As more Africans get online, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are increasingly hailed for their transformative potential. Yet, the fascination for the possibilities of promoting more inclusive forms of development in the information age have obfuscated the reality of the complex negotiations among political and economic actors who are seeking to use technology in their competition for power. Building on over ten years of research in Ethiopia, Iginio Gagliardone investigates the relationship between politics, development, and technological adoption in Africa’s second-most populous country and its largest recipient of development aid. The emphasis the book places on the ‘technopolitics’ of ICTs and on their ability to embody and enact political goals, offers a strong, and empirically grounded, counter-argument to prevalent approaches to the study of technology and development, that can be applied to other cases in Africa and beyond.

Iginio Gagliardone teaches Media and Communication at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa, and is Associate Research Fellow in New Media and Human Rights at the University of Oxford, UK. He holds a PhD from the London School of Economics and has spent years living and working in Africa, including for UNESCO. His research focuses on the relationship between new media, political change, and human development, and on the emergence of distinctive models of the information society in the Global South. He has extensively published in communication, development studies, and African studies journals, and his work has been translated into Arabic, Chinese, French, and Italian.
The Politics of Technology in Africa

Communication, Development, and Nation-Building in Ethiopia

Iginio Gagliardone
University of the Witwatersrand / University of Oxford
To Nicole
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I have always been fascinated by how technology evolves and, throughout its evolution, opens new opportunities for us to understand the individuals, groups, and societies who designed and made use of it.

When I first stumbled upon one of Schoolnet’s plasma TV screens in a secondary school in Addis Ababa, I could not resist but start asking questions about how that apparently costly and complex system came about, who designed it, and what else it was connected to. At the time – it was March 2005 – I did not know this book would have emerged from that first encounter, but I am still deeply fascinated by how much technology – if properly asked – can tell us about how a society thinks of itself and its future.

Along this ten-year journey I have hugely benefited from the time, advice, and wisdom of numerous people. Firstly, I want to thank the many individuals who generously agreed to sit with me and patiently explain why they did what they did, what influenced them, and what they envisioned through their activity. Especially in its initial phases, this book required collecting and trying to piece together many pieces of a puzzle only a few people were trying to solve. This meant I often had to come back to the same individuals and ask more, test with them whether an apparently promising connection was pointing in the right direction, or other avenues should be pursued instead. Some of these individuals are named throughout the book, and their words are reported as often as possible, also to offer the reader a glimpse of our meetings and conversations. Others asked to remain anonymous, but I am deeply thankful for their generosity and willingness to share their views and information with me, often in trying circumstances.

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