

## **ADVANCES IN PROMOTING LITERACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS THROUGH MOBILE LEARNING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is taken from a larger review of extant research from a chapter titled "The role of mobile learning in promoting global literacy and human rights for women and girls" from the Handbook of Research on the Societal Impact of Digital Media. In this article we review the fairly recent advances in combating illiteracy around the globe through the use of mobile phones and e-readers most recently in the *Worldreader* program and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) mobile phone and reading initiatives. Utilizing key human rights publications and the lens of transnational feminist discourse, which addresses globalization and the monolithic hegemonic representation of "third world" women as passive and in need of the global north's intervention.

We explore the ways in which digital media provides increased access to books, and other texts and applications in both English and native languages for people in the global south. Although the use of e-readers, mobile phones and other mobile learning initiatives are providing advances in combating illiteracy, the tensions and power imbalances of digital illiteracies as to which resources are available by whom, for whom and why, must also be examined.

**Keywords:** Mobile learning, literacy, e-readers, human rights, transnational feminism.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Literacy is a human right. Literacy is a tool of personal empowerment through expression, as well as a means to social, cultural and human development.

However, the nature and use of literacy, for whom, under which circumstances and for what purposes is a contentious question that depends greatly on the social views, cultural capital, politics, and temporality of both its teachers, students and the communities of discourse in which they participate (Foucault, 1972; Gee, 1996). In short, who is considered literate and what literac(ies) are considered to be worth knowing are dependent on dominant societal, and in an age of globalization, transnational constructs. Carl Kaestle (1991) points to the inherently social and political aspects of literacy in stating,

Literacy is discriminatory with regard to both access and content. Problems of discrimination are not resolved just because access is achieved; there is a cultural price-

tag to literacy. Thus, whether literacy is liberating or constraining depends in part whether it is used as an instrument of conformity or creativity. (p. 30)

The mere access to literacy does not guarantee that access to the liberatory potential of literacy is achieved. Rather, access is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for liberation.

In considering the plurality of literacy and the nature of being literate, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) posits, "the way literacy is defined influences the goals and strategies adopted and the programs designed by policy makers as well as the teaching and learning methodologies curricula, and materials employed by practitioners. Its definition also determines how progress or achievements in overcoming illiteracy will be monitored or assessed" (UNESCO, 2004, p. 12).

In recent international data compiled by UNESCO, there are currently 773.5 million adults globally who are functionally illiterate. With 63.8 % of that number are women. Of that number, 123.2 million children are illiterate and 61/3% of them are girls. The lowest literacy rates world-wide are found in Sub-Saharan Africa and in South and West Asia (UNESCO, 2013). The significance of these numbers to the struggle for the recognition of human rights for women cannot be ignored (Kelleher, 2014). Addressing global illiteracy, especially for women and girls is an important part in recognizing the human rights and the education of all.

In this paper, the advances in combating illiteracy around the globe through the use of mobile learning initiatives such as e-readers and mobile phones are reviewed. In particular the *Worldreader* program as well as in UNESCO's mobile reading initiatives (West & Chew, 2014). The lens of transnational feminist discourse (Hesford & Kozol, 2005; Swarr & Nagar, 2010) is utilized that addresses the effects of globalization and the monolithic and hegemonic representation of "third world" women as passive and in need of the global North's intervention.

Furthermore, while advances in combating illiteracy through the use of e-readers and other mobile devices are promising, the tensions and power imbalances of digital literacies, especially in the global south must also be examined. Intrinsic to this examination is the recognition of the multifaceted interconnections between global flows, especially of information and ideas, when digital media "travel" from one locale to another, far removed not only in place but in resources and power as well.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Thus, to begin, we situate this review in the affordances and limitations of human rights discourse, especially as it relates to women and girls. Building upon the themes and tensions of human rights discourse, the ways in which transnational feminisms speak to the effect of globalization and the contexts are discussed regarding the local and the global, as well as the public and private sphere. Having established the lens in which we situate digital media in this review of the literature, we explore mobile learning initiatives as locations where the promise of digital media may have to attend to concerns around the "reproduction of gender, class and racial inequality" (Blackmore, 2005; p. 244) even as they strive for global literacy.

### Human Rights

The United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR: 1948) was written in the aftermath of the Second World War. Despite the initial intent of the document was to prevent a recurrence of the human rights travesties that occurred during WWII, the UDHR also included education as a human right stating in Article 26:

- Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
- Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
- Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children. (United Nations, resolution 217A [III], 1948)

Waldron (2010) posits that the UDHR provides a global framework for providing education for all, and for the purpose of creating and protecting a more just global citizenry.

In this epoch of globalization, where identities are both global, local and contested spaces within each, (Beck, 2002, p. 36; see also Apple, Kenway, Singh, 2005), the ways in which literacies are constructed, created and by whom, become increasingly important.

Nonetheless, to be literate and have access to literacy is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for individual, societal, and indeed, global betterment and advancement.

For literacy to be used to fulfill a promise change is required in political and social structures that underlie and perpetuate inequality; it must be constructed as a right (Bhola, 2008). Tomasveski, the late Special Rapporteur to the United Nation argued:

*"The right to an education is a bridge to all human rights: education is indispensable for effective political participation and for enabling individuals to sustain themselves; it is the key to preserving languages and religions; it is the foundation for eliminating discrimination. It is the key to unlocking all other human rights" (Tomaseveski, 2003, p. 172).*

To contextualize literacy instruction in the global context, a human rights-based approach is placed on literacy education. If not on a continuum with critical pedagogy and social justice, then certainly from a similar lineage of ideals. There is a distinct difference between the auspices of critical pedagogy and a human rights based approach. While critical pedagogy espouses similar ideals and resulting practices (i.e. praxis, social justice, etc.). Those ideals and practices remain contextualized to a particular nation-state. A human rights based approach situates education in a geo-political framework that claims literacy as indivisible from other *universal* human rights including the social, cultural, civil & political (UNESCO/UNICEF, 2007).

Despite the laudable goals espoused within the human rights education discourse, it is not without critique especially around issues of access, inclusion and equality for both males and females. We turn now to the ways in which transnational feminism speaks to the effects of globalization and to some scholar's critiques of the public/private, political/cultural aspects of human rights-based discourse in education, in general and literacy in particular.

### **Globalization and Transnational Feminism**

Globalization may be portrayed by the vast movement or flow of information, ideas, images, capital, and people across increasingly permeable political borders due to economic and technological change (Castells, 1996; Luke, 2002). The velocity, durability

and plasticity of these transnational flows and networks affect almost every aspect of local and global life, *albeit*, unevenly to the effect that the global and the local are not experienced as polarities, but rather as mutually influencing spaces (Beck, 2002; Harper & Dunkerly, 2010).

The term, transnational feminism has emerged primarily as a response to international and global feminism that has been critiqued as "rigidly adhering to nation-state borders and ignoring and paying inadequate attention to the effects of globalization" in the former, and for "prioritizing northern feminist agendas...and for homogenizing women's struggles for sociopolitical justice, especially in colonial and neocolonial contexts" (Swarr, & Nagar, 2010, p. 4).

In other words, transnational feminism connects with the monolithic and hegemonic representation of "Third World women" as passive victims and instead seeks to highlight their activism and agency in such a way that transnational solidarity and collaborations can be reached.

As Tohidi (2005) explains, "the concept of transnational feminism offers the desirability and possibility of a political solidarity of feminists across the globe that transcends class, race, sexuality and national boundaries" (Tohidi, 2005, p. 5).

Transnational feminism describes "the interdependence of the global and the local -how each is implicated in the other- and how the "local, private and domestic are constituted in relation to global systems and conversely, how such systems must be read for their particular locational inflection" (Hesford & Kozol, 2005, p. 15). However, it is in the realm of particular locational inflection as well as in the interplay of local/global and the public/private sphere in human rights discourse, particularly around education, that transnational feminists critiques systems that may perpetuate inequality and continue to portray women in a monolithic manner. We turn now to those critiques surrounding human rights discourse as well as to the corporatization of non-governmental agencies (NGO's) and the "NGOization" of development in the Third World.

### **Using the Transnational Feminist Critique to Examine Human Rights Discourse**

Blackmore (2005) argues that the human rights movement has all too often focused on political and civic rights that largely impact men in the public sphere and less on rights that most impact women in the economic, social and cultural spheres such as those that relate to education, childcare and domestic violence. As she contends:

Education policy discourses, for example, distinguish the human *right* to a basic education, but rarely calls upon the right to an "inclusive" education, one that is about empowerment, that recognizes girls' and women's needs as well as interests. The latter would have as a fundamental proposition of a more inclusive human rights discourse the development of individual agency that would be about participation, inclusive curriculums, as well as just outcomes, essential tenets of education for democratic citizenship. But there is little challenge within current human rights discourses to change the dispositions of education away from social selection and the reproduction of gender, class and racial inequality. The dominant view is that access to education means equality (p. 244).

To recognize the importance of literacy acquisition in both the private and the public sphere the development of a literate female global population is essential in creating a space for women and girls to move limited definitions of citizenship and rights into the discourse of a global society (Dunkerly & Harper, 2013). Yet, paradoxically, it is in that space of reform and development that women have become a "project" and their literacy

an “objective” that negates their agency and instead positions them as in need of rescue by the Global North.

### **Using a Transnational Feminist Lens to Examine the Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**

Since the 1980’s, non-governmental agencies have become one of the primary vehicles to provide funding for development, including those involving mobile learning initiatives (Peake & De Souza, 2010). Organizations such as the *United Nations Foundation*, which is a public charity supporting the efforts of the United Nation has invested and/or raised over 1.5 billion dollars over the past decade and delivered to the UN and UN partners including NGO affiliate (The United Nations Foundation website, n. d.) Despite the considerable diversity among NGOs developers and funding sources, the extent to which they have also become corporatized and act as extensions of the state in regard to labor and resources is well documented (Farrington, Bebbington, Wellard, & Lewis, 1993).

Furthermore, the role of donors in influencing the direction, meaning and legitimacy of the organization without being “on the ground” is also of concern, especially in regard to local agency vs. NGO objectives (Hilhorst, 2003). As the *Sangtin Writers* (a collective of women researchers and activists in India) ask: “What does it mean when NGOs or movements begin to determine for a village which issues it should mobilize around and which people should it work with? Whose village? Whose issues? Whose empowerment? And who is authorized to claim credit for that empowerment? (Reena, Nagar, Singh, & Surbala, 2010, p. 134).

Another concern is raised by Peake and de Souza (2010), who describe the corporatization of NGOs and the attendant practices of establishing benchmarks, outcomes and plans for sustainable development. While these and other aspects are certainly a necessary component of organizational structure, they “at the same time, neatly package it up into projects that deal, for example with “women” or other apparently discrete aspects of development for disconnected periods of time (Peake & De Souza, 2010, p. 110). Ultimately, however, the most essential concern of transnational feminism in regard to the work of some NGOs comes down to the collapsing of women’s issues into singular, simplistic and monolithic categories. The Sangtin Writers offer a heartfelt argument against this:

When women’s issues are collapsed into a pre-designated gender and a pre-marked body, and “feminist activism” is gathered and piled into a predetermined list of issues and when a complex political and cultural economy at local and global scales becomes associated with such a classification, feminism becomes an institutionalized structure, a bureaucracy, and a commerce that feeds the status quo. A compartmentalization of poverty and violence along the lines of gender helps sustain the existing caste-and class-based structures of privilege and deprivation (Reena et al., 2010, p. 140).

As we turn now to a review of the existing literature, we do so through the lens of transnational feminisms and against the backdrop of historical human rights efforts. Throughout this review, we will utilize that lens to interrogate local v. global voice, the construction of womanhood and girlhood, the proliferation of the Global North’s perspective at the possible expense of local knowledge; and the ways in which technology, while indeed liberating in some regards, may hold the potential for inadvertent hegemony as well.

### **Mobile Reading**

In recent years, the Internet and other mobile learning advances have offered a greater number of people with access to more information in recent times. However, there still remain a great number of populations that lack connectivity and access to the internet.

Despite the seemingly ubiquitous presence of the Internet, only 40 percent of the world's population is actually online and in the majority of developing countries 16 percent fewer women than men use the Internet (ITU, 2013). Moreover, the discrepancy and inequality in access is as disturbing as it is predictable.

Currently in Africa only seven per cent of households are connected to the Internet, compared with 77 per cent in Europe (West & Chew, 2014). Thus, millions remain functionally isolated from textual resources that are key to education, employment and engagement in the globalized world.

Given the unequal and indeed, in some locales, impractical access to computers and the Internet, mobile phones have become one of the primary means of accessing text when books and libraries are either non-existent or too expensive to stock and maintain. The difference in access to traditional libraries globally depicts the rather dismal nature of equality in access: In the United Kingdom for example, the ratio of libraries to population is 1:15,000 citizens. In Nigeria, that ratio is 1: 1, 350,000 (UNESCO, 2013). However, recent data from the United Nations indicate that of an estimated global population of 7 billion, over 6 billion people now have access to a working mobile phone. For the sake of comparison, 4.5 billion people have access to a toilet (UNESCO, 2013).

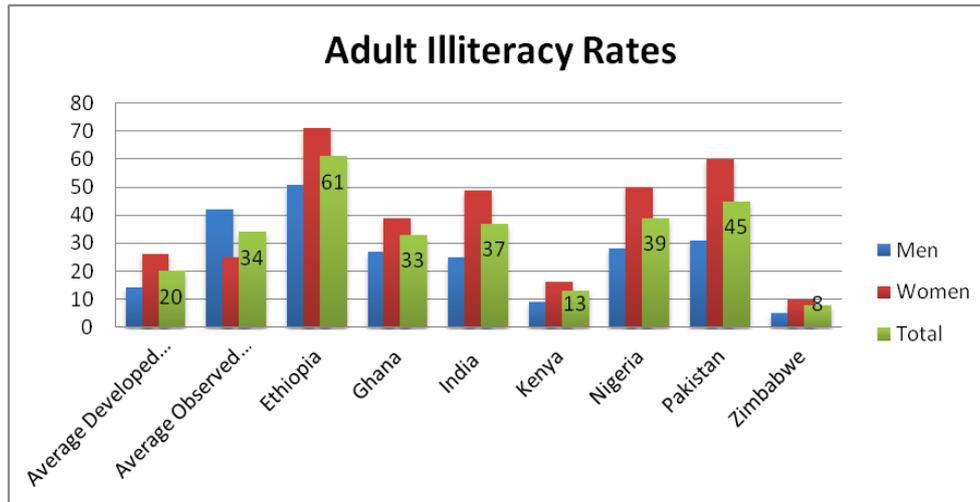
To capitalize on the existence of even basic mobile phone ownership and usage, corporations such as Nokia have partnered with UNESCO and the non-profit organization World Reader to utilize a mobile reading app to provide access to text for whom print based books are inaccessible. *Worldreader Mobile* (WRM) is an application that allows people to access books and stories from a wide variety of mobile phones, including inexpensive feature phones. To determine the effectiveness of mobile reading in developing areas, UNESCO conducted a large survey of mobile reader users to determine who was reading, what they were reading and how the users of mobile reading felt about the experience of reading on mobile device. On average, WRM had 334,000 active users per month. To utilize WRM, users download the free application, which is stored in the memory of the phone.

It is important to note, that while *Worldreader Mobile* (WRM) provides *access* to over 6,000 digital titles, mobile data connection and the resulting expense is required of the user. Despite the fact that majority of the titles available through the app are free, most of the books are not downloadable, nor can they be read offline.

A study conducted by UNESCO in partnership with *Worldreader* and Nokia was designed as an "in-app" survey with the following criteria: low literacy rates for adults and youth, and a minimum of 6,000 established *Worldreader* users per month.

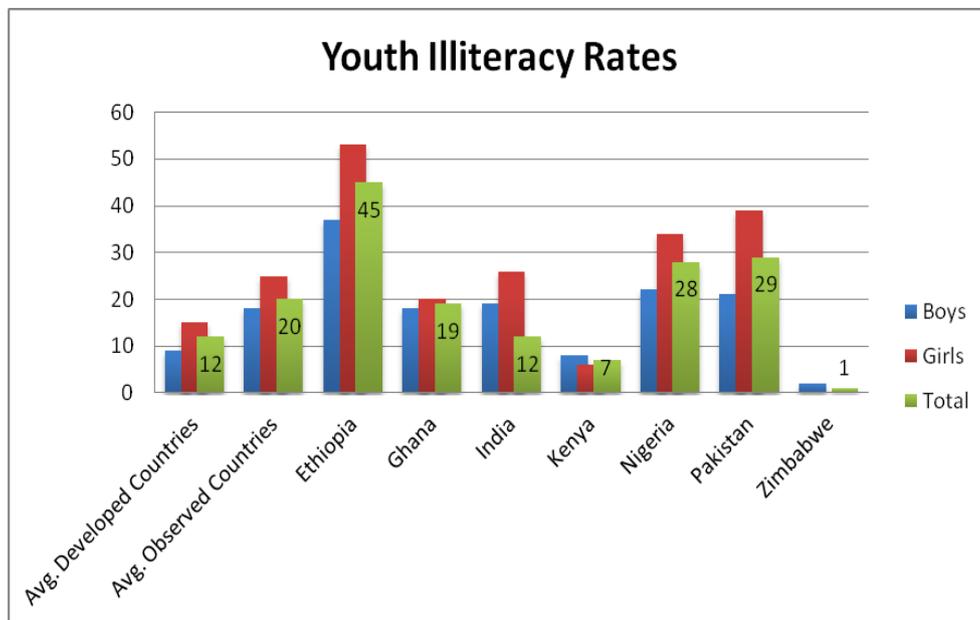
Seven countries were selected for participation based on those criteria: Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Kenya, Nigeria, Pakistan and Zimbabwe. Despite Kenya and Zimbabwe having distinctly lower adult illiteracy rates (13% and 8% respectively, other countries fare much worse.

In Ethiopia, for example, the adult illiteracy rate is over 60 percent for the total population and over 70 percent for women; in Pakistan the illiteracy rate is 45 percent for all adults and 60 percent for women. (UNESCO, 2013). Overall, the average illiteracy rates for adults in the countries included in this study are 34 percent or approximately one third of the total population (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.**  
**Adult Illiteracy Rates in Developing Countries**  
 Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013.

In the countries surveyed, the illiteracy rates for youth are similar to those of the adults. Again, Kenya and Zimbabwe have youth illiteracy rates far below the averages found in the other nations surveyed, while Ethiopia has the greatest percentage of illiterate youth at approximately 45 %. Overall, the average youth illiteracy rate for all seven countries included in the study is 20 percent, or one-fifth of the population. The rates for each country included are summarized in Figure 2.



**Figure 2.**  
**Youth Illiteracy Rates in Developing Countries**  
 Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2013

Survey participants were issued an invitation that appeared on their mobile device and their reading frequency was tracked by monitoring usage. A total of 4,333 readers in the seven countries completed the survey and were monitored. Of those, 3,332 were men and 1,001 were women. Readers of both genders were grouped as:

- Occasional Readers – read 2–4 times per month
- Frequent Readers – read 5–20 times per month
- Habitual Readers – read 21–40 times per month
- Power Readers – read more than 40 times per month

The researchers used this information to track participant device usage to compare actual time spent reading with self-reported attitudes and perceptions towards mobile reading. After the survey, researchers attempted to conduct qualitative follow-up phone interviews with those categorized as frequent readers. Unfortunately, the response rate was poor and resulted in only a total of seventeen interviews. Participants were offered a small incentive in the form of mobile credit equal to US \$0.50 to complete the survey. This credit could be used towards the purchase of books. Despite the limitations of only including readers using the *Worldreader* mobile app, the results of the study present credible data in assessing the demographics of users, the frequency with which they engage in mobile reading and their attitudes towards reading on mobile devices.

### **Mobile Reader Demographics**

In the study, mobile reading statistics closely mirror mobile phone ownership in the countries represented. On average, there are approximately three male mobile readers for every female. The gender difference was the smallest in Nigeria and Zimbabwe with the ratio of two male readers for every female, however in Ethiopia and India, the gap was the widest showing that there were nine males for every female. Yet, women used mobile phones for reading more frequently and for more diverse reasons than did men.

This is encouraging, as it emphasizes the potential of mobile reading to provide women and girls with greater opportunities for literacy and for civic participation. The gender balance shifts to a female majority across countries when viewing reading activity. Among the top 2,000 active readers, over 59 percent are female; among the top 1,000 active readers, 72 percent are female; and among the top 100 active readers, 80 percent are female. As West and Chew (2014) explain:

On average, women spent 207 minutes per month reading on their mobile phones during the three-month period of the study. Men, by contrast, read about 33 minutes per month. Women also tended to read more frequently and for longer periods at a time. During the study period, men read 3 to 4 times a month for around 10 minutes each time, while women read around 11 times per month for about 19 minutes each time.

In terms of hours read per month, women performed 66 per cent of the total reading completed during the study period, despite the fact that they only constitute 23 percent of the total readers (p.30).

Furthermore, this study also captured difference in age and educational attainment. As perhaps anticipated, the participants in this study tended to have achieved a higher level of education than the respective national average – 24% of respondents reported having a bachelor's degree or higher. In comparison, the average for higher education degrees across nations involved was 8.7%. Surprisingly though, reading time diminished for those who had obtained a bachelor's degree in comparison to those still in secondary (high) school. The researchers postulate that this could be due to young people studying for entrance exams for bachelor education programs, therefore they would be accessing greater amounts of text for longer periods of time). A similar pattern was observed in those readers who were in or preparing for master's or doctoral programs. An interesting theory posed by the researchers is that as higher education is obtained, printed books and other texts are more accessible and digital reading is used less.

These discoveries also align with findings related to the age of the readers in question. Across and within countries, users of digital reading were typically young. The average age of participants in this study was 24. Over 90 percent of the survey respondents were under the age of 35, and two-thirds of respondents were under 24 years old. Across all countries, fewer than 1 in 10 mobile respondents were over the age of 35 (West & Chew, 2014). These findings align with the illiteracy rates for adults and youth discussed earlier in this paper. It would stand to reason that with lower illiteracy rates, and a higher likelihood of having and using a mobile phone for a variety of reasons, younger people would be more likely to utilize their phones for the purpose of reading.

### **Overview of Issues in Scholarship and Practice**

One issue raised by examining the role of digital media in contributing to the increased literacy, and thus greater civic engagement of women and girls globally lies in the notion of digital technologies as placed resources (Prinsloo & Rowsell, 2012); as well as in the concept of a global “digital divide” which cannot be bridged simply by making technology available in distant locales. Norton and Williams point to “the growing body of work which suggests that digital resources are not directly transferable from well-resourced to poorly resourced communities” (Norton & Williams, 2012, p. 315). While Prinsloo (2005) argues that new literacies cannot be transported to new locales and have their meaning, use, value or context simply reproduced:

At the level of practice, the new literacies are never reproduced in their entirety across different contexts. They function as artefacts and as signs that are embedded in local relations that are themselves shaped by larger social dynamics of power, status, access to resources and social mobility. They are placed resources. (Prinsloo 2005, p.96)

In this argument, Prinsloo refutes the attractive generality and seamless transferability of skill-based new literacies such as the ability to “use the Internet and other ICT’s to identify important questions, locate information, critically evaluate the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer questions, and then communicate the answers to others (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; p.1570).

While these skills and may seem like a *panacea* for global illiteracy issues, they do not necessarily take in to account the situated and enculturated nature of digital practice, especially as it pertains to literacy. Thus, Prinsloo’s distinction is crucial to this review, as the majority of the existing literature are reports and other various publications by international NGOs and other organizations who may be more inclined to discuss the affordances for users of digital literacies in the global south, but reluctant to discuss the “constraints that mark their status as persons located on the globalised periphery (Prinsloo & Rowsell, 2012; p. 271).

Nonetheless, it is imperative not to view the notion of placed resources or the global digital divide as coming from a discourse of a nation lacking or disadvantaged. Rather, the research around new literacies and digital literacies/ technologies as placed resources allows for the exploration of possibilities when the settings of use are recognized rather than homogenized in function and affordance. Snyder and Prinsloo (2007) speak to this and encourage researchers and practitioners alike to attend to the variety and nuanced contexts in which people engage in digital media practices and resist the notion that availability of technology equates with access and equality:

When computers or other media are inserted in a particular setting, to bring about certain results, they encounter situated social practices that do not necessarily result in these resources being used in a way that promotes social development and participation, as might be conceived by the implementers. Digital divide logic overemphasizes the importance of the physical presence of computers and connectivity to the exclusion of

other factors that allow people to use electronic media for meaningful ends. (Snyder & Prinsloo, 2007, p. 174).

In tandem to notion of digital media and literacies as placed resources, culture must also be considered and of what is counted as knowledge and literacy to people in those developing nations. Mobile learning has been demonstrated to enhance and extend learning and related activities in various settings in many ways. Traxler (2013) posits that mobile learning initiatives may transmit certain cultural and pedagogical assumptions and values related to education inherent in Western models that may not reflect the culture of the locales in which mobile reading has been placed. Questions such as, "What is worth learning?" "How is it to be learnt?" "Who can teach it?" "How can competence be expressed?" implicitly define that culture's conception of learning, and thus of knowing" (Traxler, 2013, p. 49).

Furthermore, as language and literacy are primary markers of a particular culture, there can be an uneasy tension between globally predominant languages such as English, and a local language and/or dialect. Indeed, education and enculturation are often synonymous with each other. Therefore, there is a fine line between offering new technologies to be incorporated into existing cultures and social systems and imposing them in a manner which may subvert or replace them. As Traxler states:

These technologies project the pedagogies, strictly speaking perhaps the epistemologies, of *outsiders* into communities that of course already have their own learning.

There is a risk that mobile technologies delivering learning in this way represent either a Trojan horse or a cargo cult that threatens or undermines a fragile educational ecosystem. The issue is not one of emerging markets or developing regions *per se* but of fragile cultures (or sub-cultures or even counter cultures) and their capacity to negotiate an optimal balance between the preservation of language, heritage and culture on the one hand and engagement with the wider world and the global knowledge economy, on the other. (Traxler, 2013; p. 49)

It is in that delicate balance of local preservation and global engagement that may present the biggest challenge for mobile reading and e-reader initiatives as we move forward into new research. In doing so it is valuable to remain cognizant of their situated and contextualized use in ways that may further illuminate the affordance and challenges of digital media and literacies as placed resources.

In conclusion, we look to the promise and potential of mobile learning, to promote equitable access to literacy and other human rights, but we do so with a sense of caution and remain cognizant that the potential for hegemony often walks beside even the noblest of intentions.

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