Book Review: Schwittay, A. (2015). ***New media and international development: Representation and affect in microfinance*****. Abingdon UK: Routledge (ISBN 978-0415856089)**

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This is an important study of new media and development, using the particular example of microfinance to illustrate and provide information on questions relating to the current situation of the quest for financial inclusion and how the use of new media can be seen as impacting on both the donor and the lender. It is a good analytical study with particular conclusions concerning the contribution of new media in general, and its applicability and usefulness in terms of microfinance in particular.

There is an historical background and context, which is brief and principally alludes to the eighteenth-century antecedents of the efforts of Mohammad Yunus, the Make Poverty History campaign and other modern western affective movements which have proved to be of varying degrees of success. This is evidently true of much of microfinance and other efforts at financial inclusion. A major conclusion and question of the study is to ask whether or not the efforts to utilise the new media possibilities to increase the scale and scope of financial inclusion result in greater sums of money becoming available for lending, which they do. However, the study reflects on whether or not this means a greater impact on the outcomes of better access to education opportunities for the poor, better housing, better nutrition and health, or just more financial inclusion and higher incomes. These are questions which can be asked of microfinance and other programmes intended to alleviate poverty at any time and in any form, but the new media aspect faces not only these existing challenges, but also the questions as to the outcomes and effectiveness of the use of new media itself. In some respects, this is where the issues are largest; peer-to-peer lending may increase the level of funding, but play down the incorporation of training and assistance and concern with education and living conditions, not to mention having much less impact on the savings element of microfinance. Schwittay also places the uncomfortable thought in our minds that instead of making the connection between lender and borrower greater, the virtual connection is unsatisfying and the real-life meetings between lenders or western volunteers for microfinance operations in the field, are not always what was anticipated.

The study is not looking to show where the new media fits in any long-run evolutionary pattern of assistance and finance activity. It is much more focused on the emergence of a radically different approach, emerging out of a desire to engage in an affective relationship which not only provides a positive financial and relationship outcome for the recipient, but also provides a return to the donor, which is more concerned with emotive returns and feelings of connection than any financial ones. There are difficulties with linking the current form of activity back to charitable feelings of the distant past, difficulties which reveal that it is more than just a moral imperative on the part of those who have garnered wealth from the economic system to share the benefits with those who have not. In Schwittay’s analysis of an affective relationship, reliant upon the receipt by the donor of their own emotive gains from their actions, this is seen as providing a feeling of relationship, as well as clear satisfaction for the giver that the donation is effective and is not so much charitable as securing a more just society. Schwittay questions whether the achievement of a just society is really effected; some things alter with microlending, but the impact on the underlying social structure seems to be very limited. As with the earlier efforts of many NGOs to improve financial inclusion to secure greater educational opportunities and other benefits from the use of donor funds, there are difficulties in assuring good outcomes for the donor and the recipient. From a Sen entitlement perspective, the market entitlements of some to material things may be improved, but to a limited extent and with little in the way of any change to a more just underlying social structure. This leaves the question of changes in affect and connectedness rather than the material condition.

Schwittay talks of the standard story of success as being provided for the microlending tourist and the obligatory meeting with a recipient, sometimes ending in an uncomfortable outcome for both parties, so putting the idea of good affinity outcomes at risk. The role of the new media is viewed as allowing "virtual stories" to augment or replace the current stories which are propounded as reasons for supporting microfinance, but the power of the bloggers, websites and the like has greatly increased the impact of the process. Stories of success also increase in number and early participants became the model for others. "Deti's story as the model borrower" (p. 62) is used throughout the book as a powerful example, repeated thousands of times and generating fine feelings. The actual effect rather than affect is less easily found. Representation through the new media has been at least as effective in generating new business as were the older methods already in place. Photographs of poor people, especially children, generated loan activity and the internet multiplies that effect many times. Microfinance tourism is intended to reinforce the feeling of connection between lender and borrower though, as Chapter 5 shows, this can result in less certainty among the lenders and a lesser affective feeling on their part with disquiet revealed as to the outcomes and the difference to those previously anticipated ones by the lenders.

Chapter 6 portrays the situation of the way in which Kiva depends on volunteer labour in order to operate and the particular ways in which this can be seen as sometimes strengthening and sometimes weakening the affective links between those from the North and the South.

There has been much discussion and critique of both government and non-government aid assistance programmes, much of it centred on its cost effectiveness. In this study, the claims of the proponents of new methods for microfinance or more particularly microlending, since borrowers appear in this case not to be savers as well, are put to several tests, with mixed results. The conclusions that are arrived at suggest that all is not as the volunteer Kiva Fellows expected and that the formulaic questions that they are supposed to ask in interviewing borrowers, including what are their dreams, are not always welcome and not what the borrowers want to talk about, or that their dreams are mundane and relate to getting families a basic education, better basic housing, food and other necessities rather than any great, momentous vision for a fundamentally life-changing outcome. The borrower is apparently often aware that the lender's attitude is one of charity or pity, not one of empathy. There is little true connection between the two; the individual tie between the volunteer or the tourist with the borrower is a virtual "story" rather than a reality. A sobering conclusion, but optimistic if it prompts thoughts that financial inclusion alone is far from a complete answer to the search for better lives and less poverty, and societal change rather than individual change in circumstances is needed.