

A Note from the Directors

(Re) Establishing 'Publicness' in the Network Society – A Counter to Run-away Neo-liberalism

The world today is witness to an intense political conflict between the forces of democracy and of neo-liberalism. This conflict, in network society terms, can be seen on two planes; between centralising and decentralising forces, and between forces for corporatisation and those promoting public and commons-based spaces and systems. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) play a crucial role with regard to both these opposing set of vectors. Our work at IT for Change centrally addresses this larger structural role of ICTs in shaping the emerging social paradigm.

Centralising Economic and Political Power

The early promise of the Internet was in extending 'power to the edges'. It was claimed that the Internet had created a new level playing field. To some extent this has indeed happened. Yet, paradoxically, the Internet today is increasingly leveraged for concentration of economic and social power in ways never seen before. A few companies such as Apple, Google, Facebook, Twitter and Microsoft together control a very large part of our digital world. John Bellamy Foster and Robert W. McChesney discuss this in their commentary on 'The Internet's Unholy Marriage to Capitalism', noting how "we are entering a world of digital feudalism, where a handful of colossal corporate mega-giants rule private empires.... the top 10 Web sites accounted for 31 percent of US page views in 2001, 40 percent in 2006, and about 75 percent in 2010..." (Monthly Review, March 2011)

The Internet is also concentrating political power. The proposed United States legislation, Suppression of Online Piracy Act (SOPA), and the plurilateral treaty, Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), are means for extra-territorial enforcement of the laws of the United States and other Northern countries, mostly towards intellectual property-based global economic exploitation, using the Internet as a key instrument for this purpose. The latest of these threats is the proposed Trans-Pacific Partnership, sought to be labelled simply as a 'trade agreement,' which bestows new rights and privileges for major corporations, while curtailing the political power of nation states. The Trans-Pacific Partnership proposes a parallel system of justice covering areas from affordable medicines, Internet freedoms and intellectual property rights, to labour laws and environmental protection, further extending the new forms of colonisation of the developing world. The clampdown on WikiLeaks through exerting improper political influence over credit and other payment systems, domain name server operators, web hosting services, online advertisement services etc. is a classical instance of the illegitimate exercise of coercive power in an extra-territorial manner.

The coming together of the most powerful economic and political interests in the network society is bringing alive the most bizarre sci-fi predictions. The proposed Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act of the United States presents the spectre of a global cyber control room where big business and United States government agents sit together, scrutinising and controlling the minutest details of our world, employing the new global neural system of ICTs. Hegemonic power today is about keeping the Internet free from political governance, not so much for protecting freedom of expression, as is mostly made out, but for perpetuating illegitimate control of the cyberspace. In this global geo-political game, locating the pathways of struggles for human rights, equity and social justice is a tough proposition.

Competition v/s Collaboration – A Competing Value System

A second plane of the struggle between democracy and neo-liberalism in the information society is that of the philosophical divergence between the role of competition and collaboration in human life. Over the past few decades, we are witnesses to the mighty force of neo-liberal ideology, the world view that human beings best understand the language of competition for survival and that the market has a solution for every problem, whether it is economic, social or political. It is held that the experiment of developing large-scale public and commons-based systems has failed, and should now be abandoned. Information society developments are

playing a significant role in the entrenchment of such beliefs, as corporates have quickly latched on to the organisational opportunities of network society shifts, while the public sector, typically conservative, is still to wake up to them. Perhaps even more potent, as ICTs create new communicative and associational realms, is the fact that neo-liberals have almost fully won the battle of discursive hegemony. ICTs and the information society have successfully been sold as something essentially private and commercial. This however defies all logic, since ICTs are at least as effective tools for collaboration as for promoting competition.

In India, introduction of ICT-based systems in governance, education and health sectors is being cleverly leveraged for wholesale corporatisation – with private companies becoming lead public service delivery agencies (through the Common Services Centres scheme), architects of privatising the processes and curriculum of education (in school ICT programmes), and providers of insurance and medical services (as in smart card-based, privatised health delivery schemes). This is replacing the primacy of public institutions in these areas. Profit is presented as the only possible incentive that is able to organise large-scale systems, ignoring network society possibilities for public service reform and engaging community-based organisations.

Can the Tide be Reversed?

Although the path is difficult, taking on the hegemonic forces in the network society requires actors interested in positive social change to strategise well. To begin with, it is important to understand the deep structural social shifts that are under way and to influence them. Our response in this area has been to emphasise the role of public institutions, or more broadly, 'publicness', in developing the new institutional ecology of the network society. Manuel Castells, one of the foremost theoreticians of network society, describes the imperative in this manner:

"The public sector is at present the decisive actor to develop and shape the network society. Individual innovators, counter-cultural communities, and business firms have done their job at inventing a new society and diffusing it around the world. The shaping and guiding of this society is, as has always been the case in other societies, in the hands of the public sector, regardless of ideological discourses hiding this reality. And yet, the public sector is the sphere of society where new communication technologies are the least diffused and where organizational obstacles to innovation and networking are the most pronounced. Thus, reform of the public sector commands everything else in the process of productive shaping of the network society."

IT for Change has presented theoretical frameworks, and works towards practical applications, of the 'Network Public', which may be defined as the public aspects and parts of the *Network*, the main structural feature of the network society. The 'Network Public' is not just state owned public institutions as traditionally understood. This term denotes networks of government and community institutions motivated by public interest rather than private profit, which can develop now as never before, employing the ICT-enabled opportunities.

Simultaneously, as the macro-framework of 'publicness' is asserted as the balancing factor to the run-away neo-liberalism of the dominant information society paradigm, it is important for social change actors to work towards creating and sustaining new collaborative forms made possible by ICTs. Employing the propensities of ICTs for decentralisation and horizontalisation, techno-social processes enabling networking and sharing of information resources can help reduce information asymmetries and allow marginalised communities to come together to exercise political and economic agency. Robust information systems can help social audits of developmental programmes of governments, enabling local participation and accountability. Participatory planning can be meaningful only with extensive use of ICTs for information development, information sharing as well as for communicating community choices. IT for Change has been working in all these areas, to effect change on the ground, and present programmatic and policy models for large-scale adoption.

This annual report gives a brief view of our work over 2011-2012, at both macro and micro levels, and our consistent efforts at reconciling them.

Directors
IT for Change