

HSEPP / CKS conferences

Title: Infrastructure as Creative Action: Online Buying, Selling, and Delivery in Phnom Penh

Date: 27 October 2017

Time: 6:00 PM

Place: Meeting room, Royal University of Fine-Arts

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Biodata: Maggie is a PhD candidate at Cornell University in the Department of Information Science, advised by Professor Steven Jackson. Maggie utilizes her academic background in the history of science and professional experience in the technology industry to approach problems of global computing with multiple lenses. Her work lies at the intersection of human computer interaction and science and technology studies. Maggie has ongoing ethnographic fieldwork and archival research in the technology community in Phnom Penh since January 2014. She is supported in 2017-2018 by a National Science Foundation grant to conduct dissertation research in Phnom Penh; this project investigates the ways that contemporary Cambodian technology producers and media creators reconstruct past forms of media, often using Internet platforms, contextualized through a history of modern media technologies (television, radio, cinema) in Cambodia. She is a foreign language and area studies fellow and a student of the Khmer language and Southeast Asian studies program at Cornell.

Abstract:

The lecture will present a complex global sales and logistics network based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, which utilizes Internet tools (particularly Facebook) as well as a suite of offline tools such as feature (non-smart) phones, paper receipts, and motorcycles to facilitate the buying and selling of clothes and other commodities. Against the gap or import models that sometimes limit understandings of technological change and circulation, we argue that the consumers, business owners, delivery drivers, and call center staff play active and formative roles in producing this infrastructure, integrating new tools into older cultural practices and determining how they work within the limits and conventions of the environment. She argues that resourceful and imaginative activities such as these constitute a form of creative infrastructural action and are central to the ways that new tools circulate in the world, though they often go unrecognized as innovation.

Maggie collected the bulk of the data for this paper in January and June-August of 2016. She conducted over 30 formal interviews with Cambodian shop owners turned- e-commerce-entrepreneurs, online shoppers, call center staff, and delivery drivers, and engaged in many more informal conversations with Cambodian youth about online buying. She also conducted participant observation in shops and accompanying drivers on delivery runs.

Key-words: logistics, e-commerce, infrastructure, post-colonial computing, ethnography, information and communication technology for development (ICTD)