

Some Reflections on our Strategic Directions

To take recourse to the comfort of clichés, it can be easily said that we live in extremely interesting times. If there is one thing here that the spot light must not miss, it is how the sweeping winds of technological change have brought with them the expanding 'oligarchic nucleus' of democracy, the control of politics and governance by the elite, and in particular, corporate capital. The Human Rights Law Foundation (HRLF) has filed a suit against Cisco in a United States (US) Federal District Court accusing the company of helping the Chinese government to censor the Internet and keep tabs on dissidents, including members of the banned religious group, Falun Gong. At one point, Falun Gong adherents were estimated to be at over 70 million, exceeding the total membership of the Chinese Communist Party (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falun_Gong).

Contemporary oligarchic power structures of political control seem to bear close resemblance to pre-democratic times, but the resemblance stops there. Political configurations that define our existence in the techno-social reality are post-democratic in that they erode the centrality and dismiss the relevance of the 'public' – a notion that represents the discourses, struggles and contested space of democracy; and in doing so, they are ingenuously sophisticated.

Dominant network society logic deployed through digital technologies renders history, ethics and place/context defunct. Consider the informational state; e-governance is a way to destabilise the identity of citizens in very problematic ways. Very little is publicly debated as the Government of India (GoI) is embarking on privatising governance through e-governance, in the name of path-breaking innovations in service delivery that amount to nothing more than the commercialisation of citizen-state interactions.

The trends – big and small – also concern the way the decentralising propensities of digital technologies are being outsmarted by the forces that seek to 'capitalise' their totalising power. The anarchist's dream of self-organising and self-governance may originate in the network society's possibilities for collaborative and distributed ecologies of creation and production, but these very sites are also the factory shop floor for a new form of bottom-up, distributed capitalism in the emerging network architectures. The peer-to-peer theorist Michel Bauwens uses the term 'netarchical capitalism' to describe the emerging way in which digital ecologies are characterised by "the emergence of a new segment of the capitalist class, which is no longer dependent on the ownership of intellectual property rights nor on the control of the media vectors but rather on the development and control of participatory platforms". It may take us new ways of looking at things, but look we must, at the public in digital and digitally enabled ecologies, and how it is produced through the monetisation of the commons; as Bauwens asserts, "corporates who own Web 2.0 platforms are dangerous trustees of commons-favourable protocols" (http://p2pfoundation.net/Netarchical_Capitalism).

Meanwhile, most liberal actors would much rather ignore the erosion of the public, ostensibly because State intervention in the free space of digital ecologies is anathema to the 'rights' of the netizen-user. Contestation around the rights and principles scaffolding the emerging global public is buried in the political economy of post-democratic politics, and the design of necessary global governance arrangements appropriate to the global character of the network society is not surprisingly, suitably ambiguous. While corporates in the network society are brazen in their opportunism and expediency, developing countries are not yet clear on the public policy regime surrounding the Internet. Google recently agreed to pay a fine of USD 500 million to the US government for allowing Canadian pharmacies to place advertisements on its website that resulted in prescription drugs being imported from Canada to the US, unlawfully. What India may want to or could do about similar violations contravening its domestic law, is a moot point.

The unfolding picture of the digital era needs a compelling theoretical framework that can be uniquely Southern; not only do we need explanations for the many contradictions arising from the rearrangement of social norms and practices in the digital era, but also constructive pathways for an agenda of transformation that is contemporary. The recasting of the public requires us to grapple with 'advanced

capitalism' in the digital age. The modus operandi of global capital in digital ecologies is to reformulate the structures and processes of production only for newer avenues of private gain (as in the case of peer-based platforms mentioned above that use 'community' labour). The very markers of material reality like gender seem to disappear as the labour of women from the South is co-opted by the immaterial 'knowledge' economy in the name of participation in the global work force. If indeed, lurking in the very nature of the beast, there is a promise for transformative change, a credible theory must account for history, location and ethics. It cannot be unhinged from reality as it is embedded and embodied; it cannot present a dematerialised notion of global citizenship; it must correspond to the narrative of global justice. These thoughts have informed our work as we have worked on a wide canvas this year and as we hone our vision and plans for the coming years. While the assault of jargon and new literature from various disciplinary inquiries into the digital seem to overwhelm the more bounded space of development thinking, we believe that it is only by plunging into these emerging knowledges and categories that we can create and rewrite a development-centric and equity-oriented epistemology of digital technologies. Sitting on the peripheries or hobnobbing with the familiar will not do; the times call for much more.

You will read in this report about our work on feminist frameworks building; our efforts to politicise the access-centric discourse around gender and digital technology by arguing the need for a structural-institutional approach to interpret the interests and rights of the marginal, female 'citizen' in emerging digital ecologies. The humble wisdom that comes from the work of our field centre (now christened '*Prakriye* – Centre for Community Informatics and Development'), continues to lend us the courage of conviction needed for long term organisational sustainability in these times of complex challenges. The *Kishori Chitrapata* project with young, out-of-school *dalit* girls has not only designed experiences that have left a never-the-same-again imprint on their lives, but helped us explore feminist intervention differently. *Prakriye*'s work with *dalit* women's collectives continues to demonstrate technology-supported empowerment models that go beyond the generation of counter-cultures. As mentioned already, we are convinced that new concepts must inform development theory and practice; a mandate that we also gave ourselves through the Public Software Centre that seeks to work with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), academic institutions and government departments, to extend the politics of the 'freedom to produce and share' espoused by the free software movement, to encompass a 'public ownership' perspective.

We want our work to resonate more with the debates in the global justice arena. Internet Governance (IG) is one area we have sought to shape – more or less as lone crusaders espousing political economy perspectives – through multiple entry points, including significantly the India, Brazil, South Africa (IBSA) inter-governmental platform. Walking the talk to re-engineer institutions through new technologies requires a committed engagement with the government and faith in the role of public institutional regimes. This painstaking art of the necessary – 'doing' technology for transformative, systemic change – has been our strategy in the partnership with the public education system in Karnataka state, as also with the state Knowledge Commission. At the national level, our advocacy in the governance arena has gathered substantial momentum. We have held that any attempt to strengthen governance through digital technologies, whether in public service delivery or in the design of new information infrastructures like village level telecentres, or Right to Information (RTI) related proactive disclosure, must go with an explicit emphasis on deepening democracy.

Understanding the oligarchic alignments of contemporary structures, the privatised publics that the dominant digital represents, is non-negotiable for social change actors. Equally important is to know how a new reinvented town hall/village *gram sabha* can be constructed through and by the contemporary and radical community constellations – the 'network publics' – that the digital makes possible. This is what captures our imagination and action. We hope to find the appropriate institutional methods to inform the wider development effort around us committed to social justice and equity with these two mandates.

Directors
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