

## **The Digital Agenda - The task ahead for Beijing plus 20 feminist practice**

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Articulations about the idea of a people-centred, development oriented information society have been made as far back as the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003. Visions of an equal and just global communication order have also been spelt out prior to WSIS, such as in the vision of a NWICO (New World Information and Communication Order).<sup>1</sup>

The digital agenda continues to evolve, and even as we speak now, newer manifestations of digital experience are waiting to be theorised. So what is it that we need to reassert from a feminist standpoint about the digital agenda, as we look into a metamorphosing communications environment?

There is a fair degree of consensus around the need for policies with respect to universal access, high quality broadband infrastructure, affordable connectivity, new skills for digital literacy, citizen-centric e-government, harnessing the mobile revolution, assisted women-centric public access; legal remedies to tackle online violence, safeguard privacy and promote access to information and knowledge.

But there remains much to be done - in terms of mobilising progressive voices -

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. “New World Information and Communication Order”. Last modified August 16, 2014. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_World\\_Information\\_and\\_Communication\\_Order](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_World_Information_and_Communication_Order)

on the contentious issues around protecting net neutrality and saying no zero services – a euphemism for a dumbed down internet for the poor; fighting copyright regimes that undermine and take away people's rights to information and knowledge, and making corporations accountable for privacy and online VAW, and demanding regulation to check the growing concentration of media ownership. This is big agenda – and where it goes depends very much on alternative discourses of truth, shared conviction and power of collective resistance. The road is long.

The ever-present agenda of the state is an even longer road perhaps. The regimes of governmentality in the information age and its consequences for state power and women's freedoms is at the heart of the 'democracy agenda' in the information society.

The digital agenda, it may seem, is far too wide and far too diffuse for feminist activism in communications. But the Internet is not only the future of our communication paradigm, it is also the unfolding present of our social, economic and political lives. The challenge then is to step out of zones of epistemological comfort and construct a coherent theory of communications in the digital age. One that accounts for the ubiquity of the digital in human life. The digital agenda that the feminist communications activist – regardless of her location – will essentially assert is the old agenda of radical transformation, but transformation in a digitalised world.

What do we seek through this transformational praxis?

### 1. Making the Network-data complex visible

The digital paradigm is represented in the network-data complex that powerful countries and their corporations control. Monsanto's power in agri-business today comes from its control over data about micro-local land holding across the US –

that gives it access to details about soil, crop yield and more.<sup>2</sup> Media networks today are connected with the US foreign policy establishment, defense and other economic sectors, through financial and social links<sup>3</sup>. The social and political control exercised through the network-data complex is unchecked; the democratic deficit in internet governance and the huge propaganda by the US, including through think tanks and NGOs, has more or less stalled any public debate on a global treaty on internet governance and on the global governance of data<sup>4</sup>.

A feminist theory of media and communications in the network society has to unpack the network-data complex continuously, calling out the particular ways in which it works to entrench patriarchy. What is visible and what is circulating as truth are not only questions of representation today – but of the subjecthood that dominant networks create, legitimise and circulate. The mindboggling varieties of feminism that include google's doodle on Women's Day to 'empowered' versions of consumption thanks to personalised advertisements that pop up so thoughtfully, and self-aggrandising, 'short-term' dissent that obscures historical struggles in the margins require a resistance politics that uses the very same subjecthood for creative disruption of capitalist patriarchy. We may be commodified alienated subjects of network capitalism, but our political agency can transform and politicise the very structures and platforms of the network that reduce us to data.

## 2. A global alliance with movements for global justice

A transformative feminist digital agenda must inhere within and inform the core demands of the global justice movement. If the logic of neo-imperialism and neo-liberal capitalism permeate the network, it is vital that we anchor our framework

2 Singh, Parminder Jeet. 2015. “Who rules cyberspace?”. *The Hindu*, June 6. <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/who-rules-cyberspace/article7286747.ece>

3 Phillips, Peter and Mickey Huff. 2010. “Inside the Military Media Industrial Complex: Impacts on Movements for Peace and Social Justice”. *Project Censored*, May 3. <http://www.projectcensored.org/inside-the-military-media-industrial-complex-impacts-on-movements-for-peace/>

4 This is borne out in the work of IT for Change ([www.ItforChange.net](http://www.ItforChange.net)) and our and coalitions, in global advocacy platforms

with reference to the big picture. They may be old battlefields in the struggles for justice – but the contestations around patent regimes and the commons are critical sites through which network capitalism undermines women's rights to knowledge and livelihoods.

Informing the social movements for justice about the 'commons' character of the internet is an urgent task. The virtual commons of data, knowledge and spectrum need to be held collectively to maximise social good within a framework that respects human privacy. Through various means of propaganda and silencing, the digital rights discourse has remained underdeveloped in its connections to the right to development and to notions of justice. Policy contestations involving net neutrality, privacy, big data, spectrum allocation, and industry structure/consolidation are part of this struggle for informational and communicative justice. Seeing some rights – freedom of expression for example – as more important is bound to affirm not only the capitalist expropriation of the internet, but also perpetuate false notions about openness and participation. Oxford Internet Institute's research<sup>5</sup> shows that there is more than twice as much content created about France than the entire African continent in the Wikipedia – the place that is ostensibly the sum of all human knowledge. What is perhaps most interesting about some of the smaller language-editions of Wikipedia is that it is not the Global North that vanishes from the map. It is rather other parts of the South that become absent: an observation that seems to imply a reproduction of the visibility of the already highly visible. Paradoxically, the Global North is being represented in local languages while the South is largely being defined and described by others. What we see is an amplification of earlier unequal patterns of information geographies. The fight has gotten much more blatant and intense. In 2014, when developing countries proposed a resolution for a binding instrument on human rights violations and corporations, the EU and US fiercely opposed it.

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5 Graham, Mark. 2014. "The Knowledge Based Economy and Digital Divisions of Labour". In *Companion to Development Studies*, 3rd edition, edited by V. Desai, and R. Potter. Hodder. 189-195.

Any destabilisation of powers that be in current network logic is pushed back.

### 3. Rediscovering feminist spaces

A transformational digital agenda demands an urgent reassessment of the 'how' of progressive feminist politics. In the age of coalitions and multistakeholderism, doing politics often means assimilation into dominant networks<sup>6</sup>. A recent critique of the Commission on the Status of Women, for example, shows how big NGOs, mainly from the North, increasingly function as gatekeepers to the UN system.<sup>7</sup> In the 20 years after Beijing, it is increasingly clear that the strategic gains of engaging with the state are not stories of unequivocal success. The ideological and political compromises involved, such as the “bowdlerized, impoverished or just plain wrong” representations of gender<sup>8</sup> are now well embedded in development discourses. The time, energy and resources that have been poured into partnerships with the state by feminist activists have seen a vision of women's empowerment that has very little to do with feminism, or even with gender equality<sup>9</sup>. With the informational state, arguing a digital agenda that promotes women's citizenship and rights has proven to be a fraught political endeavour.

In the global Internet policy arena, contentious feminist politics is completely delegitimised in multi-stakeholder coalitions, which have place only for rights and freedoms that can be accommodated into the larger design of network capitalism<sup>10</sup>. Feminist strategising for a transformational digital agenda will need

6 Veneklasen, Lisa. 2011. “Citizen action and the perverse confluence of opposing agendas”. *openDemocracy*, November 10. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/lisa-veneklasen/citizen-action-and-perverse-confluence-of-opposing-agendas>

7 Jauk, Daniela. 2014. “Insiderness, Outsiderness, and Situated Accessibility- How Women Activists Navigate UN's Commission on the Status of Women”. *Societies Without Borders* 9(1): 69-95. <http://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1044&context=swb>

8 Cornwall, Andrea, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead. 2007. “Beyond Gender Myths and Feminist Fables: The Struggle for Interpretive Power in Gender and Development.” *Development and Change* 38(1): 1-20, quoted in Kalyani Menon-Sen. 2015. “Twenty years after Beijing: Time to Re-evaluate Policy Engagements with the State?” *UNRISD*, May 7. <http://www.unrisd.org/beijing+20-memon-sen>

9 Menon-Sen 2015, op. cit.

10 Belli, Luca. 2015. “A heterostakeholder cooperation for sustainable internet policymaking”. *Internet Policy Review*

staying power for contentious collective (and collaborative) action, and a strong narrative of a new social – that can bring networks and data to the service of emancipation.

#### 4. A transformative digital agenda must learn from practice.

The work that my organisation has been doing with marginalised women's collectives and girls from the *dalit* community, through public access information centres, using radio broadcasts and collective listening, collective viewing and discussions of community video material, GIS based data collection exercises to bargain with local government, sending out bulk audio messages through IVRS, have taught us a lot about digital agenda for national and global policy work. Through local media and informational power, women's groups have taken their collective struggles forward, mentored new leaders, forged safe spaces to talk about their claims, fight it out with local politicians and invited public authorities to discuss their versions of 'data-truth'. These processes comprise the training ground for new citizenship pedagogies, and the civic intelligence fundamental to capabilities in the digital age. They provide the institutional structure for democratic rituals that collectively make mini-publics. Such mini-publics have nurtured deliberation and regenerated solidarity that gradually and almost silently disappears as spaces to self-organise shrink. Coming together to watch a film, to do a survey, to critique a video, to record an audio byte or just enjoy a radio programme with their voices and those of their peers is part of the repertoire of new digital functionalities that bring meaning to the women for a life they value. This repertoire may not have necessarily pulled them out of poverty, but it has enriched them as actors espousing a collective ethos in the local public arena, having authority and bargaining power, however limited. It has collapsed the binary between cognitive and affective aspects of learning digital technology in a way that cannot but be feminist. Running their information centre and media

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activities can be empowering, but it also brings great challenges that add to their life as leaders.