

# BOOK REVIEW

## THE POLITICS OF TECHNOLOGY IN AFRICA

*by Iginio Gagliardone*

Mihaela Cojocaru  
Development Studies  
MSc student

### ABSTRACT

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), in their advancement, have added a new dimension to development approaches and became a critical element in the integration of the developing world into the global knowledge society. This review explores Iginio Gagliardone's book, *The Politics of Technology in Africa*, which provides a comprehensive account of ICT adoption and adaptation in Ethiopia and an experimental framework for researching ICTs on the African continent, grounded in Hecht's concepts of technopolitics and technopolitical regime. Drawing on the history of technology, international relations, African studies, and a decade of field research, the author's alignment of the technological and political to study the relationship between development and ICT, not only challenges the assumption that African countries are passively accepting ICTs but also avoids the pitfalls of techno-determinism. Ethiopia, as the top "Official Development Assistance (ODA)" recipient in Africa and the staunchest advocate of an alternative development state for Africa, makes for an excellent case study and foregrounds a good presentation of the recipient/donor relationship, role of the state, African agency and communication strategies.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mihaela Cojocaru is a postgraduate student at SOAS working towards her Master's degree in Development Studies, with a further Bachelor's degree in English Language and Linguistics from King's College London. As an undergraduate exchange student at Hong Kong University, she undertook a research field trip to Ethiopia, which catalysed her interest in the developing world. Following her graduation, she joined Delegations for Dialogue, a Community Interest Company, as a multilingual programme co-ordinator for Eastern Europe/Post-Soviet World, East Asia, and East Africa. Currently, she is completing her Master's dissertation on China in Africa, while working as a global evaluation project research assistant at the Minority Rights Group.

**KEYWORDS:** ICT; Technopolitics; Nation- and State-building, Recipient/donor; African Agency.

The advance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), by redefining real-time communication, reshaped global dynamics and became a critical element in the developing world's integration into the global knowledge society. Iginio Gagliardone, in *The Politics of Technology in Africa*, maps out the complex and conflicting tactics and strategies undertaken by the Ethiopian government to incorporate ICTs in its state- and nation-building and stabilize its power after the political turmoil following Eritrea's secession.

Drawing on the history of technology, international relations, and African studies, the book is a culmination of 10 years of field research and studies. The author has established a name within the fields of new media, political change and human development, and this book centres him within the emergent discourse on Global South information societies. Existing literature, limited by dichotomous generalizations (authoritarian vs. democratic) and heavy reliance on indices, fails to explain why and how ICTs are being reshaped across the globe, while in development circles the concept of technology is de-politicized.

Gagliardone aligns the technological and political to study the relationship between development and ICT and argues that ICTs can be used to enact political goals as sites of multiple conflicts, where values and visions can be contested or accepted. Challenging mainstream assumption that ICTs are neutral tools passively accepted by African countries, he builds on Hecht's concepts of *technopolitics* and *technopolitical regimes* to avoid the pitfalls of techno-determinism known for lacking historical depth.

Scholars of international relations and political communication, development and African studies, policymakers and ICT professionals may find the book useful. Within eight chapters, the author first introduces the conceptual foundation, then analyses the internal and external actors shaping the conflictual process of ICT assimilation in Ethiopia. A focus on national politics and discourses is then further explored against China's role and Western donors' foreign agendas and rising securitisation, concluding with the framework's possible replication in other case studies.

Ethiopia is an excellent choice for analysis. Top Official Development Assistance (ODA) recipient in Africa,<sup>505</sup> it features one of the lowest regional internet penetration rates and tightest state control on information.<sup>506</sup> Its large population alone beacons interest within the highly competitive global ICT sector. More liberalised Sub-Saharan countries have navigated the introduction of ICTs by empowering the private sector and civil society organizations. Kenya prioritized market openness to establish itself as a tech hub on the continent and deal with fast, unplanned urbanization issues, through its “Silicone Savannah” in Konza.

Ethiopia’s minority-led government, the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), opted for a step-by-step state-controlled absorption. Capitalizing on the regional onset of ICTs, it consolidated its power at the centre within an ethnically diverse political entity through controlled decentralization. Central to it was the government’s *culture of communication*, which interlaces the tangible and intangible. Gagliardone’s novel conceptual approach of technopolitics combining machine and meaning offers a good analytical framework.

Discourses of ethnic federalism (national ethnic equality), revolutionary democracy (populist government focused on peasant unity and elite exclusion) and developmental state (economic policy) linked the periphery to the centre, ideologically. Technically, the communication strategy translated into technopolitical regimes through WoredaNet and SchoolNet. WoredaNet, a network of district (woreda) administration, enables central ministries to videoconference with and instruct peripheral offices, which are passive receivers in this relationship. SchoolNet broadcasts pre-recorded classes in English to all secondary school students via plasma TV screens, and trains teachers and government officials on civic education across the country.

Digital literacy and internet access were hardly priorities as both projects aimed to facilitate EPRDF’s communication with the general population not to enable the latter’s

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<sup>505</sup> “Development Aid at a Glance: Statistics by Region”, Africa, OECD, last modified June 6, 2020, 2, <https://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/documentupload/Africa-Development-Aid-at-a-Glance.pdf>

<sup>506</sup> Iginio Gagliardone, *The Politics of Technology in Africa: Communication, Development, and Nation*. (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1,122.

integration into global communication flows. The book would have benefited from an account of the financial agreements and investors behind the projects, considering Ethiopia is a low-income aid-dependent country. Considerable contributions to important and highly debated topics in related literature are identified.

## ROLE OF THE STATE

The book expertly engages opposing by-products of the tight state control on ICTs. Mercenary practices of the governing elite appropriating features of a new sector to consolidate their own power are addressed through the lenses of technopolitical regimes and strategies to quiet dissenting voices. The state, as a mechanism of defence against the shortcomings of Western interventions, ignorant of the local context, is explored through the cautiousness with which the Ethiopian government approached ICTs.

Aggressive pro-market approaches usually overlook the implementation pace, which is paramount when inserting a new concept in its functional-material form into a highly illiterate society uneducated on its benefits and pitfalls, i.e. Facebook genocide in Myanmar.<sup>507</sup> Regardless of criticisms on poor digital integration and government monopoly over telecommunications, EPRDF fought with external actors for its policy space.

## AFRICAN AGENCY

Usually seen as a passive receiver under the auspices of homogenization *Africa is a country*, there is much room for investigating African agency in mainstream Africa development<sup>508</sup> approaches. Gagliardone, in his analysis of the WoredaNet and SchoolNet, skillfully brings attention to it by highlighting and exploring the diverse tactics and strategies employed by the Ethiopian government to bypass traditional donor conditionality.

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<sup>507</sup> Paul Mozur, "A Genocide Incited on Facebook, with Posts from Myanmar's Military," *New York Times*, October 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html>

<sup>508</sup> A country-specific account: Lindsay Whitfield, ed., *The Politics of Aid: African Strategies for Dealing with Donors* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

The 2005 Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness has centralized this issue in donor–recipient relations. Labelled as ownership, it purports that receiving countries should decide where and how to channel the funds but does not clarify exactly “who” is the decisive agent. Is it the government, political or business elites, or the civil society? The book, by contextualising the different narratives on the adoption and adaptation of ICT in Ethiopia, expertly addresses the issue revealing a complex picture, characterised by regional/external and country/internal heterogeneity with convoluted competing discourses including the often–overlooked diaspora.

## TRADITIONAL DONORS

The book gives the overall impression that EPRDF proficiently deals with both internal and external actors. Major reliance on foreign assistance suggests a different picture. Gagliardone efficiently explores the government’s control over national discourses and practices. A successful example of resistance to Western technopolitical regimes is UNDP’s SchoolNet, same–name project prioritizing internet access and digital literacy implemented in response to EPRDF’s initiative. Interestingly, there is little distinction between the two in international settings and on the internet, the latter being mainly addressed in Gagliardone’s work.

When powerful international entities control global discourses and ICT flows, is it about EPRDF’s skilful manoeuvring or donor leniency seeing the transient nature of a political elite and ICT securitization in the region? Though the author explores how EPRDF uses the latter to suppress adversaries and realise its national vision, the lack of a note on projects’ performance in later years suggest a momentary happenstance catalysed by alternative support.

## CHINA–AFRICA RELATIONS

There is much space for studying ICTs in China–Africa relations. The author narrowly covers the agreements with ZTE and Huawei and mainly emphasizes the *silent partner* as an alternative financier. The no–strings–attached policy is downplayed, though,

simplifying the complex relationship China has with its aid/investment recipients.<sup>509</sup> China is not a charity, so why continue to endorse government monopoly on communications when facing negative returns? Following general trends of looking at Chinese companies as a coherent group, misses their controversial and highly competitive inner dynamics, and discounts their impact on Ethiopian technopolitics.

Considering China is the main investor in the Ethiopian telecommunication sector, closely following the establishment of the African Union in Addis Ababa in 2001, the book would have gained from a deeper exploration of the Ethiopian government's relationship with both ZTE and Huawei, in which the latter was used as a mechanism to curb the former's sector monopoly and induce reforms.<sup>510</sup> Gagliardone's new book, *China, Africa, and the Future of the Internet* may give further insight.

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<sup>509</sup> A comprehensive account: Deborah Brautigam, *The Dragon's Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>510</sup> Ding Fei, "Chinese Telecommunication Companies in Ethiopia: the Influences of Host government Intervention and Inter-Firm Competition," *The China Quarterly* (May 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741020000417>

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