Bringing the lens of social justice to interrogate the Internet and the Internet-mediated world

– Concept note for a 3 day workshop

Jointly organised by IT for Change and Manipal Centre for Philosophy and Humanities

Dates – Jan 31st to Feb 2nd, 2014

Venue – Manipal University, Manipal

The discontinuities of the network age seem to render the depth of conventional categories and ideologies inadequate in explaining power and exclusion. As leading information society scholar Manuel Castells observes, the network age is a crisis for liberal democracy. The modern nation state is bypassed by global networks of wealth, power, and information, and has lost a good amount of of its sovereignty. And the historic social contract between capital, labor, and the state stands ruptured.

Global capital employs digital architectures on a planetary scale to create new regimes of production that challenge the capacity of labour to find cohesion and articulate their interests. The way societies work, produce and consume, is paradigmatically different today. In the network economy, survival is contingent upon constantly renewed value – the capacity to stay profitable in the value chain of the global economy. The unconnected seem to fade away against this ruthless logic of emergent times, not able to claim any space on the 'Net', and quite inconsequential to the nodes of power.

As global networks aggrandize power, a normative crisis is enveloping societies. In the unrootedness of the global network, questions of culture and identity emerge prominently. Collective identities anchored in political frameworks are dissolving, while individualism replaces shared values. New identities are emergent - some that reassert tradition or nation and others for whom the 'global' imaginary inspires hope for freedom from vulnerability and marginality. These latter communities forging trans-local bonds and claiming a space that transcends the national seek new visions of global justice.

The promise of liberal democracy was never quite realized in post-colonial societies. Ethnic and communitarian identities in these countries have always troubled liberal democracy's notion of the citizen. And now, as we stand at the threshold of the network age, a deep irony confronts our societies. As the dominant, global elites – "identity-less individuals" become "citizens of the world"[1], people resisting economic, cultural, and political disfranchisement tend to be attracted to communal identity. They struggle to produce and disseminate narratives that can challenge the hegemonic logic. However, the business of staying in public discourse and occupying cultural memory in the network age is exhausting. It demands a tireless pursuit of alternative representations, inflecting dominant information flows with conceptions of justice that is at the same time rooted in historical time and space and spanning multi-scalar life worlds. It would, for instance, require women's movements to argue how sexual violence arises in context specific ways, how it manifests in the real virtuality of electronic frontiers and how it bears unequivocal markers of class or ethnicity.

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1   formulations of Castells in his book, 'The Power of Identity - The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume II'

Telling stories may not be enough to dislocate power in the space of flows. Being heard in the networks of power needs a highly sophisticated, new grammar of politics. As global democracy is undermined by some powerful countries, new geographies of power (like the rise of China in the African continent) accompany private norm-setting and dispute resolution that supersede international frameworks. The all-pervasive ideology of 'market globalism' is also rather versatile; it generates perverse adaptations of alternative and progressive world views, and so, we have myriad versions of empowerment or equality and indeed, of justice. In the public discourse of the current moment, we see endless diversity where competing narratives collide. And in the ensuing politics of recognition, those narratives that challenge the global market are pushed to a defensive corner.

The long road to transformation through new identities seems befuddling – it is unclear as of today, if the individualised modes of the digital grassroots fit snugly with a formal politics of resolution. Are today's revolutions – hybrid as they are in their offline and online methods – ephemeral, or do they offer new conceptions of ethics that can underpin democracy and justice in the social paradigm of the future?

The state may well be losing some of its traditional power, but it is still relevant in current geo-politics. One can in fact see innumerable variations of the neo-liberal state with different nationalist flavours under market globalism. And as the state also transforms through the technological apparatus, we are witness not just to a changing craft and modus-operandi of governance. The material-semiotic capabilities and the raison d'etre of state are being reinvented (The innumerable debates around the Aadhar card are clearly a case in point). Yet, the vestiges of the liberal state still continue to present the source of legitimacy to those who are 'unconnected', the socially and economically disenfranchised who are excluded from the democratic core of networked globality.

The social and political pathways of the network age, carrying a crisis of institutional-political frameworks and a chaotic theatre of new identities and fluid relationships, sometimes generate hope and at other times confound efforts for regeneration. How must we reinterpret the institutions of civil society appropriate to the network age? Is the promise of justice – through collaboration, horizontal relationships and new political subjectivity – real? The global Internet gave rise to a moment of disruption; it opened up a new architecture for global domination, and at the same time, it unleashed new possibilities for association and community. The world post-Snowden seems to suggest that there might emerge a patchwork of smaller, sovereign 'Internets' in an interplay with a somewhat global Internet. What would this mean for new configurations of power and justice?

As social relations and hierarchies get configured very differently in the Internet-mediated ecology, old structures do not become irrelevant. The movement for social justice must respond to the moving targets. There is here, both an epistemic and an action-related responsibility.

Manipal University and IT for Change want to bring together a group of 25 interested thinkers committed to social change – researchers, activists, journalists, media practitioners, teachers, artists, bureaucrats and designers included – in a 3 day workshop that will use different methodologies to debate and discuss perspectives on the theme 'Justice in the Network Society'. The workshop will bring the ongoing work and networks of the 2 organisations to shape the discussions covering interconnected themes. The big questions of the workshop will include the following -

As national and global imaginaries jostle together in the lived experiences of the elite and the marginalised, what conceptual frameworks help us understand the configurations of power in relation to the architecture of digital technologies?

How do we move our conceptions of justice and re imagine democracy in the emerging social structures? What do experiential accounts of civic and community action offer for building a transformative politics?

Related to the above, the workshop will address themes such as:

1. The continuities and discontinuities of the technological paradigm in the global economy, addressing questions such as -
- How do digital technologies interplay with historical continuities of economic organisation? How do they generate new patterns?
- What are the social norms and patterns underpinning alternative methods of life and work, production and consumption, in the network society? What do open paradigms of production imply?

2. The Internet, democratic flux and citizenship, including themes such as –
- What do the fluid constellations of the state, civil society and market suggest about democracy and institutions? Where is the Internet implicated in this?
- How can we move our understanding of democracy and citizenship in the network age? What institutional models allow us to articulate a notion of justice that is adequate to situated lives and multi-scalar life-worlds?

3. The place of media, culture and community in the space of flows, and allied themes –
- Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's conception of 'finding what is common in our differences and expanding that commonality while our differences proliferate' offers a socio-cultural map of the future. How would an 'Internet for Social Justice' mirror this ideal?
- What do technological architectures that run counter to the centralising powers of the Net reveal about alternative cultures of knowledge and society?
- How do structures of media shape the politics of representation today? How does this implicate the creation and representation of (multiple) knowledges?
- What are the aesthetics and ethics of alternative media politics on the Internet?

If you think you are intrigued by digital technologies and inspired by transformative change, please apply, with a brief CV and a 500 word essay on the reasons you would like to attend the workshop to ITfC@ITforChange.net , before November 24th, 2013. Selected candidates are expected to pay Rs. 3000 and bear the cost of food expenses. Accommodation will be provided for the selected candidates on campus. Limited scholarships, only available for India-based applicants, to cover course fee and travel. Selected candidates will be informed by November 30th, 2013.