

Cake for the North and Crumbs for the South - The Political Economy of the Information Society¹

This paper is inspired by 2 unrelated events -

One - an article in the Economist² that attracted considerable attention in ICTD (Information and Communications Technology for Development) circles. The essence of the article is that telephones, especially mobile telephones are useful for the poor, and that computers and the Internet are of no use. The article also takes the view that liberalized markets are the way to reach mobiles to all or most people. The article denounces the Digital Solidarity Fund (DSF) and similar initiatives that commit public and donor money to develop a computer-Internet infrastructure in developing countries on the grounds that this is largely useless for populations in these contexts.

The second - the experience that my organization has had with an ICT project and our sheer inability to convince the project selection committee about its empowerment potential for women. The project aimed for collective empowerment of rural women from marginalized sections, their organizational strength and identity and their information and communication needs. It did not fit neatly into ICTD frameworks - it did not talk about extending connectivity to villages, did not promise telecentres based entrepreneurship models, and did not commit initially to a total number of beneficiaries. We felt over the protracted period of engagement with the selection committee that the vocabulary to argue the case for ICTs in meeting women's development priorities and collective empowerment is by and large absent, (beyond the obvious value of networking in cyberspace, which is ridden with problems of who is online and who can network thus).

Obviously, we were not going to be able to convince the different people in the committee from various backgrounds, unless we were able to show that ours was indeed an ICT project where technology would make a real difference despite not conforming to the typical ICTD project mould. The problem is that it is indeed difficult to grasp and articulate how ICTs can potentially intersect all at once with poverty, development and women's empowerment - how dalit women's information hunger, collective identity, organizational strength and strategies and their engagement with external institutions are important but intangible outcomes that can be achieved through the appropriate use of ICTs. Explaining and understanding an approach that seeks to make change happen at an institutional level - at the level of women's collectives and their social ecology - is certainly more difficult than elucidating and communicating a direct media strategy for women through ICTs.

During this period, it was equally challenging for us to dialogue with the women's organization we are seeking to work with and to explain to them

¹ Work in progress, please do not cite.

² http://economist.com/printedition/displaystory.cfm?Story_ID=3742817

how their feminist goals would at all be advanced within the context of their grassroots work, if ICTs were introduced to support their existing strategies. One lesson was very clear – that conversations between theory, practice, lobbying and change are still marked by silences within the discourse of ICTs and development. There exists a great chasm between the ICTD sector and what by contrast may be called, the traditional development sector.

The above instances although unrelated, capture revealing perspectives on the relationship between ICTs and development. They reflect the inadequate grasp of the ICTD space and insufficient theorization of the connections between development and the new ICTs from Southern perspectives. They also denote the territory that Southern feminists require to map, to come up with conceptualizations of ICTD that account for the claim of the South to the Information Society (IS), and the location of women in it.

The Problematique of the South

In arguing for a political economy analysis of gender, development and ICTs that is South specific, I must clarify at the outset that I am aware that the divisions of the South and the North are debated and even contested, and as pointed out in feminist literature³, even part of a neo-liberal design. While it is true that what defines the boundaries between the South and the North are social exclusion, poverty, discrimination and oppression, not location⁴, specific North-South dimensions that have consequences for feminist activism and advocacy need to be recognized, especially from a political economy perspective and from the vantage of institutional analysis, which is a central preoccupation of this paper. Location thus becomes useful to embed analysis within the broader political, social, cultural and economic environment. Devaki Jain captures this in a simple and hard hitting way – “Illustrations of similarity (between the North and the South) however, conceal that the poor in Chicago, whose outcome indicators are similar to the poor in Bangladesh, still have a social-security floor, social insurance, or some basic social welfare entitlements. The poor in Bangladesh, on the other hand, could easily die of starvation, lack of clean water, or various forms of pestilence and disease, as they have in the past and continue to do so. In other words, unprotected death is a real, proximate and completely tangible phenomenon among the poor in most of the poor countries, but not so for the poor in the advanced countries..... Thus, inequality and poverty, which admittedly exist everywhere, take a different characteristic in the South. The

³ Ewa Charkiewicz argues that among the key instruments of global governance is the division of the world into North versus South and that the metaphors of North and South as techniques of representing the world are crucial for the formation of the global empire. The amorphous spaces, the unnamed territories, the multitudes are ungovernable. They have to be named, categorised, calculated and problematised—to be ruled. See “Beyond Good and Evil: Notes on Global Feminist Advocacy”, <http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/wia/wia2-04/ewa.htm>

⁴ Devaki Jain, “The Problematique of South-South”, <http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/wia/wia301/devaki.htm>

inequality in South countries has a kind of vividness, cruelty and deprivation that offers no reprieve—it has no cushion, no safety net, no umbrella.”

This paper does not seek to minimize the feminist project, which despite the case for an exclusive South-South development discourse seeks a legitimacy across geographies and diversities. It seeks to explore how the critique of the ICTD discourse falls short of adequately unpacking the specific impact of ICTD policies and approaches in the South, and proposing perspectives that are Southern. It argues the need for a Southern feminist analysis of the ICTD landscape and for the articulation of alternative approaches in ICTD through the lens of institutional transformation.

Feminist Critiques of ICTD

Feminist critiques of ICTD go back to problematising NGO approaches that informed media advocacy in the Beijing process. One such critique⁵ argues that the understanding of information and communication for women's empowerment has been distorted into a frozen media-technology discourse of 'women and media' plus 'women and new communications technologies' in the Beijing Platform for Action and WomenAction2000, a project set up during the first PrepCom of Beijing plus 5 as an experiment of the convergence of information communication technologies for women's empowerment, involving print, radio, TV, Internet, email and fax. It also contends that the specific needs of women were not separated from the needs of women's NGOs, and that “the static media-technology discourse failed to challenge global digital capitalism and consumerism in mass media and new communication technologies.” Adopting the view that the Internet may be a hegemonic project, the critique concludes that “the understanding of IC(T) was limited, and there was inadequate scope for contextualization of policies because technology was emphasized over the information and communication needs of the women/users. Mass media and new communication technologies, especially Internet, were emphasized at the expense of traditional medium (such as drama, folk songs etc.) and other forms (audio, oral, corporal etc.) of information and communication.”

Even as such analysis provided an important perspective to think about new technologies within the feminist project, it is located within a media and communications perspective. It reflects a construction of the Internet as a site of power, where hierarchies operate, dismissing this space as dystopian, and labeling it as a new hegemonic project. While the critique from a feminist view point is valid as far as the wider political context of the Internet is sought to be laid out, the analytical framework is based on the limiting assumption of the Internet as a site of communication, characterised by the hegemony of a capitalist globalising discourse even though offering spaces for resistance. While making a strong case for women's information and

⁵ Denise M. Y. Cheung, “ An Empowering Global Discourse? Information Communication Technology (ICT), Media and women's empowerment in the Beijing Platform for Action and its review”

communication needs and the contextualisation of intervention, it slips into a dystopian view of technology, and is unable to engage theoretically with the opportunity for subversion and transformation that the Internet holds, and the institutional shifts that the Internet makes possible through discontinuity of earlier paradigms. Further, it valorizes traditional media, conflating the new with the hegemonic and the traditional with “subjugated knowledge” appropriate for the subaltern. More about this later.

Civil Society Positions at WSIS

Analyses of the neo-liberal moorings of the ICTD discourse cohered around the WSIS in the Geneva phase. These came from an understanding of how the promise of growth through IT was by and large a story of digital sweatshops and in fact yet another manifestation of the fleeting face of global capital. The control of corporate monopolies within the ICT arena, the emergence of monopolistic transnational media, the issue of proprietary regimes in software, and the unbridled deregulation and privatization of the telecom sector in developing countries and the consequent takeover by MNCs of markets in these countries were seen as a continuum of issues, all related to corporate globalisation. The absence of adequate ICT infrastructure in countries of the South was flagged in the assertion of the digital divide, bringing to the fore the need for a Digital Solidarity Fund especially to deal with ICT infrastructure investments in Africa. When governments at WSIS adopted the WSIS Plan of Action, CSOs held that the implementation proposals were a “perfect disguise for getting access to new markets, specifically the newly emerging larger markets in regions like Latin America and Asia (particularly India and China).”⁶

The analysis proposed by civil society organizations were a considered critique of technology-led changes built within communication rights framework as the overarching layer and upholding the freedom of expression and the right to communication of all peoples and an equal information society, conceived within the frame of free and pluralistic media. The ownership and control of by communities of new technologies was seen as an answer to hegemonic ICT models.

Towards a Southern Perspective

These critiques of ICTD and of the WSIS process do not sufficiently problematise the impact of neo-liberal approaches to ICTD in the South.

The issues of engagement with new ICTs in developing countries go much beyond freedom of expression, the right to communicate and a responsive local media, and comprise the exploration of opportunities afforded by new ICTs for strengthening and revamping institutions. However, the discussions on ICT and its potential for growth and for enterprise have driven out of the window any effort to head in this direction. ICTs have been constructed as

⁶ <http://www.isiswomen.org/onsite/wsisis/eu-cs.html>

economic infrastructure to be put in place across the country by the private sector. The telecom approach of most governments has disregarded social and development aspects. Such an attitude is best exemplified by the fact that ICTD projects put in place by local governments in India have come in conflict with national telecom policies on issues like wireless connectivity and VoIP that provide cheaper local solutions, because national telecom policies are driven by market and business requirements and not by development needs⁷.

The lifeforce of the ICTs for development discourse may be traced back to the prescriptions of the 1998/1999 World Bank Report on Knowledge for Development. Developing countries were persuaded to reform, reconstruct, and readjust their institutional arrangements, prepare their future workers, and establish information infrastructures for globalisation. The connection here is simple and clear - a technology- and market-led framework is seen as the best way to alleviate poverty, and improve gender equity as well as the quality of life in general. Not too further down in time, but certainly with prolific instances of market failure to deliver on these goals in technology-led development, the time for asking a basic question is more than ripe - what is the role of information and communication infrastructure in the context of development, and what kind of institutional investments in ICTs are required for people's well-being, beyond the mere preparation of future workers?

Southern governments still do not see ICTs as development infrastructure that need policy commitment and a translation of such commitment into investments. The recommendations for allowing a market-led ICT (read telecom) revolution to "bridge the digital divide" have also come with prescriptions for public sector reform, the emphasis here being on a reorientation of policy that is pro-market. ICTD is also cast invariably in the language of "applications", reflecting the construction of ICTs as tools of efficiency, the "e's" that may be used as accessories to health, or learning or banking or governance. The same approach is found in the WSIS Geneva Plan of Action.

Also, much of multilateral aid in developing countries has gone in the direction of resource heavy, un-replicable, pilots built on private investment models that have not borne out any lessons for the institutionalization or upscaling of ICT-enabled alternatives to address structural issues of poverty or unemployment, and innovations in health, education etc. Questions of women's access to ICTs have been addressed, with few exceptions, through the projectisation of ICTD - through initiatives that have sought to bolster women's economic activities through mobile phones or through telecentres based mainly on revenue or profit models. The approach to women's empowerment within the ICTD paradigm is almost identical to donor approaches to micro-credit, where women beneficiaries become the target of

⁷ see <http://www.itforchange.net/projects/#pro-poor> for 3 case studies of local ICTD initiatives and their issues regarding connectivity solutions.

an aggressive development strategy that rewards those who can survive in the market.

Civil society advocacy in the countries of the South does not yet possess a coherent vocabulary to challenge the dominant trends, nor do development sector activists see ICTD issues as directly pertinent to their activism. The inadequate exposition in development terms of the ICTD discourse has meant that there exists little that connects ICTs to development priorities, whether as critiques of the dominant ICT paradigm, its social and political impacts or as an elucidation of what ICTs can do for the poor in general and poor women in particular, in addressing their concerns.

Deconstructing the debate on old versus new ICTs

Against the larger landscape of a market-led ICTD discourse, the alternative discourse on women's empowerment through ICTs is located on a continuum that inherits from participatory media approaches. Feminist practice seeks to emphasise women's ownership and control over media, as in the many community radio and video projects in the South that give visibility to women and their perspectives. Gender analysis of the context of women in the South asserts the infrastructural impediments in women's access to new ICTs, like the absence of electricity, connectivity and the like, and of their inability to benefit from the gains of the Internet on account of illiteracy, restrictions on mobility and other dimensions of gender discrimination. The analysis of the unavailability and inappropriateness of the Internet in these contexts has by and large led to a logical fallacy in the articulation of alternatives by development actors in the South - 'old' or 'traditional' technologies including radio are seen as the answer to women's information and communication needs and the Internet and computers are seen as irrelevant technologies that cannot meet the I and C needs of poor women.

This formulation is problematic in 2 ways - it fails to see the Internet and wireless technologies as development infrastructure, providing information and communication platforms no doubt, but essentially transforming the information and communication architecture of social institutions. It also hands over the case against new technologies for the South to neo-liberal interests on a platter, as the piece in the Economist illustrates.

If radio and video can appropriately respond to the information needs of poor women, Internet-based technologies can revolutionise the context of their social, economic and political relationships. And since the market is not going to find incentive to reach new ICTs to poor women, social policy needs to commit itself to building the physical and social infrastructure to engineer institutional change through ICTs that serve the needs of development and empowerment of women.

Thus, from a feminist standpoint, the Internet is to be seen as new media no doubt, but it is also the foundation of new institutional arrangements. As a communication platform, it offers spaces for resistance and as a new

architecture of social institutions, it offers space for subversion and transformation, paving the way for a new social organization in which traditional power structures can be challenged. Within an institutional framework, the Internet may thus be seen as a mediator of change, transforming institutional structures, norms and values, and the way social relations are constructed within institutions. Such a shift marking a dislocation of old power structures may be understood as similar to the social transition from an industrial to post industrial society. For women and other marginalized social groups, the information society potentially marks a paradigmatic shift in their social relations as institutional arrangements undergo fundamental changes.

Is the promise of ICT-mediated institutional change real?

The role of technology has to be interpreted and shaped within institutional frameworks of development. ICTs need to be deployed in the context of the current limitations of institutions serving women's development needs to mediate appropriate institutional changes.

One of the most crucial institutions in the women's developmental ecology is the government. The extension machinery of government development departments have entrenched bottlenecks in terms of reach, efficiency and accountability. How can the new technologies be used to overcome these constraints?

The welfare state even in the countries of South Asia promises a lot of legally enforceable entitlements as a social security net. However, the allocations are so low for these entitlements, as well as leakages so huge, that a good part of the promise remains on paper. Can ICTs enforce responsiveness and accountability in the social security system in a manner that the social security entitlements cannot be denied to anyone who is legally entitled? But would that raise the stakes in the social security system so much that the entire resource base of the governments will need to be re-worked? How much of the resources can be saved through system efficiencies alone, and how much would it mean to re-orient the governance and taxation system to meet the requirements of a truly welfare state?

There are numerous other institutional bottlenecks that may be possible to address. Women in rural areas have poor access to banking and micro-credit. The issue of cost of transaction - low per-transaction volume as well as low density of transactions - is the main constraint. Can ICTs be used to re-vamp rural banking in a manner that can bring economic empowerment to rural women struggling to break traditional norms of male control over economic resources? Can ICTs be used to develop and strengthen institutions of social organization among rural women who are individually placed in disempowering social contexts and greatly need to use collective strength to force changes?

These posers are not just concepts or likely possibilities in ones mind. Akshaya in Kerala is trying to transform development delivery to make it more effective and cost-efficient at the same time. Rural E-Seva in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh is making the information about social security processes like PDS, old age pension, concessional loans to weaker sections etc so transparent and accessible, as well the processes to apply for these benefits so accountable, that it may soon not be possible for the government to deny entitlements to anyone who is supposed to get them.

In villages of Madurai where DHAN foundation works, villagers interact with government officials through video-conferencing. Sitting in the comfort of a village community hall, it is possible for the village community to raise questions that may be difficult to raise inside government offices; the video conferencing throws the entire interaction open to scrutiny of a larger village community or communities or even superiors, and allows for the responses to be recorded. The very context in which the citizen-official interaction takes place is transformed in this process in a manner that is empowering to citizens. And because of restrictions on mobility, and constraints on speaking in public, these processes can potentially benefit women even more.

Telephone and mobile networks are being used by grassroots women's organizations like SEWA for organizing their internal activities effectively.

The Piece in the Economist - Understanding the Political Economy of the Information Society

The article in the Economist employs a contrived logic that mobiles are more valuable, to de-value computers and Internet in context of developing countries.

Let us unpack this.

Telephone penetration in most countries of the North has been at near-saturation levels for a few decades now; yet it took the Internet for the notion of an Information Society to be invoked. Social institutions of the North have been changing paradigmatically over the past decade or so. Mediated by the Internet, these far reaching changes are evidenced in every aspect of society - from government to entertainment, media, education, markets, work organisation and health systems.

The cost-effective paradigms that the Internet has made possible has even altered the technology and economics of telephony, and if a complete replacement of traditional telephony by Internet-based telephony has not taken place, it is on account of regulatory issues protective of existing business interests.

The argument that the digital divide is just a symptom of deeper divides like income and literacy, erroneously labels poverty and exclusion as causes when they are in fact the results of entrenched institutional barriers and

biases that need urgent attention. Equally flawed is the formulation that access to computers or the Internet, as meaningless and sterile in developing country contexts, when the real meaning of the digital divide to people of the South is in being left behind even more than before as the Internet mediates far-reaching institutional changes in societies of the North.

The placement of telephony, computers and the Internet all on the same continuum reflects the problematique of insufficient conceptualization of the information revolution contained in the new paradigm made possible by digitalization and the Internet. The dismissal of the Internet and computers as inappropriate for the South and the push for mobile telephony through liberalization of telecom policy, as if that is the ideal option, celebrates neo-liberal ideology even as it hands down an apology of an information society to the South.

The technology revolution in the North, it is believed, has by and large been led by private sector innovation, whereby markets followed demand, and technologies have found appropriate use in this process. The political economy of the IS in the North thus follows from the assumption that the market knows best and is guiding institutions in their mutation, leading upto an information society⁸. The role of the government is in providing an enabling environment for the market to function effectively and in addressing specific socio-cultural externalities of information society changes.

By this logic, the prescription for the South, as argued in the Economist, is that the meteoric rise of mobile telephones is proof enough that these must be the appropriate technologies for the South, at least at for the present. And conversely, the failure of ICTD projects using computers and the Internet illustrates the inappropriateness and irrelevance of these technologies.

The relationship between market, technology and change in the North has to be understood in the context of how the conditions for the 'triumph' of the new ICTs which mark the IS, evolved since the 70s in the societies of the North.

Sean O Siochru traces this history and argues that the role of knowledge and information in society was already being recognized as central in the North since the early 70s, and thus the stage for rapid technology innovation and diffusion that have taken place since the 90s was already set in the social environment.⁹

The new ICTs were thus born out of a more complex dialectic with social developments than technology determinists would like us to believe. This dialectic implies a certain sync of the markets with socio-economic needs of the society. Under these conditions, the market may be seen as well poised

⁸ This dominant view obscures a considerable role of public investments in technology research, innovation and diffusion in the North.

⁹ Sean O Siochru, "Will the Real WSIS Please Stand up?", 2004

in the North to lead institutional transformation towards a new paradigm - that of the Information Society¹⁰.

However, the context in which the new technologies are sought to be applied for development in the countries of the South is entirely different. The new technologies do not have an existing dialectic with many of our institutions, yet, the opportunity that these technologies open up for institutional changes and transformation is real. We do not have the luxury to wait and see if and how the dialectic develops - leaving it entirely to the markets. Our development needs require us to consciously develop a public policy design for applying technology towards institutional change.

We need to claim our share of the cake not by resigning to prescriptions of what is appropriate as defined by a neo-liberal agenda of the North, nor by succumbing to skeptics in the South who reject new technologies as necessarily irrelevant. The absence of Southern perspectives on what new technologies mean for the South has meant an uncritical acceptance of the information society paradigm defined by the North, Northern civil society included. In meeting the needs of the poorest and the most disadvantaged, we will need to claim the old and the new (technologies), not just addressing their information and communication needs, but also appropriately employing new technologies for institutional change that leads to gender-just and equitable social transformation. In this context it needs to be mentioned that though the recent corrective to ICTD that advocates a shift to using the term ICD instead of ICTD may be well intentioned¹¹, from a Southern perspective the T in ICTD represents the remaining agenda of technology appropriation by development actors in their effort for social change. The political economy of the information society needs to be rewritten and the role of feminists from the South in this task cannot be over emphasised.

Conclusion

In the political economy analysis of new technologies, while there is no denying the issues of the dominance of technology- and market-led diffusion of new ICTs, the increasing monopolization and commercialization of media, and the neo-liberal underpinnings of the information economy and its impact on countries of the South, the existing framework of analysis for an equitable information society needs a strategic shift.

Media and communications perspectives need to be complemented with development perspectives that articulate how poor women can seek a place within the information society, and how national and global policy frameworks on ICTs need to be oriented to revamp economic, social and

¹⁰ Northern civil society does have grave concerns about the directions in which market-led IS developments are headed, especially in relation to communication rights, information monopolies etc, and these are being contested at many forums including the WSIS.

¹¹ As against ICTD, the term ICD is seen as representing a greater emphasis on people and social processes over technology.

political institutions that the poorest women engage with. This also calls for a reassertion of the framework of ethics, social justice and equality in the conception of information society.

For Southern women, ICTD approaches need to address their poverty and inequality through institutional transformation, so that in the emerging institutional realignments, women can forge new relationships within their social and economic contexts. New technologies need to be appropriated towards such social transformation. If this civilizational opportunity is not claimed, the South is likely to be left with the crumbs that get distributed through neo-liberal formulations.

It is imperative for national governments to have policies that enforce public service commitments from communication corporates. As Sasha Costanza-Chock¹² puts it, “the communications industry relies on access to what should be considered public goods (spectrum and satellite orbits,... state investments in research and infrastructure, and... copyright and patents.) Private communication firms exist and are able to make money hand over fist because governments offer them huge swaths of valuable common resources, and then enforce (using more public funds!) private monopoly control.”

Also critical is the role of public finance towards communication infrastructure and other technology areas for reaching spaces that markets avoid, and a public policy vision on what ICTs can do for women, beyond instrumentalising gender within preexisting and flawed frameworks that do not answer basic development priorities and the rights of the poorest women. Countries of the South need to direct public investment towards research to promote innovation and appropriate technologies, provide communication infrastructure for universal access, develop community-level institutions and capacities, and lead institutional transformation especially in relation to the institutions that touch the lives of the poorest women – governance, health, social security, education, and livelihoods.

¹² Posting on the WSIS CS plenary mailing list