

How public and political participation may need to be recast in the network society context

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(Input submitted to the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women the for its report on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice in public and political life with particular focus on efforts undertaken in times of political transition, particularly transitions which involve fundamental changes of political regime and/or of the legal system.)

(The) new international landscape is reflected in a vocabulary of networks that is broader than international politics. Networks have become the intellectual centerpiece for a new era. If the contest between markets and state hierarchies was an organizing feature of the 1980s, network has emerged as the dominant social and economic metaphor in subsequent decades.¹

The 'network society', a description of the dominant social paradigm today, signifies a life-world in which the webs of connection and connectedness become very strong determinants of 'being and doing'. A very large number of social practices in the network society emerge at the human interface with digital technology, a process that realigns the axes of individual, social and institutional life. In the global, interconnected world, social structures and processes are being framed by rules, norms and practices that embody situated meanings of digital technologies, arising through their production and use. Feminists may be more familiar with the implications of global economic integration and the way this has impinged upon lives of the majority of women in the world. However, the realignment of structures of power, politics and citizenship in the (global) network society are still not debated enough in feminist circles.

Information and communication technologies have certainly been game-changing for women's political rights and freedoms. From freedom of expression to the rights to assembly, association, and information, ICTs are enabling women to emerge as political subjects. However, women's rights advocates must also engage critically with how network society politics operates. This is not only significant for appropriating the new transformative spaces and communities, and the ideal of a 'global democracy' oft-repeated in the context of the Internet, but equally, for the way politics itself, in its structures and processes constituting publicness, participation and inclusion, is morphing. As is quite well discussed in feminist politics, the relationship between technology and social change is mediated by politics and power. The digital sphere must hence be subject to scrutiny for this truism.

Hybridity of public space – new reality for feminist resistance

The sites of democratic deliberation and contention are being recast today. These sites, or 'publics', encompassing the real and virtual, usher in new possibilities for women's political

¹ Miles Kahler, ed. *Networked Politics: Agency, Power, and Governance*, Cornell Studies in Political Economy, 2009

engagement. In the fluidity characteristic of new age publics, we see possibilities for new voices in public debate, decentralised action, horizontal alliances, new communities of non-normative gender orders and collaboration, across time and space. Social movements and social campaigns can aspire for non-hierarchical models of organising and a trans-locality, that is unprecedented.

Different kinds of discourses are able to proliferate, and thus norms that discriminate against or silence women can be challenged and dismantled, and a new threshold for citizenship rights and freedoms forged. As the CITIGEN-ASIA research project² demonstrates, network society shifts the structures and processes of politics, whereby, women in public office can come together as women leaders to nurture a women's political constituency; disenfranchised migrant women can find solidarity and the power of collective organising; women activists can participate in, and potentially shape, emergent discourses of fragile post-crisis democracies; poor and socially excluded women can bring plurality into legal debates through their lived experiences of body and sexuality. In many countries, the visibility and dynamism of queer activism may be attributed to the emergence and availability of the Internet³. ICTs also provide pathways for the realisation of democratic ideals of citizen participation and decentralisation in governance and for the diffusion of public information.

The liberatory potential of the Internet, and its capacity to open up public spaces for non-normative discourses (including of sexuality and gender) as well as contentious politics, suggests a historic dislocation; a plausible moment for the actualisation of rights of marginalised people and social groups. This has seen a few countries like Costa Rica, Finland, Estonia and France recognise access to the Internet as a basic right⁴. Many rights that broadly comprise the right to public and political participation, are perhaps fully realisable only through access to the Internet. The Internet is therefore seen as an enabler of rights. The right to assembly and association, for instance, of migrant women workers, would be next to impossible, without unrestrained access to mobile phones, a need that, in their case, can be considered as their inalienable right to communicate.

Getting beyond the surface – Politics, publics and paradoxes

The potentially emancipatory impact of the Internet has become a subject of intense scrutiny and intervention. Multiple interests and discourses intersect in this debate, including state sovereignty and jurisdiction, national security and cyber warfare, public ethics and morals, civil liberties, corporate profit and intellectual property. These interests frame the context of participation and the practice of politics in networked public spaces. The section below provides analysis in this regard.

2 The research project was coordinated by IT for Change. It comprised practitioners and scholars who came together to examine women's citizenship in the information society during 2010-2012. See www.gender-IS-citizenship.net

3 Internet regulation and sexual politics in Brazil, Sonia Correa, Marina Maria and Jandira Queiroz, in *Erotics: Sex, rights and the internet*, An exploratory research study, ed. Jac sm Kee, APC, 2011

4 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Right_to_Internet_access#Countries_with_laws_making_Internet_access_a_right

1. 'Platform Politics' – how online public space is neither 'public' nor 'open'

The question of structural aspects of politics in the digital age (code as law and architecture as policy, formulated by Lawrence Lessig⁵) – implying the role of software and hardware ecologies – is critical to the understanding of publics in the network society.

Platforms offering specific Internet services as monopoly frameworks for social interaction have become synonymous with online communication. Many young people access the Internet for the first time through social media platforms, some of which are available as free services on mobiles⁶. Increasingly, mobile computing and its operating systems, prioritise Internet access via 'apps' and not web browsers. These platforms are able to take advantage of the scale-free architecture of the Internet and build large user bases and communities of interest. However, unlike the world-wide-web, these platforms are often proprietary, have closed protocols and operate as a kind of privatised 'public space'. As someone said, there seem to be three forms of cyber-democracies to choose from - computing environments of Apple, Android or Microsoft! The structure and political mediation of network politics is therefore moving in a direction where proprietary platforms and the private interests that control them are important in shaping politics. The Pink Chaddi Campaign in India⁷ – a movement that spontaneously organised through Face Book to resist the moral policing of women by the right wing presents an interesting case. The Campaign, protesting cultural right-wing attack on women in public spaces, gathered momentum through a Face Book group. Shortly after the campaign took off, the campaign's Facebook group began to be attacked by trolls and was eventually broken into. Attackers renamed the group and included racist slurs and death threats in its description. Facebook's support department for help. However, not only was Facebook unresponsive to repeated requests for support, it actually disabled the account of the group administrator.

Emerging constellations of activism supported by social media do not automatically represent sub-altern collectivities. The structures and discourses of participation in social media spaces may have seen the birth of the liberal 'woman' individual, obscured in renderings of modern political theory. However, they also carry neo-liberal hues, embedded as they are in a wider context of the Internet market place, and so can produce, through the commodification of all social phenomena, definitions of agency deradicalised, atomised and distanced from active political struggle for transformation.

2. Going mobile – and becoming unfree?

A central element of the communication revolution was telephony going mobile. It brought new freedoms, especially for women. However, access to the mobile phone is not a given. The research done by the CITIGEN-ASIA network has shown how for migrant women domestic workers, access to a SIM card and to the use of the mobile is constrained both by regulatory regimes and coercive force exercised by agents and employers. Even where mobile phones can be the radical edge for subversive political action, this often presupposes more than just

5 Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace, Lawrence Lessig, 1999

6 'Facebook zero' in many parts of Africa, and 'Google Free Zone' in Philippines

7 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pink_Chaddi_Campaign

access to text or voice, requiring access to the Internet, which is still not within reach of the majority . Even in a country like India, where 3G services are rapidly spreading in towns and villages, carrying voice, video and data streams , poor and marginalised women are yet to see these developments touch their public-political lives meaningfully.

Mobile Internet models are also mostly not the same as the open Internet that was created with the foundational principle of net neutrality⁸. Internet-on-mobiles is typically characterized by corporate control and anti-competitive practices by oligopolies (telecoms and their business partners), with considerable vertical integration across connectivity, hardware, software, application and content. You are locked-in to a 'free app' on your phone and have to pay for what you may want, but does not come bundled! Violation of network neutrality - the principle that all Internet traffic should be treated equally - in wireless Internet also implies Internet Service Providers can block content, applications and services on your mobile phone (like AT&T did a couple of years ago preventing use of Skype).

Under the circumstances, the issue it is evident, is not just 'access' but also access to 'what kind of' communication system, something which is much less discussed.

3. E-democracy initiatives – agency without citizenship

Innovations in the global North and South have attempted to explore variations of what goes by the name of e-democracy, to expand opportunities for the public participation of marginalised and remote populations. These include sms-based or web-based voting for eliciting public opinion, web-casts for public consultations and online grievance redressal systems. While it is clear that such 'bottom-up' democratic participation can potentially bring greater transparency and accountability, the context of most countries of the global South complicates and even compromises the democratic content of even well-intentioned initiatives. In the absence of a public goods policy framework to ensure connectivity infrastructure, and the lack of social and institutional capability to address issues of illiteracy, oral cultures, local language, scale and remoteness, new models of participatory democracy end up as harbingers of a culture of development that displaces traditional discourses and practices of political citizenship. They also often give a disproportionate voice to those who are better connected, and thus, in the process, may actually harm the interests of marginalized sections.

Telecentre initiatives not informed by a nuanced gender and citizenship approach to public information and services, nor supported with adequate public finance, end up commodifying public information, and subverting community-centred development models. The introduction of technology in local governance structures embedded in patron-client cultures (characteristic of the countries of the Global South) has seen feudal, patriarchal and patronage systems combine with neo-liberal forces. In local implementation of e-governance, especially, for social inclusion - whether it is in terms of selection of beneficiaries or distribution of entitlements - problems of opaqueness, lack of accountability and corruption are conveniently attributed by vested interests to the new system necessitated by the 'computer'⁹. An air of obfuscation is created to dismiss poor, illiterate women's legitimate

8 Whereby, all data and content has to be treated equally and without discrimination by the carriers.

9 Insights from consultations that IT for Change has had with with Right to Information activists in India.

queries. While top-down, privatised e-governance models seem to be supplanting state-citizen interactions, responsive ICT-enabled institutional innovations that can enable marginalised women to speak up in the local democratic space are almost non-existent.

4. Deepening democracy – still about collective struggle and institution-building, even in the age of vibrant, online publics.

Research done in the CITIGEN-ASIA network suggests how political organising to bring women into public life needs to contend with meso level structures (like fundamentalist religious organisations) and their infiltration of digital spaces. Women have breached the boundaries of the private sphere, responding to the call of religious fundamentalists, willing to be out there in the public domain, as agents of retrograde politics. Decentered action made possible by the Internet does not necessarily imply democratic outcomes. Social change projects call for more than just the ease of reach of network age's communicative means, and require vision and strategy. Strategies for transformation therefore needs critical feminist engagement with the discourse of technology. Often it is actually the power of a new phenomenon like ICTs, that lull us into deprioritizing these 'essentials'. The tendency of the network age to promote silos and create strong in-group identities within bounded spaces is something that militates against the openness required for democratic debate, and solidarities for collective action, across women's rights groups and with diverse social justice movements.

An important lesson comes from how ideological change and transformation in Egypt, post the revolution, lies in the institutional-social processes that are longer term and require much more than what social media can give. Dijk's¹⁰ observation that virtual cultures and identities, being too partial, heterogeneous and fluid, are unable to make up for a 'lost public debate' seems to provide an useful insight in contemplating the place of technology in devising new age cultures to build solidarities especially in relation to women's rights and to feminise democratic institutions.

Public life in the network age does bring serendipitous connections, and hence the possibility of unanticipated, random change or a rupture that dislodges traditional social arrangements. Social movements have organised extensively through digital spaces. However, democracy as a feminist project requires more than spaces to mobilise and organise. It needs an anchor in normative frameworks that articulate visions of social justice, and institutional mechanisms that guarantee the enjoyment of freedoms. In the network age, democratic processes – in their legal, policy and institutional frameworks – need to account for emerging, Internet-mediated architectures. Publics in the network age seem to make way for voice and solidarity, but to be effective counter-publics, they need to garner attention and penetrate the fabric of mainstream politics. This process of 'politics as presence' is linked to how communities of resistance in the network society can seek legitimacy in the deliberative arenas of national democratic processes and gain recognition. Laws are playing catch-up in most developing countries, and rights-based frameworks are not the default. Technology has tended to be seen as an issue for economic policy and for criminal law. The institutions of justice and democracy in the contemporary context will therefore need to be revamped to legitimise emerging public-political spaces as spaces for progressive politics. Currently, network publics, by virtue of

10 The reality of virtual communities, Jan A.G.M van Dijk

their proprietisation and corporatisation and dis-location from conceptions and guarantees of freedoms, are unhinged from the notions of democracy and justice. This is most significant for the everyday life of women and to protect their rights as citizens who have complete and unrestrained access to public life. Instances where women are penalised for exercising their basic right to communicate online are increasing – both due to abuse of authority¹¹ and cultural policing¹². The absence of rights based frameworks in relation to the Internet and digital spaces strengthens the misogynist, patriarchal state to use its increasing panopticon powers for ad-hoc and repressive authority.

5. In the era of a 'global' Internet, is the weak link between global democracy and global justice getting weaker?

The political economy of global governance has assumed deep significance in the era of networked politics. Rule-making today is complex, distributed and involves private entities. Network propensities seem to have exacerbated the democratic deficit in global governance, as powerful countries like the US, and rich country clubs like G8 and OECD, along with corporate cartels, make rules that become default law for other countries. The collusion between transnational corporations and powerful countries and their oligarchic nexus in the communicative arena reproduces the status-quo, with huge implications for the rights of developing countries and peoples. Significantly, these power nodes of the 'global network' have found significant support from elites of developing countries, making the situation even more complex.

Often national governance systems and regulators are not seized of the the political economy issues in this debate, and merely focus on increasing access to technology, failing thus to bring in the full gamut of relevant public interest and public policy questions in relation to the governance of the Internet.

The absence of a binding, normative, global framework on Internet rights points to a serious vacuum in global democracy, constraining the capacity of Southern states and civil societies to call to question the unbridled power of digital capitalism and its unholy alliance with powerful countries. Without cognizance of the contours of the network age and its contested territories, voices that call for 'mobiles or social media for women's empowerment' may therefore willy nilly be doing what feminist have always warned us against – mainstreaming headlong into the male, corporate stream.

What can the UN Working Group on Discrimination Against Women do?

The proposed report for 2012 of the Working Group must carry analysis of the changing nature of public spaces, politics and women's agency, recording possibilities for progressive change and registering concerns about market excesses in the digital and telecommunications arena.

11 As in the recent case of the arrest of 2 girls in Mumbai, India, who exchanged private communication on a social media platform after the death of a right-wing leader.

12 Traditional community based structures dispensing justice, usually comprising male patriarchs, have often condemned the use by young girls of mobile phones in South Asia.

At the same time statist efforts towards greater control, through censorship and surveillance, must be noted. It must urge that the concept of a public Internet and a public good¹³ / commons-based approach (as against the Internet seen primarily as a market place) be claimed as the principal basis for policy and programme intervention. It would be useful to issue statements in crucial intergovernmental and global events, including at the WSIS plus 10 Review hosted by UNESCO in Feb 2013.

The Working Group needs to recommend strongly that in order to address the democratic deficit in Internet Governance, global, multi-stakeholder processes towards an international framework on Internet rights and freedoms must be initiated. This exercise should involve the full range of implicated negative as well as positive rights¹⁴, stressing the principle of indivisibility of rights. Democratic global governance of the Internet is thus needed not only to affirm freedoms but to safeguard the publicness of the network (including in relation to mobile telephony architectures, spectrum regulation, pricing, net neutrality in mobiles wireless broadband etc)

The Working Group must take cognizance of and promote the July 2012 declaration by The Human Rights Council of the UN, on Internet rights, which while encouraging special procedures to take the issue into account within their existing mandates, as applicable, also

- Affirms that the same rights that people have offline must also be protected online, in particular freedom of expression, which is applicable regardless of frontiers and through any media of one's choice, in accordance with articles 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- Recognizes the global and open nature of the Internet as a driving force in accelerating progress towards development in its various forms;
- Calls upon all States to promote and facilitate access to the Internet and international cooperation aimed at the development of media and information and communications facilities in all countries;
- Decides to continue its consideration of the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights, including the right to freedom of expression, on the Internet and in other technologies, as well as of how the Internet can be an important tool for development and for exercising human rights, in accordance with its programme of work.

The Working Group must exhort national governments to take due steps to affirm digital freedoms and make access to the Internet a basic right. It should also promote normative and policy frameworks upholding the basic egalitarian principles of the Internet, like net neutrality. Access to digital public spaces is crucial for the public participation of marginalised groups and people, especially women. Rights and citizenship based legal frameworks for Internet and digital freedoms must address abuse of state authority, corporate control over the communications arena, and cultural policing (by both government and private agents).

Since much depends on how participation in and appropriation of digital space is programmed

13 "Global Public Goods – International Cooperation in the 21st Century" , Inge Kaul et al, UNDP

14 Work done by the Coalition on Internet Rights and Principles is useful to see in this regard.
<http://irpcharter.org/wpcharter/>

through governance mechanisms, the Working Group must encourage states to create e-democracy blueprints that enable the most marginalised women to engage with local governance and democracy and make claims as citizens.

The Working Group must encourage local NGOs to invest in democratising awareness about the nature, limits and possibilities of digital spaces and to study how cultures of use create politically productive outcomes for women.

The Working Group must appeal to national women's machineries and multilateral agencies to support empowerment initiatives that promote use of ICTs for collective organising and public participation of women in governance and development processes. New political pedagogies in the grassroots (women citizen reporters; women-owned community radio, Internet access centres run by women) create the possibility to link democracy with the discourse of 'governance that works for women'. Universal and critical digital literacy for citizenship must be instituted through the formal education system as well as through grassroots empowerment programmes for women.

The Working Group can look to document alternative techno-ecologies and practices where technology models that espouse the vision of open and equitable online public spaces meet progressive rights-based initiatives.