The Internet and Citizenship – Applying a Gender Lens
Abstract for the IGF workshop by Heike Jensen

Having just almost completed a two-year research project on the gendered aspects of Internet censorship and surveillance in the context of the Open Net Initiative Asia, I would like to address the issue of citizenship on the Internet within the context of censorship, broadly understood. Censorship constitutes a productive starting point because it is what shapes the public spheres and what thus impacts decisively the possible forms of citizenship on the Internet.

The censorship of any kind of media can take various forms, direct and indirect. Direct forms of censorship are undertaken by the state and take the shape of laws and their application as well as state violence. Indirect forms encompass administrative requirements for those wanting to operate a medium, market and financial conditions, architectural and infrastructural circumstances, and social norms. States, it is important to note, are not only responsible for direct forms of censorship, but also contribute to the regulation of administrations, markets, architectures and norms.

Particularly as far as women are concerned, a lot of evidence has been gathered that indirect forms of censorship play a far larger and more consistent role in hindering women from participating in public spheres than direct forms of censorship: Cultural norms against women speaking out, women's comparative lack of resources and ownership of media, and the minor role that most women and their concerns play regarding the development of infrastructure and architecture all combine to provide significant stumbling blocks for all but the most privileged groups of women.

To a lesser extent, this is also true for men in discriminated social factions. In fact, it is important to note that the concept of "the public", as historically evolved in the global north from what was called the "Enlightenment" onwards, implicitly referred to men of the newly constituted bourgeoisie and middle classes. The increasing self-consciousness and self-confidence of this faction, which came to see itself as the ideal citizenry, has not only been tied to its public sphere, but also to its project to create nation states, which led to the specific trajectories of imperialism, decolonization, war and peace that we are all still grappling with today. Within these trajectories, nation states have striven to erect or maintain their external borders and to maintain their internal social hierarchies based on race, class and other markers. Central for both endeavours has been the policing of women's reproductive sexuality, i.e. to confine it to within the nation state and to within the respective social faction. Thus neither "nation states" nor "citizenship" nor "the public" are innocent concepts, which explains why so many feminist scholars grapple with them and try to redefine them.

From a social justice perspective, the following goals and issues could be debated: To make citizenship on the Internet, and hence Internet publics, less related to privileged social factions and their male representatives, states would need to work towards eliminating the blocks constituted by gendered norms, architecture and infrastructures, markets and administration as well as censorship laws and direct forms of violence aimed at perpetuating existing hierarchies. Unfortunately, this is not really in the self-interest of those factions that rule the states, let alone the markets. Yet even eliminating these censorship blocks is not sufficient when it is restricted to the question of access, but not even when it is equated with access and freedom of expression. What needs to be safeguarded as well is that knowledge and concerns from discriminated social factions are not submerged in a sea of privileged

voices, but that they guide and animate the public discussion of steps toward social justice. Here, a danger of the Internet is that it helps proliferate the number of sub-publics or partial publics that ultimately do not feed into any larger social public at all.

The above-identified dimensions of censorship blocks could in this context turn into dimensions of marginalization of non-mainstream voices: For instance, regarding architecture, the operating modus of search engines is likely to favour mainstream sites with many links among each other over sites around which smaller clusters are formed. Regarding social norms, even open and collaborative platforms such as Wikipedia favour mainstream approaches which are followed by the bulk of user/contributors, so that feminist entries have been heavily contested and gotten abridged or censored by the editors. Regarding markets, the growing value attached to domain names has led holders of intellectual property rights and domain name "tasters" or "squatters" to invest in ever larger bundles of names, potentially marginalizing non-commercial Internet users and their domain names. Administratively, ICANN's policy-in-the-making regarding new generic top level domains appears to raise the financial bar for applicants, thus favouring financially privileged registries, which are likely to pass on the financial burden to registrars and registrants. And with respect to the state, the evidence from many e-government projects so far indicates that comparatively privileged segments of the public are reached and facilitated in their concerns rather than underprivileged groups.

So how can these imbalances be stopped from consolidating? How can they be corrected to further social justice goals, including a common public sphere informed by input from marginalized segments of society that actively collaborate with others towards an erasure of their marginalization? Would this require new forms of censorship, in the broad sense used here, and how and by whom would these have to be devised and implemented? It is useful to recall in this context that traditional mass media in democracies have often been legally obligated to carry public service content, but that they have generally dodged this obligation, particularly with respect to women's and feminist concerns, by citing their freedom of expression. Neither market-led, nor state-led mass media setups have genuinely worked towards social justice and gender justice, because neither from the top-down nor from the bottom-up has there been enough pressure for this goal within each national context.

One question to explore then is whether the transnational may offer a public space to build this pressure, and how this may then relate to the local and the national. Importantly, a crucial characteristic of the Internet is often seen in its rendering place-based differences potentially less meaningful. One issue to keep in mind here, though, is that the Internet's architecture can change and may indeed be likely to change in the direction of creating national boundaries based on code. In addition, as ONI's findings suggest, direct national censorship law is also on the rise, even though this so far creates a lot of enforcement problems.

Hence the drawing of political/administrative boundaries is very much an issue, and feminists need to debate what kinds of boundaries they find useful. Given that the policing of women's reproductive sexuality has been a vital issue in maintaining social hierarchies and national boundaries, feminists cannot easily acquiesce to these demarcations. Yet the principle of subsidiarity may be a useful one to retain, since not all issues are or should be global issues, and no world government can take care of everything. Thus ultimately, layered governance structures, and hence boundaries, are necessary. Could these be based on local contexts and yet be fluid enough to encompass anybody who would happen to be in a local context during a given time span? How should these boundaries or layers relate to the shaping of public spheres, and should these spheres be based on any one medium, such as the

Internet? Would different local contexts be able to create uniquely mediated public spheres for themselves? How would these spheres tie into one global public sphere?

While I obviously do not have the answers to these questions, my argument would be that approaching them in a historically informed way, and with reference to the public sphere and its censorship dimensions of law, violence, administration, markets, architectures and norms is quite useful to tackle the gendered complexities of "Internet and Citizenship".