

Representing the Non-formal: the Business of Internet cafés in India

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It is our contention that small businesses of information and communication technologies are deeply embedded in a context of non-formal business relations and practices in developing economies. Cyber cafés in the city of Mumbai, the subject of our study, operate in and through an unregulated grey market of non-formal business practices. In this paper we explore the fit of ICT's into this 'area' of commercial practices. We do this by profiling café managers, business strategies and contextualizing these in the broader culture of non-formal business relationships pervading every day transactions. With regulatory discourse of information technologies centered on piracy and illegitimacy, informality of business practices in emerging economies provide an alternate premise to understand its nature and function. These challenge received notions of visualizing IT in emerging economies as simply piracy and illegality. It also implies coming to terms with markets shaped and structured by para-legal and non-formal processes in negotiating on-going and future business relationships.

Introduction

We report from an on-going research study of cyber cafes¹ in and around Mumbai metropolis. Many small businesses in Mumbai operate in and through a grey market of non-formal business practices. Informality pervades the warp and woof of these businesses. They are often developed through dispersed family ties and local social networks, and sometimes rely on underground connections to run and maintain their day-to-day transactions.

Our focus, in this paper, is to explore the fit of information technologies into this parallel domain of non-formal practices. We use ethnographic explorations to give voice and visibility to the small business of cyber-cafes. We attempt to reveal how cybercafé businesses discover survival niches, sustain social networks and adapt organizational strategies to endure an uncertain marketplace.²

Our research is based on open-ended interviews among 30 cyber café owners in town, suburban and outer suburban Mumbai, conducted during August 2006 to April 2007. Cyber cafés are an increasing presence in Mumbai as they are in many parts of Urban India. Proliferating cafés have made it a highly competitive business with small margins. In our

¹ We studied cafés run as small business, the mom and pop kind, not up-market chain of *i-cafes* run by corporate giants in India. Almost all cafes in our sample refer to these as cyber and not internet cafes. For a broader range of information on internet cafes in India, see Haseloff(2005)

² This paper speaks of outcomes from ethnographic research rather than merit ethnography as method in bringing grey data into the light of day. That will command a paper by itself.

study, most of the 31 cafés are in low-middle income neighborhoods and 6 out of these are in the midst of bustling slums/shanty towns, 5 in Dharavi and 1 in a South-east suburb (we consider Dharavi in a separate section). We deliberately chose these neighborhoods to understand the interplay between business practices and the demand for ICTs in low-income populations living in poor infrastructural living conditions. More importantly, non-formality entrenched in the commercial cultures of poor locales provide an opportunity to study ICTs away from IT business parks.

Our understanding of the 'non-formal economy' in Mumbai is similar to and builds upon the notion of 'the informal sector', a term used by Keith Hart(1973) to describe unregulated, small scale economic and social exchanges in urban Ghana, whose individual economic transactions do not ever rise to the taxable limit. The informal sector is frequently considered synonymous with survival strategies of the poor, where economic transactions may range from daily wage labor to economic exchanges that are unregulated or remain untaxed. Mumbai is home to an extraordinarily vibrant and organic commercial culture as well as a thriving shadow economy, with businesses crisscrossing the formal and non-formal at various points³. As a result, mainstream (and audited) economic practices are subsidized when people enter into informal business relationships. The state, in turn, exploits the situation by aligning illegally with these businesses for a price (Srivastava, 2003).

We studied small cybercafés (own-account, less than five employees) and use the term non-formal economy, for the purposes of this paper, to denote the unregulated nature of small businesses⁴.

Information and communication technologies, ICTs, are considered a privilege of technologically mature ecologies used by an informed populace in countries deploying huge infrastructural investments. How do the same technologies organise themselves into small enterprises in developing economies like India? Here, the IT sector is abuzz with opportunities for livelihoods spawning a host of business ranging from formal cutting edge software development to dubious para-legal outfits buying and selling computing hardware, software solutions and internet access. Non-formal relations underscoring developing economies are nothing new. Our research forays into the contextual specificity of Mumbai providing an interesting case-study of internet technologies adapting to the demands of a broader shadow economy of the metropolis. The normative forms of internet technologies and the structure of Mumbai's economy combine to endure in locations some where between the formal and the non-formal, the secured and the unsecured and the legal and the

³ Here Mumbai belongs with Bangkok, Hong Kong, Sao Paulo, Los Angeles, Mexico City, London, and Singapore, the loci of the practices of global capital. Typically, these cities are large (10–20 million people) and are currently shifting from economies of manufacture and industry to economies of trade, tourism, and finance (Appadurai 2000)

⁴ A broader definition includes household enterprises that are own-accounted, family or non-formal employees, contract employees employed by the formal sector, casual labour and intermittent labour all of which work under varying conditions of (un) regulation. Mumbai's non-formal economy accounts for 68% of all businesses (Agarwala 2005).

para-legal⁵. The dialectic of the two processes surrounds the liminal status of the cyber café as small business. We bring to surface the constant dialectic and adjustments the two sectors engage in. The big clash seemingly occurs when organizational commitment to entrench ICTs by the state, corporates and other legal players encounter non-formal ICT businesses at the grass-roots. It might be safe to say the two have come of age co-existing and adjusting to sociological forces binding them. This nexus becomes inevitable with the expansion of ICT markets and usages depending heavily on these small businesses. We, thus far, see two social blocks, the *quasi-legitimate users* and the *legitimate expanders* of ICT, and the necessary interrelationships they need to contend with. Hence the dilemma, of ICTs emerging from a digital rights domain conflicting with the expansion of its user base, a market in constant confrontation with legality. The focus of an earlier paper dwelt on three interrelated contexts crucial to cyber regulation in India: the grass-root, the state and the non-formal economy. While cyber café managers 'dismiss their responsibility to police on-line security, state level initiatives show contradictions in their stated enthusiasm for an IT enabled society and sporadic regulatory behaviour directing public usage of the internet (Rangaswamy 2007).

Extant literature around urban cyber café in India is scant. Apart from Haseloff (2005) we found little scholarly engagement with internet cafes. Haseloff's consideration of urban cyber cafes focused on their being potential development tools complementing the telecentre movement in rural regions. Research was conducted 'to explore the problems and potential of cybercafés as development tools for different urban communities'. The study gave us a good overview of urban internet cafés and a starting point for our research. However, we move away to probe the specific trait of non-formal small businesses in Mumbai and the fit of cyber café operations into these.

Our study enabled seeing, hearing and recording albeit partially, the voices, transactions and deals of the everyday in the internet café, located at this intersection of the formal and the non-formal. The dynamics of transacting in any of the cafés is borne out by processes that are organic, spontaneous, necessitated by existing market relations and economic structures of survival. As ethnographers and researchers we don a role by not taking sides against the 'unregulated' but *problematizing* legality in these spaces. To represent the non-formal is not to celebrate its grit or subversion but point to its enduring form.

The Mumbai Mosaic⁶

"... I am French.... I am gay, I am Jewish and I am a criminal, more or less in that order. Bombay is the only city I have ever found that allows me to be all four of those things, at the same time..."⁷

⁵ Rangaswamy (2007)

⁶ Patel (1995, 2003)

⁷ Roberts (2003)

The quote pretty much captures the generous spirit of survival and accommodation extended by the megapolis to droves of humanity seeking a place under its sun, a city described as 'India's symbol of uneven modernity, and hectic contradictory character of the nation's modern life' (Khilnani 1997).

Mumbai is a site of various uncertainties; of employment, wages, housing, citizenship and security. People, drawn by their already established kindred come to her in large numbers from impoverished rural areas to find lively hoods, even if it offers a six by six foot space to sleep and work is often difficult to obtain and retain. To quote Appadurai,

"Frequently, these are cities where crime is an integral part of municipal order and where the circulation of wealth in the form of cash is ostentatious and immense, but the sources of cash are always restricted, mysterious, or unpredictable. The everyday is shot through with socially mediated chains of debt—between friends, neighbors, and coworkers—stretched across the continuum between multinational banks and other organized lenders, on the one hand, and loan sharks and thugs, on the other" (2000:628)

A significant contextual factor, before we turn towards empirical discussion, is that Mumbai is not representative of India at large. Mumbai is extreme in terms of average income, cost of living, and the gap between rich and poor. A metropolis of very rich and desperately poor, of a relatively large and prosperous 'middle class', and site of concentrations of huge slums in Asia (Nijman, 2006). Quoting Naregal (2000) from another unregulated terrain, the cable communication business in Mumbai;

"Historically, Mumbai's economic success has always been built upon 'a pragmatic and most ruthless exploitation of her far-from-perfect communication and commercial networks'. These have, quite visibly, since the 1970s, bred what has been described as a 'robber-baron'⁸ culture of economic speculation and processes... The privatization of public sector, the speculative rise and fall of the city's stock markets, national inflationary trends, a growing consumerist ethos, shrinking employment in the formal sector have created thriving interfaces between the under-world and the 'cleaner' capitalistic sectors(pp296)".

Mumbai is also home to many from diverse ethnic backgrounds who create an imaginary community for themselves. I am using the word 'imaginary' more in a physical rather than a culturalist sense.⁹ Here, people with different backgrounds and socio-economic biographies, come to recreate themselves as belonging to one community (Falzon 2003), in this case the various geographically framed ghettos in the megapolis. These communities retain a degree of cohesion that manifests itself in marriage and kinship practices, in the

⁸ Lele (1995)

⁹ See Anderson (1991) for a culturalist definition of imaginary communities

politics of group identity and, most notably, in the types of business networks they engage in.

Survival of the fittest: Cyber worlds in Mumbai Metropolis

Our interviews with café managers and participant observation in café premises reveal an atmosphere of arbitrary norms and regulatory practices towards internet browsing and tolerance of pirated software transactions governing everyday operations. There are inconsistencies in billing, evidence of pirated software and multiple businesses running under a single business title. In an environment rife with non-formal business relations, cyber cafés are spaces that depend on social networking to procure and maintain café infrastructure and a loyal clientele (Rangaswamy 2007). Prem, 25, manages a café in the largest shanty town, Dharavi, says, *“We even allow happy hours during the day halving rates and allow our loyal clientele to browse longer if they want to...”*

The oldest café in our sample, in outer suburban Mumbai started shop nine years ago. Amit, who has now taken over the business from its original owner recalls, *“... it was some kind of dating services. We had cubicles with curtains running all around them... I believe the owner thought that in his area, that had no open spaces or parks this would be hit... At that time when cyber cafes opened pornographic surfing was very rampant... In Mumbai where do you get private space...? But I don't allow such activities...”* Around 20% of cafés in our sample still have separate cubicles but deny any thing improper or illegal going on. When asked why then enclose spaces when one could open up more shop space, the owners fall silent and smile.

Out of our 31 cafés, 3 had enclosed cabins and 5 others partially enclosed spaces for internet browsing. Almost all operators, including those with enclosed cubicles, said they strictly prohibit pornographic web surf. We probed:

“I mean, you created privacy even in this small space, when you could have freed up more space for business... and you cannot know what goes on...”

“We have written very clearly on our walls... Yes, we do not peep over shoulders to see what is going on...”

“Err... why you had these private cubicles”

“Hmmm... we wanted people to do work in privacy, like e-mail, chat etc without getting disturbed.... Well, what can we do if they go to these sites...?”

“There are blockers etc... You know...”

“Yeah! If we install these even good sites get blocked and slows down the already shared connection... We cannot do all these things just to stop all kinds of surfing”

Enclosures not with standing, ‘inappropriate’ surfing are a distinct possibility. We did note the preponderance of young adult and male users at certain hours in cafés. All cafes had regular women clients but afternoon hours saw very few visiting cyber cafés and are predominantly a ‘male space’.

Inside café premises several business practices fall into the contested terrain of legality. Café managers are hard pressed to run a profit making enterprise and resort to available measures, time tested in existing business practices, slipping into the broader culture of non-formal economic relations. We are yet to encounter a café that owns original software. Many do not own any legal software while some have a single system license and generously share with the network. Amit, opinioned that in today's MTV world there is 'so much out in the open'. People can easily hire pirated CD's etc and watch at home. He added that some cafes that he knows of in adjoining neighborhoods offered pirated CD's for circulation. I asked him what he felt about piracy. He remained silent and smiled. But Taussif, who runs a café in Ray Road, a South Mumbai neighbourhood and home to a sprawling informal automobile hardware market, lost his temper when he heard the name of our research sponsors "... how the hell do we buy your software when it so expensive. We are running hand to mouth business and you fancy buying legal versions for all our computers...." When we mentioned our research focus and the company's interest in ground level realities, he told us to 'get lost and never to show our faces in his café'.

All cafés in our sample had attached business. Many who began the business thinking it lucrative had to diversify to make ends meet. Computers, software, maintenance and repair were all obtained in markets with dubious legal credentials. The ready availability of such markets promoted proliferation of internet cafés driving heightened competition amongst them. To beat maintenance expense, around 50% of café owners, in our sample, were hardware literate and assembled and sold PCs to their customers. Infact their cafés attracted prospective clients. Assembled PCs were cheap¹⁰ and parts were procured in Mumbai's sprawling informal markets at Lamington Road. Around 70% of cafés were communication centres offering local/national/international telephone services and digital Xerox/scanning/printing services. Around 30% had mobile servicing as attached business. One of them had a book lending library, one was a photo studio, one is a share/stocks trading centre, the last two using idling PCs for café business. One of them even offered food catering services. Many of them ran these multiple business under a single license. From what we gathered, income and profits were not declared with full transparency, more so when profits were hard to come by.

Sanjay, owner of a cyber café next to Mukesh, also operates a interior design consultancy, a money transfer franchise and a telephone booth form the same premises. He says;

"...I grew up in Mumbai. My family members are all in services but I wanted to run a business. I started my own outfit with the help of friends and began interiors. I began the café 4 years ago. There is such heavy competition amongst internet cafes. Surfing rates are dropping steadily. We have 4 other cafes down the road itself... Starting a café is not much. Assembled PCs are cheap, home PCs are increasing. Even this telephone business is going down. The Sathyam corporate chains of i-cafés are providing

¹⁰ Anywhere between 6000-20,00 INR, 150-500 \$US, depending on quality and specifications demanded by a client

VOIP so cheap. We find people with headphones talking away in these cafes paying so little”

Most café spaces were rented out and relations between owner and tenant were unclear. Dinesh, managing an outer-suburban café says:

“...: Actually, there are two different people. One owns the place while the other has rented it and set up the cyber café”

“...okay meaning the place belongs to a different person and the setup belongs to a different person”

“...yes exactly. ... I am a third party in this business. The second party totally handed over the business to me. I have no contact with the first party, the space owner. I deal with the second party who own the cyber café”

“And you have employed some one else to look after the café in your absence”

“Yes, that is the fourth party who reports to me”

Dharavi

In Dharavi, the non-formal slips back and forth into the illegal with greater vigour. The very social-geographics of this hyper-active slum community is intimately tied to illegal squatting, tenements and the many productive business transactions. It is true that Dharavi is unique even amongst slums. It is spread over 223 hectares and consists of densely packed informal settlements accommodating an estimated seven lakh people (although figures of how many actually live in Dharavi remain disputed). It is also different from other slums in that it is home to over 4,000 ‘industries’ producing anything from foodstuffs to clothes, jewellery, leather and surgical sutures. A recent survey¹¹ established that in a central area of Dharavi called, Chamba, ‘leather’, bazaar the density is 336,643 people per square kilometer!¹² Virtually all regions (and languages) of India are represented in Dharavi. In every nook and corner of Dharavi there is ‘industry’.

There are 6 cyber café serving, arguably, a million people. We found and profiled 5 of these. All are recent, the oldest around 13 months ago and youngest, a week old. That demand for internet is an emerging phenomenon was interesting in itself.. All of them had pirated software or a single licensed copy generously shared with the network. All had attached communication centres offering public telephony. One had an adjoining business of textile retail. All cafés have attached business and without exception, offer public telephonic services. Some have Xerox/printing options and mobile phone services. Space being premium PCs, usually 4-8 in a café, are crowded into as many cubicles. It is claustrophobic space, to say the least. But cafés get crowded all day, mainly visited by male

¹¹ <http://www.airouts.org/?p=57>

¹² If we take the 700,000 population figure, the population density of Dharavi would be around 314,887/km, more than Manhattan in rush hour, which is about 50,000 people/km (Dharavi, High-rise Eviction, Economic and Political weekly, June 23, pp:2364, 2007)

youth who are busy surfing the internet. The most popular activity is visiting the chat-room at Yahoo! Youth spend hours, as much as 8 hours a day, chatting with on-line friends. Internet is popular with students for information search and mail. Gaming happens but limited due to lack of networking resources. PC's are brought with pre-loaded games. Of course, all are pirated including windows software.

Typically, café owners run a parallel family business alongside the cyber café. Catering, cloth merchandise, printing, are older business. The communication centre offering telephonic services are reportedly losing business due to proliferating mobile phones and cheap calling rates. At least two out of the five cafés were managed by teen age college students wanting to move out of family businesses.

Ram Kumar, 17, who manages *Devi Communication*, says:

We, my brother and I, are handling the café on our own. We alternate and sit in the café to manage our college timings. We want to get bigger a better place, as this is too small and can barely accommodate four computers. ...Having started the café we surely have had a boost in our reputation People find it nice to see us, so young and all, handling a business ... Internet is fast catching because of its speed and you can find anything on Google... In terms of the café we now have second hand and assembled computers, but in the future we want new PCs and provide better facilities, of web-cams, better systems, etc. Right now our focus is to finish studies...

Regi runs the most fancy of cafés in Dharavi. It is air-conditioned and has 7 computers and good decoration inside of the café.

... We are the biggest and the best in this area. We have 50 to 60 clients visiting us every day. Many of them like the air-conditioning from the heat of Mumbai and visit us even from neighboring areas... We have a cloth retail next door our family business but we acquired this area to begin internet. We got cousins from our native place who learnt computers and they run the show here...

Café owners believed Dharavi offered the cheapest going rates for services. Edward, running a small café, wanted to diversify into desktop publishing, with his computers, "...It's been only five months since me and my brother started the café. You see it is on the mezzanine floor above a cloth shop". The brothers have rented the place and currently have four computers. The computers are second hand and hence required cheaper capital. In the future he plans to get into printing business; jobs like those of printing banners, cards. He said, "... Dharavi is a major market for printing, because it is the only place where you'll get the cheapest printing rates. The printing job is public related. The more connection we have with the public the more business we'll get. With those intentions I started the café..." He is worried about the printing business being risky with good possibility of clients wanting 'to forge documents'. He nevertheless wanted to start one!

Café owners adopt a furtive attitude towards privacy in café premises. As noted, there is awareness of regulatory norms that turn ambiguous in practice (The crowded cubicles and

predominance of male youth are common observations). Interestingly, there is a slippage between these 'irregular' youth activities inside the café and its embeddedness in Dharavi's contested legal status as a residential slum, an active community and a bustling economic unit. There is large amount of literature around the contested status of Dharavi's economic history¹³ and nature of re-development politics¹⁴. It would be understating to suggest small business in Dharavi come under a cloud of unregulated practices. Functioning Internet cafés operate very much within this paradigm as there is little scope for economic transactions outside of the penumbra of the non-formal commercial culture. It is little wonder what goes on inside the café are above board!

Of gamers and chatters

"It seems 'the newest hotspot belongs to the internet café. Where else can the young go to travel the world in an hour, spill your heart out to millions, and get the latest news, gossip, and trends from every possible source?'"¹⁵

Chatting, dating and ensuing social relations are often denied or considered illegitimate and pursuing these through the internet in a café almost seem like an allegory of the informality or even illegality of business ethics. However, we know little from research about how youth sexuality is culturally constructed and what structural arrangements enhance or inhibit sexual experiences. Several studies and reports in India dwell on youth sexuality from a social health perspective. For example, a better known work, Leena Abraham's (2002, 2001) study of 'heterosexual peer networks and partnerships among low-income, unmarried, college-going youth in an Indian metropolitan city' tackles the issue to contribute towards designing culturally relevant sexuality education and the planning of appropriate sexual health services. Nevertheless, un-coded and partially regulated spaces such as the cyber café and access to the world of internet in them are emerging unsupervised spaces for youth to explore socially restricted practices.

Embedded in cyber café non-formality are young chatters and gamers who perceive chatting and gaming as social needs that internet fulfills. As we discovered these enthusiastic internet addicts we saw the 'social needs' linked to secrecy around dating, expressing sexuality and coded flirting behaviour. What struck us is the fit between the greyness of cyber café status as legitimate business in low-income neighborhoods and the greyness of behaviour and use of internet by youth clientele. The age-group which patronizes chatting and gaming are adolescent – young. They occupy a loosely marked social zone between childhood and adulthood and also occupy a special place in the city's changing commercial culture. Here, we make a speculative and ideational connection between the

¹³ Here is a list of select literature, Chatterji(2005), Sharma(2000), Desai(1995), Verma(2002) PROUD(1989), Appadurai(2000)

¹⁴ Mukhija (2002)

¹⁵ Blog spot on internet cafés, <http://technolojai.blogspot.com/2007/06/internet-cafes-rockget-excited.html>

'grey' non-formality of café businesses and 'unmonitored' chat-room dialogues that youth indulge through these very businesses

Cyber cafes made most of their money selling internet time to young 'gamers and chatters'. A considerable portion of income comes from these activities. We heard many café managers remark that internet publics, especially the youth, have turned 'purposive'. They have discovered the joys of social networking, gaming, web surfing and plain and simple mailing and job search. While decoding non-formality in cyber café business practices, our ethnography made interesting connections at the client-end. It is clear, at the outset, youth in urban India are discovering the covert pleasures of internet chatting and the new high of gaming supersonic cars and terrorists. We spoke to 16 such self-confessed addicts and their on-line passions. Café regulars were 16-24 years of age, the youngest so far, in an outer suburban Mumbai café, is a 8 year old gamer who come regularly with his elder cousin. All except 4 were male. The four girls were made contact with great difficulty as is considered norm for young and female persons to avoid cyber cafés for chatting or gaming. Two of them, chat addicts, went on-line from their home PCs; one young woman of 22 was an employee in a suburban Mumbai café and got into yahoo chat with idling PCs¹⁶; The fourth was a regular gamer visiting 2 or 3 favorite cafes in South Mumbai with her group of friends¹⁷. The 11 boys were hooked to these internet practices and were regular cafe visitors and spent good money on these services. They report most of the cash came by way of pocket money from parents and other generous relatives¹⁸.

We try and glean from narratives the import of these activities in the lives of youth subjects. These were ethnographic data whose meanings were not apparent on the surface of things. They also held a tenuous link to café business practices, not always talked about, partially hidden from the public eye nevertheless playing out in public space. We report two of our chat room encounters. Sagar, 17, in high school, lives in South Mumbai. His father drives a cab and family income is around 270\$US per month. He uses the Yahoo chat room while at the café, some from around 9 in the morning to evening time, when he is 'in the mood'. He says, it not really a major part of his life, but yes "*if at all I am fed up and tired then I sit to chat. I am not dependent on it. If I feel like it then. Yes there are boys who can't stay without chatting at least once during the day*". But this conversation we had while he was chatting, tells a different tale, "*Ab here is a female! One can guess immediately from the language of the person... You know, when in chat rooms you are relieved of all the tension. You feel relaxed... Feel like doing a lot of mischief...*" Aadil, 21, moved from his home town to study computer engineering in Mumbai. His first internet experience was in a café to check exam results. He is an avid internet user, e mailing, Orkut, information for college projects and even looks for free downloads. But his most passionate past time is chatting at Yahoo. Beginning on a serious note about computing technologies he eventually told us his less talked about pursuits;

¹⁶ She reluctantly gave us a brief interview and refused to discuss in detail her on-line chatting practices.

¹⁷ Female gaming needs special and separate attention to analyse gender dimensions of public and shared internet usages. We have not gone into this issue in this paper.

¹⁸ We need to probe further about who funds youth internet time.

"I was chatting with a girl and she told me how she looked and that she was looking for someone with so and so looks. I thought that she was lying so I lied to her too. I started bragging about myself. One day we decided to meet. Instead of going personally I sent my friend ahead and watched from far..."

"Did her description of herself matched?"

"No it didn't. So she was bragging... and she was dying to meet me... and finally it did not work out for us. There are other girls and there are 22 states in India. I want a girl-friend in each of the 22 states..."

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, we wish to reiterate the nexus between Mumbai city, its pervasive non-formal business culture and techno-social needs inflecting the every day of cyber cafés. The pervasive nature of informality demands us to look at the emerging market discourse of IT business practices not through the discourse of illegality but informality. With regulatory discourse of information technologies centered on piracy and illegitimacy, informality of business practices in emerging economies provide an alternate premise to understand its nature and function. These challenge received notions of visualizing IT in emerging economies as simply piracy and illegality and coming to terms with markets shaped and structured by unregulated and non-formal processes in negotiating on-going and future business relationships. Several of cyber café socio-economic transactions occupy an indefinite legal status, flirting with copyright laws and appropriate internet browsing behaviour. We also point to irregularity in business infrastructure licensing and ownership. Café find ways to survive the cost and maintenance of expensive internet technology, again seeking existing non-formal business networks of Mumbai.

As we point out in the paper, cyber cafés, especially those sprouting in 'illegal' tenements like Dharavi and social practices like youth chatting and gaming lend a new dimension to non-formality. Cyber cafés, already suffused in non-formal/para-legal business sociality, become sites offering a certain amount of secrecy around virtual dating and flirting for young clients and economic transactions for businessmen. The scope of the paper did not allow a detailed reflection upon the affinity among young clients and cyber cafes. However our ethnography shows the 'greyness' of youth internet practices ironically reflecting the 'grey' areas of café business practices. We also point to the many instances whereby the non-formal and the illegal develop tenuous links, overlap and mute boundaries separating them, a function of the overarching shadow economy of Mumbai.

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