Community level initiatives and the debate on Internet governance

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Dear friends,

It is an honour to be here and to speak on this panel.

I would like to talk about geographies of the network society that are excluded – geographies typically characterised as 'bottom of the pyramid' by non-inhabitants – geographies that are home to those who we are told are waiting to be empowered by the telecoms.

These are communities in the margins, who matter all too little to the networks of value.

I would like to speak to the question of the governance of digital spaces, from the standpoint of these vast regions, these communities.

Of everything I have heard in the highly elevating forums of discussion in these couple of days here, I have been most intrigued by Prof. Castells' assertion that – all theories we are taught about cultural imperialism are no longer true, since we see a cultural domination of multiple, competitive business networks.

The intellectual import of the redundancy of cultural imperialism agitated my limited wisdom, setting off a series of thoughts .. and making me wonder, if we are to feel somewhat better, somewhat relieved that the multiplicity of cultural hegemonies was not as bad as the era of cultural imperialism....

I was then reminded of a discussion I was witness to on a mailing list that I am part of.. this was a discussion on grassroots communities and why a special lens on the 'local' may be needed, as we debate digital dispossession.

As we know, these are times when categories can be really elusive....So, someone on the list stepped in and said, - the 'local' need not be the 'geographic' local. Local is about locus. The locus of control.

And this seemed to somehow make epistemic sense. Going from here, and reclaiming situatedness in these times of mobile society, I would like to focus a bit more on the local.. a region that we are told by scholars of globalisation – is that in which the global is appropriated and reproduced.

I will like to come back to the question of cultural imperialism a bit later.. For now, I would

like to ask if the local – even as a heuristic, can be treated as a prior category, one that we may want to examine closer.

In our politics and practices, we seem to take globalism as an inherent value. We like to see ourselves as 'global' citizens. I think, we need to unpack globalism – examine if this indeed is a neutral value, or if it is a world view that locates people differentially – in hierarchies of social, economic and political locations.

Gandhi professed localism.. he was not a bigot, but he conceptualised local living as intrinsic to social belonging and political agency. For Gandhi, the local was important; localism was not nationalism. In Gandhi's notion of 'swaraj', the local was the 'autonomy' of people, the locus for self-determination. Today the apparatuses of the network society seem to annihilate those with no claim to globalism. The Internet has emerged as the unitary force behind the creation and proliferation of contemporary media. It is the new organising force – enabling the centralisation of power and holding the promise of emancipation, for the unfree.

The material-semiotic underpinnings of the Internet are very important to understand. Today, 13 of the 30 largest publicly traded corporations in the US are Internet-related companies, and most are monopolies. Their power beyond the jurisdiction of the US is immense.[1]

An analysis of the relationships between 43,000 transnational corporations has identified a relatively small group of companies, mainly banks, with disproportionate power over the global economy. This web of ownership, the research tracked back to a "super-entity" of 147 even more tightly knit companies - all of their ownership was held by other members of the super-entity - that controlled 40 per cent of the total wealth in the network. "In effect, less than 1 per cent of the companies were able to control 40 per cent of the entire network,"[2] ..

This consolidation in no small part owes its strength to global techno- and data- architectures. This is why, if not for many other important reasons, the governance of the Internet is a vital issue.

As an artefact with an open, global architecture, the Internet has been moulded by the technical community with a world-view – described as Californian ideology - that combines radical individualism, libertarianism, and neoliberal economics. It is a curious hybrid of the New Left and New Right, based on their shared interest in anti-statism, the counter-culture of the 1960s, and techno-utopianism[3].

Internet governance, has been a legacy of this ideological world view, rooted as it is in what has come to be known as multi-stakeholderism. In 2013, IT for Change undertook a discourse

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1   http://truth-out.org/progressivepicks/item/15516-can-capitalism-tolerate-a-democratic-internet-an-interview-with-media-expert-robert-mcchesney
2   http://www.ianwelsh.net/147-companies-control-40-of-the-world-economy/
3   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technological_utopianism

analysis of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) 2012[4]. The IGF is a multi-stakeholder space for policy dialogues on Internet Governance. We ploughed through the transcripts of the six main sessions of the IGF 2012. We did a detailed reading of these, pegging our inquiry to the systematic tracing of the word 'access'. We trailed the word 'access' and looked at the context in which it was uttered.

From the 95 utterances that we examined, we were able to conclude that the dominant discourse in the IGF is of the market. Access finds mention with an anxiety about the rate of return on infrastructure; social policy is relegated as residue; development is signified as a paradigm of catch-up, a consideration that must come after growth; and individuals using the Internet are invoked as consumer-users whose preoccupation is with assimilation into a gadget- and applications- centric market. Concerns like linguistic diversity find mention within the overarching idea of demand and supply.

The study also found that the Internet is expressed as a multivalent, abstract, 'global' phenomenon, and 'access' also alluded to in a global sense, whereas 'governance' is seen as confined to the realm of the national. The global-universal is valorised as the scale and space of value, linked to the ideal of 'openness'. On the whole, excessive regulation by governments, by states, is seen as the main threat to rights of privacy and security and not so much the omnipresent surveillance machinery of telecom and Internet companies. Regulation in its varied contexts of utterances, is assumed to be value-loaded, something that is deemed undesirable.

The discursive processes of the IGF thus emphasise an openness through multistakeholder dialogue. Their neo-liberal leanings produce, reproduce and legitimise a politics of recognition, sidestepping the political economy questions of governance in its redistributive sense. The multistakeholderism of the IGF is a peculiar form of democracy... If the poor from the back of beyond of Telangana[5] are unable to be on the multi-stakeholder table, especially if they are not yet haloed users of the Internet, their world views about what the Internet means for their own localities - whether they can dream of high speed Internet, and how they may be able to use it for their socio-economic, civic-political advancement, will not be heard. Of course, they are invited to participate in debates virtually!

So – why am I sharing this research with you? The structures of the world are being fashioned by the structures of the network society. Chaos and decentering, inherent to network age architectures have birthed new forms of subordination and expropriation giving rise to what we know is called, network capitalism. The powers that be in international political economy have increasingly sought to align global regimes of technology with that of trade, finance and intellectual property to further the status quo. The arena of technology is also marked by coalitions of convenience, posturing by powerful countries and corporations, to perpetuate the governance deficit at the global level.

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4   http://www.itforchange.net/What-does-the-Internet-Governance-Forum-signify-for-gender-equality
5   The new Indian state where the conference is being held

The structural aspects of the network society also make power very diffuse. This diffusion of power, corresponding to network society 'dis-organisation' paradoxically works to create constellations of actors bound together by the ideology of globalism. In this global class, corporates organise 'big society' production through small world networking; nation-states come together with global corporations in an oligarchic nexus, and civil society networks attempt to consolidate their legitimacy. Digital technology provides the material-semiotic basis to also complete neoliberal capitalism's key project - that of 'taming politics'.

So, coming back to Prof. Castells' assertion.. Cultural imperialism as we knew it, may have metamorphosed.. it may have died as an idea, only to mutate into a multiplicity of cultural dominations.... As somebody said, culture is no longer the romantic or the modernist resistance to capitalist civilization. It has instead become integrated throughly, into the system of commodity production and circulation. Culture is commodity, and commodity is culture.

But imperialism? Imperialism lives on – it lives in and as the very material, physical spaces, that are carved out and shared by the 'global' class. It emerges as a post-modern creation, in fluid formations of a neo-colonial model in network society. India is a great example of this – with an immense concentration of wealth, tight networks of favour between politicians and powerful corporations and the capture of public assets for private gain.

The single most significant fact about network society imperialism, as James Petras, scholar-activist, who has written about Latin America and West Asia, says - in all of its manifestations, whether old US imperialism, revived European and Japanese imperialism or newly emerging Chinese imperialism is the re-division of the world. We are in the midst of a major struggle among the major and minor, old and new imperialisms, to seize control of regions, regimes, energy and strategic resources, through wars (unilateral and multilateral), "regional or bilateral free trade agreements", military alliances and economic associations. Giving the example of Latin America, Prof. Petras says, that so far, the carving up of Latin America proceeds through the very legitimate channels of elected petit bourgeois politicians, and not through wars or ethnic separatist movements.

Network society imperialism reproduces through discursive structures that co-opts aspirants vying to be part of the 'global' class – who then become its foot soldiers.. In an article written recently, an ex-diplomat of India talks about how plurilateral agreements among developed countries have remained the dominant global governance model in the Internet arena. And, as in the case of the Indian telecom and Internet industry, employees of MNCs have consistently cornered the space for discussion, seeking to propagate the thesis that the "multi-stakeholder" model advocated globally by the multinational Internet and telecom majors resonates in India as well![6]

The architectures of technology and data are the two meta layers of global society that will re-arrange social reality in the next few decades. These are controlled by powerful nations, the US

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6   http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/cast-a-wider-net/

in particular, and powerful corporations. Network society globalism is heedless.... its recklessness complements disorganised, neoliberal capitalism, and its masculine romance of the free, unencumbered, self-governing individual[7]. Its greatest obstacle is the national – the site where the dispossessed struggle to make visible the extreme alienation of the local, to claim rights and assert their citizenship. Strong voices of the marginalised are not nice, for the globalist class. Certainly not nice for their imperialist masters. They have to be squelched, and nation-states in the global south, disciplined, nay, 'controlled' as Deluze would say[8].

So, How can localism claim information power? How can it infiltrate the open spaces of the global? How do communities who have lost their autonomy, reclaim their autonomy? How do we bring value to the local, that challenges and pushes back the hegemony of global networks of value? And how can Internet Governance enable this?

Today, as Free Press, a US NGO argues, broadcasters make billions in profits while using the public airwaves for free, without fulfilling programming obligations for remote and disadvantaged communities. Access to broadband is a basic public necessity, and as the global class deepens its webs of gain, monopolies refuse to build high-speed broadband in regions that need it most. Instead, they actively seek to block communities from building their own community media solutions. Giant companies like Apple, Facebook and Google are steering us to their increasingly closed versions of the Internet, mining our personal information. Consider Facebook's recent acquisition of WhatsApp, the popular messaging service, or Google's purchase of Nest, the smart home thermostat company. Both of the target companies had offered strong privacy safeguards to consumers. Now they — and the data of their users — will simply be subsumed in the larger companies[9]. But these companies will however tolerate no criticism. Much is said about the use of these monopoly platforms to promote democracy and human rights in the Middle East, China and Russia. But hardly a word is spoken when these companies prevent their own users from expressing criticism. In fact, in most debates in Internet Governance, nation-states of the global south are repeatedly cast as authoritarian and anti-democratic.

The biggest task that confronts us, is to visibilise, extricate from obscurity, questions that are less sexy, questions that correspond to a progressive localism through which a meaningful globalism can be reconstituted.. It is upon the revival of the 'autonomous local' alone that we can build a true culture of sharing.. one where sharing is not a commodity.. And these are questions that come out of community struggles to save the publicness of knowledge and protect the last trenches from where people's political voices can be asserted.

The little that I know from having been associated with the information centres we assist dalit women to run, in the rural hinterland of Mysore city, is that the information centre for them is a lifeline. It makes applying for job cards under the national scheme for employment guarantee

7   http://newleftreview.org/II/56/nancy-fraser-feminism-capitalism-and-the-cunning-of-history
8   Gilles Deleuze, 1992, 'Post-script on the Societies of Control'
9   http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/16/opinion/invitation-to-a-dialogue-internet-behemoths.html?_r=0

much easier. It helps them with their data needs – to build evidence to appeal to or even confront the establishment – for bringing big change to the village ; to show how there are enough children for the government to set up the public child care centre (*anganwadi*, as they are known, in India). It enables them to record their stories and send it digitally for radio broadcast. There is little titillation in such stories for the global news market, but it is critical for the local public sphere.. It is critical for the women who seek control and ownership of their data and information processes.

As Robin Jeffrey, Canadian media researcher who has been writing on India, says so beautifully, today's users of iPads and iPhones are unlikely to go a-googling for such accounts of village development,.. It may be, he says, easy to be "Small" in these digital times, but Small is fragile, vulnerable and dangerous[10].

Yes it is...

One of our women partners in the information centre project of IT for Change, who fought tooth and nail to bring the centre to her dalit colony, died under strange circumstances, days before the inauguration.. Information power is dangerous, and the local mafia knows that only too well. Network society incursions on the local are indeed far reaching.

Until June 20th 2014, if you visited the Wikipedia entry on Bhanwari Devi — a women's rights dalit activist who was raped for taking on child marriage in an upper caste community in her Rajasthan village, you would see a narrative that was extraordinarily misogynistic. Women's rights organisations have since then sought to rewrite the narrative, bringing justice to Bhanwari's account of the story.

The task for governance is to create new social meanings around the Internet... the meaning that women from the information centre I spoke about, derive..Today, India's huge optic fibre networks are lying unused.. billions of dollars of universal service obligation funds lie unutilised. But with respect to rural connectivity, we are asked to wait for a business model. The anarchist within me asks, why can't we just leave computers there; give free public access.. put the machines, bring a a wire.. integrate such a programme with the innumerable government programmes for youth, farmers, women, adult literacy.... build a local knowledge eco system.. develop a pedagogy for appropriation by the most marginalised. ..

Dump the business model..

Our policy myopia has also destroyed network neutrality – especially with respect to the governance of mobile telephony. In an ongoing research on the Internet in India, IT for Change has found that rural youth whose primary mode of connectivity is the mobile phone, do not use the word Internet, they just use the word Face Book, as a synonym! Why? Because, they get Face Book free with their data plans. The death of network neutrality portends the death of the

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10 http://www.epw.in/perspectives/indias-bully-pulpit.html

dreams of local participation in the global information society. Why can't the policy process incorporate conditions in licensing - say, reserve 5 percent of spectrum for community radio and access to public services?

The meaning and value of network society citizenship is being shaped by a reflected global value.. where the local is systematically and callously abandoned to the extractive devices of the dominant players. The solution of course is political. We need public policies that ensure the use of open standards, net neutrality, and equitable opportunities for access. We also need commons initiatives through community driven forms of governance – for the application layers (like free software) and service layers (such as open archives, local knowledge repositories, etc.)

What community initiatives tell us is that the governance of digital spaces must guarantee and proceed from an alternative economics. They tell us that governance is about creating architectures for new cultures that restore to the local, a modicum of reality that has been taken away... it is about new cultures that can place the marginalised at the centre, and about old ideologies where everything that matters does not have to be on sale.