

E-governance and women's citizenship – a critique based on the right to communicate*International Association for Media and Communication and Research Conference, 2016*

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What I propose to do is look at the way e-government, as a new framework of governance, reorders gender ideologies in political communication - the connections and interactions pertaining to politics and citizens.

As the digital permeates everything, ideas of citizenship are redefined through the material practices of governance deployed by the state through its new information and communication architectures. The point of departure therefore is that statecraft in the network society bases itself upon a new material-semiotic configuration that reinscribes patriarchal ideologies in the wider democratic arena, constraining the agency and citizenship of marginalised women.

At the normative level, policy statements on ICTs, e-governance, telecommunications, and broadband invoke the language of inclusion, the intent to reach the unreached, along with a new idea of democracy. So, in many of the vision documents, we see references to 'expanded' or 'proactive' democracy, as the information society is seen to herald a new disruptive moment. The assumption is of a guarantee, techno-deterministic in nature, of expanded rights of citizens to engage, and ostensibly, participate in influencing politically the directions of democracy.

In the past two decades, marking the post Beijing context, most governments have undertaken efforts to mainstream gender. These have taken different forms, from apolitical drives to add and stir 'gender', tactical maneuvers towards gendering budgets to strategic rethinking for gender justice. These efforts have had a chequered impact, but they have also opened up spaces for democratising the question of gender politics in local to national public discourse. Come e-government and the digital-by-default discourse, and we see retrograde movement. Most official documents on e-government do not have any perspective on gender. They seem to embrace an ungrounded, utopic stance as if the digital, in and of itself, can birth a new nation inherently emancipatory for all citizen subjects.

It is useful, as communication scholars, to disassemble policy documents for more than just their discursive subtext. Texts, as actor-network theorists point out, may be read as material-semiotic agents that transcend intent. In "reading with the text," we uncover more than ideology; we are able to see the agency of policies. Similarly, techno-social assemblages such as data bases, management information systems, portals for citizen grievances, mobile based innovations in government-citizen interactions, and all the emerging practices of e-government that rearrange social relations and communications, can be examined as 'actors'. If we look at e-government practices in this way, we see how they reconstitute gender norms. Techno-solutionism from the top programs women as victims, mothers, or passive clients of the state's largesse, detracting from the real debates on women's agency, autonomy, and rights in a digitalised context. A masculine state can easily track

compliance of poor women to conditional cash transfers; it seeks from them behaviour as good mothers and home makers who send their children to school and have hospital based deliveries , dropping the bad others who do not meet the targets for national 'progress'. Citizenship shall be given only if well-deserved, never mind the structural causes of marginality and exclusion.

A predominant neo-liberal logic of connectivity lumps women into the numbers unreached by the market - along with the aged, aboriginal people and physically challenged. This normative shift to a desocialised vision of gender politics legitimises a disciplined individualism in which the techno-apparatus of the government will enable a flawless redistribution of claims, one intermediated by machine intelligence. In India, for instance, several thousands of poor women are being struck off pension and social security lists in what is deemed a weeding out of leakages in the welfare system, with little recourse in the communications apparatus of the state to challenge the basis of the decision. As activists working on the Right to Information see it, the indignity women faced locally, with corrupt bureaucracy, was vastly better – at least this was visible. But in the case of computers and biometrics, the blame for non-delivery of services is always transferable to a remote somewhere else; a claim that manipulative local bureaucracy routinely uses to silence women and the poor. In the opaqueness of a faraway server, the tools of citizenship that poor women have used, the public protests they have held against corrupt local officials, are all rendered irrelevant. Who do they fight? Online grievance systems can easily misrecognise oppression – the fact that a lower caste woman is not allowed to draw water from a pond is a crime of caste based discrimination recognised by law. But an MIS portal recodes this as a problem of access to water facilities. The gender-based experience of caste is simply negated.

As techno-managerialism becomes default in the managing of governance, citizenship norms seem to bring back and resurface the fault lines of sexuality in masculine anxieties of nationhood. National ID systems become ways by which heteronormativity is reasserted. Not only does this violate the rights of transpeople who face stigma and discrimination, and lack official acknowledgment of their gender dysphoria, but it also allows authorities to systematically target them. In the panspectronism of the age of intelligence machines, the male gaze returns in the normalisation of the policing of bodies and a disciplining of errant, non-conforming citizen subjects. The CCTV cameras in metro trains in the city of New Delhi are the source of police voyeurism, to watch over, hound and harass young women and men traveling in the trains.

The increasing movement to manage by the digital and by data implies a foreclosure of democratic norm development in the contemporary politics of gender. The inscribing of techno-masculinity in the reconfiguration of governance marks a discontinuity in democracy. It erases the memory of feminist contestation in the domains of democracy and governance and recasts gendered experiences of marginality as technical problems that the material practices of e-governance will fix; an antithesis of the expanded democracy that the information society is supposed to usher in!

The second broad point I would like to make is related to the whole set of new rules and actors in e-governance. The advent of smart cities and smart villages, for example, legitimises the marketisation of governance, in the dependencies on corporate contracts for data capture. In the

architectures of political information and communication, scholars ([Taylor and Broeders for instance](#)) point to the growing agency of corporations as development actors and the generation of big data as representations of social phenomena, and as territories created in parallel with, and sometimes in lieu of, national data and statistics. The legibility of the citizen (an expression used by political scientist, James Scott in 1998) in traditional data collected through surveys etc., shifts now to visibility – where the citizen is unaware of the representations under the informational abundance of contemporary capitalism.

The most marginal women may not be captured in these exercises (considering that they are not yet the disembodied data points on a big data repository), but the truth that emerges is one that structures their representation and rights. From here to the argumentation in favour of new information platforms like Free Basics is a mission creep, part of the inclusion theatrics of the powerful Internet companies who ostensibly seek to inform and enfranchise disempowered women.

The new rules of governance do not correspond to citizen rights. With no data protection or adequate privacy legislation, the default data-based methods of epistemology in governance are profoundly anti democratic. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2013, only 8 states out of 55 had data protection laws.

In the global political economy of things in general, and the Internet of Things in particular, it is unlikely that a data subject of the Third World can demand the right to “an explanation” (as proposed by the General Data Protection Regulation of the EU) about any decision based on algorithmic assessment of her life by well meaning data companies and big data purveyors.

While EU regulation on data gives EU citizens back the control of their personal data, and addresses export of personal data outside the EU, the development industry in the Third World is busy with mobiles for empowerment projects for women led by telecommunication and Internet corporations. The data of Third World women must be exported out for a data based development science to be imported.

But this is the tip of the iceberg. As someone said very poignantly, “when US capitalists will lose money in smart cities projects, they will resort to TPP and sue city or state (federal) governments in less developed countries for trillions of damage”.

Today, right to information laws are increasingly being undermined and amended. The new rhetoric of open data is completely meaningless to the performance of citizenship. For example, in Malaysia, if women’s human rights defenders want to check the status of child alimony cases in the Syariah courts, requests for data have to be submitted to the Department of Statistics which will then charge search fees accordingly. Requests sent directly to the e-Syariah portal (a case management portal for centralised access) are not likely to be entertained, as data from this portal is accessible only to state Syariah prosecutors. For women, open data regimes are a double whammy; while public data to claim accountability is not accessible to them, their own privacy as beneficiaries of welfare is often at stake thanks to inefficient open data systems.

This wider context must be seen in relation to the democratic transition in most developing countries. First is the impunity of colluding states, and how the entrenchment of corporate footprint in political communications happens innocuously and immutably. India's Minister for Communications and Information Technology and Microsoft recently had discussions for the possibility of citizens to be able to use the national ID number as authentication for using skype with government offices. Second, while the swings in public sentiment and popular unrest are managed through appeasement of the masses – usually, vote bank politics to contain damage, the preferred tool is ad-hocism and blatant repression, rather than deliberative democracy and ethico-political debate. Third, in the wider public sphere of deliberation and action, there is no debate on the architectures of information and communication – neither in terms of the right to Internet access as a precursor for digital equality, nor the need to look at the relationship between data and democracy.

In most contexts of the developing world, women have stayed at the peripheries of the nation state, and their citizenship mediated through men. As has been theorised, the interpellation of the female citizen is one marked by everyday resistances, assertions coming out of lived experiences of disenfranchisement, and rights that are often post facto products of the failures of democracy. As techno-managerialism captures governance imagination, women's voice and citizenship are transformed into a technical ingredient of democracy. The female citizen subject is not likely to arise automatically as they become Face Book users. The tools of citizenship for women must therefore be imagined afresh.

I do not mean to sound dystopic. The relevance of subaltern public spheres of women cannot be overemphasised at this conjuncture. Women's local practices of media and data for autonomy over their ways of knowing, are vital to this. There is a big role also for legislation and institutional mechanisms to guarantee more than the plurality of media; the focus in this era needs to be on epistemologies of democracy, and how information and communication policies can allow truths to be generated and asserted locally. There is also a huge role for the feminist recasting of material basis of governance; projects to rewrite code, to turn around data bases and web portals on their head. This aspect of feminist techno-design supported by policy must arise from ideas of emancipation that recognise individual freedoms and collective rights as part of the singular narrative of power.

The present moment is one where a post modern feminism combines with techno-libertarian frames of freedom, erasing the relations of power. This is obviously because we are all willing to trade our privacy for the goodies of the information society. It is only through a feminist reinterpretation of public sphere theory that we can address what ails the theory and practice of political communication, and move towards a right to communicate.