

Directors' Report

Some Reflections on our Strategic Directions

IT for Change has been grappling with the epochal changes brought in by the information society. Information society describes a global context where a considerable part of social life is digitally influenced, if not mediated. The influence is direct and also indirect, impacting people and structures not directly in contact with the digital phenomenon. While we have tried to situate ourselves firmly upon the ideals of equity, social justice, democracy and development, it remains a constant challenge to find appropriate theoretical frameworks for our work. In the last five years, we have defined our analysis and work vis-à-vis the theme of 'An Information Society for the South'. This theme proceeded from the logic of the structural disadvantages that developing countries suffer from, and within these countries, the exclusions that marginalised sections are subject to. Since the dominant idea of an information society was typically a global construction, it was logical that we took the geopolitical axis of North-South as the principal anchor for developing our critique and articulating possible alternatives.

As we analysed and understood better the structural dislocations caused by the information society paradigm, we found that the challenges it presents are at an even more fundamental level of our social organisation. We had always associated the dominant paradigm of information society with neoliberalism. However, in its rapid ascent in the past couple of decades, neoliberal ideology has still remained a counter-force, even if an increasingly powerful one, in relation to basic social institutions, whether of democracy, welfarism, public life, education or media. In their essence, these institutions are still largely pre-neoliberal. For instance, even if corporate money is known to greatly influence political agendas, it is still a phenomenon looked down upon. We value the publicness of basic civic infrastructure, even as we witness and lament its growing privatisation. Libraries and schools as basic enterprises of the knowledge and socialisation of our civilisation are seen as public concerns, and most of us show some amount of disquiet at the growing proprietisation of knowledge and privatisation of education.

On the other hand, the institutional ecology of information society has very different fundamentals. The institutions of information society were born and took shape in a period of the rising influence of neoliberalism. The imprint of neoliberalism on the information society paradigm is so defining that there is a strong need to reformulate the content and nature of progressive advocacy and political activism in relation to this principal defining characteristic of the dominant version of information society. The anchor concept of such reformulation has to be 'democracy with social justice'. It is however significant to keep in mind that neoliberalism itself seeks legitimacy by claiming the idea of democracy for itself.

The only significant resistance to the dominant patterns of information society, so far, has been from techie-anarchists, who have rebelled against corporatist hegemonies

in the digital arena, often with significant success, as in the case of free and open software. However, as what Benkler describes as ‘the battle over the institutional ecology of the digital environment’ becomes more intense, larger alliances embedded in society’s political economy landscape have to be made, which often involves choosing between aligning with an ascendant global corporate power or building the collective strength of society’s public interest players, which includes the state. At this crossroad, their antipathy towards governments (even the more democratic ones) is so strong that techie groups have largely allowed themselves to be co-opted by corporates, rather than work with governments. Dominant corporatist structures of the emerging digital reality can only be confronted through an active collaboration of all public interest actors, building strategic partnerships despite and beyond their many differences.

Governments themselves have been lax in the articulation of public interest in the emerging information society for two principal reasons. They are often simply inadequate to the task of understanding and responding to the complex issues thrown up by rapid technological change. Also, they have been somewhat uni-focally fixated on the challenges that the new ICTs pose to the task of maintaining statist controls in society, to the prejudice of many other public interest issues that are implicated in the ongoing flux. In any case, ICT corporates, and generally the whole digital arena, are so globally organised that governments, especially those of developing countries, have very little real leverage over them. On the other hand, there is no global governance worth its name, except when required to push developed country interests. The interests of these countries, at present, seem to be served best by a *laissez faire* approach to the increasing corporate control of the digital arena.

Consequently, the emerging institutions of information society are almost all post-democratic. Built on neoliberal values of radical individualism and self interest, and post-modernist conceptions of absolute freedoms and anti-normativeness, digital reality is a strange new being. Simply through its claim of the technical equality of all users (defining human beings in their relationship to technology rather than vice versa), the post-democratic digital seeks to almost magically exhaust the project of social justice. Users, disembodied of all qualities other than what they themselves want to assume, taken to be interacting as equals in pursuit of glorified self-interest, and living among people of their own choosing, define a new post-human paradigm. As it greatly expands the technology-mediated private space, the negative impact of the digital on the concept of public is no less. The public is after all a negotiated common space, while the digital seems – only seems – to allow a choice of sociality which is entirely in the image of the self and the personal, and thus escapes the burdens of negotiation and accommodation. These latter social processes are inherent in the concept of the public, as constituting its political aspect¹.

The sense of extreme empowerment that the digital provides is a chimera as far as most aspects of our lives are concerned. However, this sense has been used as a kind of ‘opium of the masses’ to dull them to the real, and tectonic, shifts of power which are taking place in favour of global corporates. This is the central phenomenon

1 Politics is defined as the process by which groups of people make collective decisions.

constituting the rapid neoliberalisation of our societies. The Internet itself, which started as a public network in the hands of public institutions is increasingly dominated by a few proprietary applications like Google and Facebook, representing the privatisation of the erstwhile public territory of the Internet. Google is increasingly the world's library, and Facebook, its 'public' meeting place. Both these functions were traditionally public, but now take place within proprietary spaces, of which rent-seeking opportunities, rather than public interest, is the main structural principle.

It is obvious that this new 'reality' strongly mediated by the 'digital', presents a great challenge to constructions of democracy, social justice, public life and the public sphere. Since the virtual consists entirely of intangible informational exchanges, it may be tempting to conceive of it in terms of the historical continuity of the public sphere. The virtual does fundamentally reshape the public sphere. However, the form and substance of the virtual goes much beyond, to embed directly into, and transform, many other key institutions of democratic public life as well, defining new directions for our political future.

As a greater portion of our lives gets entangled with the digital/ virtual, the strong influence of the dominant ideology of information society is already directly evident in 'real' spaces, like those of everyday politics and of knowledge production and sharing. One striking example is the principle of multistakeholderism, most prevalent in ICT policy spaces, which, in practice, turns out to be a means for open and blatant involvement of big businesses in making policies in the ICT arena. In the yesteryears, this kind of thing used to be done through back-door lobbying. Similarly, in no other area is development research, or development NGOs, so openly backed by corporate money as in the field of ICTs for development. Such a degree of legitimisation of corporate power and its role in the socio-political aspects of our society is a uniquely information society phenomenon.

In this framing of the information society phenomenon as a set of diabolical challenges, one obvious question arises; whatever happened to talk of the great egalitarian and knowledge equalising potential of the Internet? What about the Internet's image as a possible weapon of people's power against tyrannical institutions? These opportunities still exist and there is yet hope for them to come true, at least partially. We are in times of great social disruption, which is both an immense challenge and perhaps an unprecedented opportunity.

Manuel Castells, whose trilogy on network society is considered one of the most definitive works in this area, in an interview, describes our civilisational dilemma as follows:

The problem with technology is: it reflects us and we are not really nice people, so if we're real nasty this technology is going to show it and produce many terrible consequences. If we address our psyche, our political institutions, our way of life and our relationship to nature, if we are able to change, then technology has incredible potential to empower us. So here is the problem: today we have the most extraordinary tools which can be either used to help us or to destroy us. Right now, we're doing the second. So, the crisis is not that we are collapsing, the crisis is that while we are having a very dynamic economy,

we are not integrating in this economy our societies, cultures and political institutions. It's this gap we're suffering as a crisis, at a moment that we should in fact be rejoicing.

It is true that already dominant forces have made early inroads in shaping the information society paradigm and are getting entrenched. On the other hand, progressive actors in civil society have still not even developed sufficient theoretical frameworks, much less alternative frameworks of practice. This is especially true for a Southern vision of an information society. A few dispersed efforts, while often ameliorating the damage, are as likely to be coopted by the strongly systemic onslaught of dominant forces, which look remarkably well-organised, if not by design, certainly by a keen recognition of common interests.

The Internet may still become the instrument of organising people's power and of the overthrowing of unjust systems and structures. But for this, the protagonists must learn to use the Internet to also build alternative institutions, as it is so often being used disruptively to challenge and bring down institutions.

The Internet does provide significant possibilities for ensuring transparency and accountability of institutions. In fact, it is the power of the Internet to induce extreme, and perhaps, unbearable transparency, and thus expose the gap between 'claiming to be' and 'doing', between norm and action, that has largely served to undermine traditional institutions that survived on managing this 'gap'. In the new information rich environment which makes older methods of deception ineffective, dominant groups require legitimisation of new 'enabling' means and practices. Replacing democracy with multistakeholderism as the principal political institution, especially at the global level, is a good example of such a process. Skillfully 'managing' some of the inherent tendencies of the emerging new 'public sphere' of the Internet, as have been briefly touched upon earlier, itself acts as the key means of such legitimisation. Since the sustained assault in information society on our institutions mostly builds on their existing weaknesses, which neoliberalism has been able to exploit, institutional reform becomes an even more urgent imperative today. This calls for a purposeful deployment of ICTs towards such institutional reform.

These were the insights that framed the directions of our soul-searching; we felt that the focus of our work needed to be at a more fundamental level - the concepts and practices of democracy and the boundaries between public/common and private/commercial, in the emerging information society paradigm. Positing the idea of citizenship as the primary basis of framing social membership in information society, and the concept of digital public for framing the spatiality of the digital realm, are two important anchors of the new conceptual framework that we are evolving in order to address the unique context and exigencies of our work.

Two broad areas are important for progressive forces to engage with in the new context. The first pertains to the way the socio-technical phenomenon of the Internet is shaping up. It is required to ensure that the Internet's architecture is as decentralised, open and empowering as possible for those at the peripheries, thus protecting it against strong efforts towards shaping it as an instrument of control and dominance, for the continued accumulation of economic, social, political and cultural capital. This

is largely the policy arena of Internet governance, which has to be complemented by the practice of empowering the peripheries – local communities using new technology to take control. Development of such practices require sufficient public funds to be invested into the area of community informatics.

The second area that requires urgent attention is institutional reform in areas of development, democracy and media, taking into account the vastly changed context of the information society. Fortunately, ICTs themselves provide a lot of new possibilities for far-reaching institutional reform in the desired directions.

IT for Change's work in 2009-10 was built on the above logic. On one hand, we worked in two cross-cutting areas of technical governance and community informatics, and on the other, engaged with intersections of ICTs with development domains like those of governance, education and gender equality.

One of the most important activities during the year was the conception of the term 'public software', ascribing virtues and values of publicness to software needed and used for public purposes. We found that public authorities often connected much more easily with the concept of public software than with Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), since it was defined from their standpoint of public service and public goods provision. The concept of public software was first used in a regional workshop on public software held in Bengaluru, in February 2010. In May 2010, at an international workshop co-hosted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the Government of Kerala, the 'Kochi Declaration on Public Software' was adopted. We plan to work with our partner organisations to set up a Public Software Centre to stress the 'publicness' of software, and organise collaborations between the FOSS community and public officials for developing FOSS for public purposes.

A new project 'Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society', consisting of multi-country researches in the Asia-Pacific region, which has been in the pipeline for more than a year, has now been finalised for support by IDRC. The project will begin shortly with a call for proposals followed by an inception workshop. Another major research and advocacy project, 'ICTs for Governance Reform and Deepening Democracy in India', also developed and refined as an idea in the last year, is ready to commence with the support of Ford Foundation.

Technology standards are by definition supposed to be public and free. But not in the digital arena, where proprietary, royalty-based standards abound. Such standards provide opportunities for perpetual rent to global digital corporations. The Government of India came up with a good draft policy on 'open standards in e-governance'. However, under pressure from global digital corporations, the policy was significantly diluted to include royalty-based proprietary, as well as multiple standards. IT for Change and its partner organisations launched a strong advocacy campaign against this dilution of the draft policy. A major problem however was that most civil society organisations consider such issues too technical, and do not engage with them. In this context, we consider a significant achievement that we could convince the strong and influential civil society coalition 'Campaign for People's Right to Information' to write to the government against the dilution of the draft arguing that open standards were

essential for exercising the right to information. We also offered alternative text for the draft policy. Our campaign has achieved considerable success with a clear positive impact on the draft policy process.

Further, in the area of ICT governance, we continued to work towards ensuring that global Internet policies are made by legitimate and democratic public institutions, and not by private companies, or a group of powerful countries. We did some very focussed advocacy for strengthening United Nations (UN) based Internet governance related bodies over the last year. We also networked with developing country governments in this regard.

The issue of governance of ICTs, which is the global platform for knowledge transmission, is closely related to the increasingly exploitative global Intellectual Property (IP) regime. IT for Change attended an experts' meeting called by the Third World Network in Geneva, in September 2010, on pro-development IP policies. We were also part of a national level coalition that was formed in this area and met earlier this year in Delhi for their first meeting. IT for Change brought to this meeting the important perspective of how techno-social spaces of the Internet constitute the principal site of knowledge flows, asserting that civil society engagement with Internet governance was necessary to ensure a rich knowledge commons or public domain.

Our engagements with ICTs in the public education systems grew further this year. We were able to make significant progress towards the introduction of free and open software in the public education system in Karnataka, and advocated for the same with government officials of other states. Arguing for the centrality of the teacher in ICT-enabled education, and also the use of digital content which is non-proprietary and collaboratively produced through the involvement of teachers, we commenced a new project - 'Teachers Community of Learning' - in some government schools in Bengaluru.

We continued to present strong counter-views at the global and national level where the information society discourse continues to be dominated by neo-liberal approaches. We wrote a paper 'Open but not Public Membership in the Information Society as a Club Good', in response to a call for papers by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). We participated in the Second Harvard Forum on ICTs and Development, organised by IDRC and the Berkman Center, attended among others by Amartya Sen, where we presented a paper, 'Social Enterprise to Mobiles: The Curious Case of a Propped up ICTD Theory'. We were invited this year by the independent expert to the UN on cultural rights to inform her report to the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC), to which we contributed perspectives on how the information society context compounds the category of culture.

Our field unit, the Centre for Community Informatics and Development, while continuing its engagement with self-help groups of marginalised women using community radio, community video and community computing, started a new project, *Kishori Chitrapata* (Images by Adolescent girls), which seeks to use digital video technology for shaping new constructivist learning processes and for developing local gender-sensitive content. This project is being done in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan* (SSA) and its advocacy

aim is to provide new ICT-based constructivist learning models for the public education system and for government programmes targetting out-of-school adolescents.

Even as we face new winds in international development aid that have deprioritised ICT related funding, we continue to be convinced of the need for the continued strengthening of the niche that we work in - that of looking at structural changes brought in by the digital phenomenon, from the perspective of equity and social justice. Our work belongs to the category of development effort that addresses structural issues - systemic marginalisation, social and economic justice, and democracy. Within results based development management, such efforts are often sought to be reframed in the language of measurable goals. In our organisational practice, some of our efforts simply defy easy measurement. It is pertinent to note that our work by its very nature is 'meta' and 'systemic' across almost the whole spread of social change and development activity, which makes measurements even more difficult. Additionally, there is much innovation (and experimentation) required both at a theoretical level and practical-project level in our work assessment that may require very different, forward-looking frameworks. In this context, raising funds in an increasingly risk-averse development funding environment, remains a rather formidable challenge.

To end on an uplifting note, though: there is a Chinese wish 'may you live in interesting times'. This wish is certainly granted in IT for Change's work.

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