Network publics as digital futures

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It is an honour to be here to share with you the perspectives of my organisation IT for Change based in Bengaluru, India. Our vision is rather non-descript; it has all the high sounding rhetoric characteristic of any brave new world statement – what we would like is to see digital technologies used to promote socio-economic change in the Global South. But as civil society actors, working towards transformative change, we have found it instructive in the process of translating this vision into action to balance optimistic readings of the network society with a close and critical examination of the configurations of power among actors in this domain.

I would like to first share some of our efforts to bring technology to poor communities, through approaches that have eschewed techno-utopic interpretations of digital pathways. We have always privileged the social in our efforts to enable communities to appropriate the unique propensities of network society.

The work we have done has focussed on creating institutional alternatives. We have used local telecentres as innovations in local governance, riding on the power of legislative and policy frameworks like the right to information, using these spaces to create new local architectures of information. The telecentre is operated by a young woman who reports to the women's collectives we partner with. The telecentre, called 'Our Information Centre' in the local language, performs an intermediating role between local governance institutions and public services on the one hand and the community's access to public information and entitlements on the other. The young woman running the centre is not just sitting at the centre to dispense information, but visits public offices to aggregate information from local authorities and visits households in the village to share it. Along with volunteers in the community, she also collects and maintains a simple household information data set. This collectively created data is most helpful for a clearer targetting of entitlements; but it is also potentially powerful to contest official information that may be in variance with the community generated data, a legitimate counter point to official truth that perpetuates vested interests and undermines inclusion.

The result of building this new institution at the local level has meant giving marginalised poor women a new role in the community, as new interlocutors of knowledge about entitlements. The telecentre space becomes an extension of local governance, a default place that can connect you to your rights and entitlements.

We have also used extensively, inexpensive videos and a public broadcast using the open university's airwaves for information sharing and to galvanise discussion and action. The screening of videos and the radio broadcast are a radical pedagogy to promote local, grassroots deliberative democracy, and active citizenship. Collectives have become libraries with a stack of CDs on a

variety of issues, including information about programmes and schemes of local authorities. They have become spaces for young people, especially girls to explore their identity as political subjects, exploring the village as citizen reporters, conducting surveys, defining problems and producing local media.

The rich information and communication ecology of radio, video and telecentre based action has completely disrupted local power structures, making poor, illiterate women able to exercise their rights and lead the village as knowers, with epistemic authority.

Being on the video in front of your own villagers, acquiring a larger than life image, and coming up on a public broadcast to discuss why to vote at all or to share a story of an expose of a corrupt official caught by your own local collective or to debate child marriage means much more; it is a process of capturing communicative power in the local public sphere. It is a change that is profound, it restructures relationships at many levels, not least of all between the governed and the governing.

So what can we reflect from a grassroots project of democracy such as this one?

1. There are limits to autonomous, market-led diffusion of technology. It is increasingly clear that shiny apps - mobile applications over smart phones that the poor will never own cannot substitute for basic broadband connectivity based public access models that address local governance through institutional innovation. Such innovation in most parts is techno-social involving new capabilities.

2. The power of association and collectivities is fundamental to lasting and enduring change. Neo-liberal conceptions of individual empowerment can go so far and no more when one is talking about using digital spaces for deepening democracy. The sense of collectivity and community must be locally and historically bound, with a shared sense of destiny and struggle. While the digital can and does build solidarities translocally, democratic transformation is unequivocally hinged to local realities and new configurations of local power.

The Arab spring did owe a lot to digital technology, its power to effect totally unpredictable and self propelling waves of diffused action. But going forward from the Arab spring, to the Islamist summer to now, the question for women in Tunisia for example is how as the new constitution is being made will they build a new solidarity for a feminist fall.. will there be yet another winter of discontent or will collectivities emerge to negotiate enduring progressive change in the new political context.

3. The miracles of mobility, connectivity and hybridity are of course what power the network

society and its tendencies to totalise and decentralise power simultaneously. But the questions for governance and democracy are more ethical. They lie beyond notions of liberal democracy. They must grapple not just with the rather jaded project of bridging the digital divide through libertarian notions that may continue to keep the digital underclass where they are, but with more radical alternatives. They are premised on whether we want to see new constellations of empowered, mobile, connected political identities and communities or we want to be happy having created a huge, global, mass of consumers of technology.

4. My last point, and this is something that is very pertinent in this forum and its goal of creating guiding principles.... is about a basic conceptual building block. We have been talking about the disruptive power of digital technologies.

What we see them bring in terms of institutional alternatives in governance and democracy is the notion of 'network publics'. Network publics are much larger than the public sphere where public discourse is shaped. They may be seen as a new space in participatory governance, an in-between zone located at the boundary of state and civil society, a space like the telecentres I described,

where democratic governance has a distinctly local flavour, where technological applications can support the creation of public data, mapping, planning, resource allocation, and decision making, at the local levels, requiring public authorities and local citizens to engage at the boundaries. This

clearly calls for the state to democratise itself. Network publics also refer to the processes of deliberative democracy, but take on an added character. They are radical and bring in new voices and new collectivities. They require the creation and nurturing of robust local media, and public discourse that push for the democratisation of both the state and the market. They are not just counter power, they fundamentally rewire deliberative democracy

Finally, network publics allow us to think of institutional alternatives on a global scale. The digital phenomenon makes our existence simultaneously local and global. Its current governance architecture is hugely problematic; it breaks every rule in political science and classical economics. It displays a text book case of oligarchies and urgently requires institutional frameworks at the global level. A forum like this must take cognizance of how the global governance of technologies can be democratised. I recall what the Mayor of New York said; things are bound to get messier and we must find new ways to govern the technology space. The question before us is, what would a 'global network public' that can guarantee an equitable governance of digital technologies look like?