# Public participation in the network age – A critical feminist perspective

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## 1. How network society recasts the public-political

Feminists have been among the most vocal critics of the totalising ways of technology, and the particular ways in which patriarchal values and norms frame and institutionalise technology use. Feminist theoretical work has also grappled with meta level analyses of social paradigms - the industrial revolution, modernity and then post-modernity - and in doing so, inter-twined the complex discourse of technology in sociological readings of emancipation and power. Critical readings have also encompassed feminist visions of technological paradigms.

Today, in respect of the network age, feminists – including fence-sitting skeptics and crusaders of a pre-digital life world – seem to have moved on. The mind-numbing complexity of the digital and its techno–social paradigm is evident in all phenomena small and big around us. There is an acknowledgement that a feminist praxis, beginning with an unpacking of emerging power structures and following Hannah Arendt's vision of active life in participatory democracy, also wrestling with technology through everyday political action, is most needed.

Political theory in the network age also urgently requires feminist praxis. As the logic of the 'network' – an expression used to signify the organising principle shaping social institutions today, with the rapid growth of the Internet and mobile technologies – becomes a constitutive element of our social reality, a deeper search is made necessary at more fundamental levels of schemas, norms and rules. For instance, as we all know, the world of online interactions is not free of violence. The question then is, what kind of critical theory may be commensurate with the changing face of violence in contemporary times and how must freedom from gender based violence be addressed in political theory in all its complexity.

The network age is an expression that suggests a foundational shift in social structures. In abstracting social order in the network age, scholars refer to the 'synaptic web', analogous to neural pathways in the brain. The root of human intelligence, it is believed, resides in the density and flexibility of the connections or synapses between neurons, not simply in neurons themselves. The way digital technology seems to work is similar; connections between objects become more important in network society than the objects themselves. And here, there is an shift of frame in the need to stop looking at the nodes and start looking at the space between them, paying attention to the processes of connection and connectedness.

As the fluid connections of network age acquire predominance, our understanding about basic political categories – community, citizenship, rights and democracy – requires revamping. Evidently, as Nancy Fraser says, we can map at least 4 different communities today that are aligned on different scales[1] - the imagined community, or nation; the political (or civic) community, or citizenry; the communications community, or public and the community of fate, or the set of stakeholders affected by various

1 http://www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/fraser01_en.htm, Transnationalizing the Public Sphere, Nancy Fraser, 2005

developments, requiring that we think anew of the public sphere. Virtual communities also signify the Habemassian civil society. They are not pseudo-entities; they are very much real.

The way we do politics and participate in the public sphere is one critical element of the fluidity of current times. In the emerging spaces of the digital realm, we see possibilties for new voices in public debate, decentralised action, horizontal alliances and collaboration across time and space. Social movements and social campaigns can aspire for a trans-locality that is unprecedented. These emerging solidarities have increasingly found spaces to connect through Web 2.0 tools. However, a deeper examination of the platforms and processes of connection that make for a new age politics is required to understand emerging architectures of power in the network society. The required scrutiny of who the big players are in the networked social environment and how they shape freedoms and rights is more than about active censorship, violation of privacy and surveillance, as the social issues around the Internet generally get cast.

Political change in network society is predicated *inter alia*, on the 'strength of weak ties'. This has been explored more recently, to study both civil and political action. A principle with implications for understanding the linkages between micro and macro levels of social reality, 'the strength of weak ties' may be seen as anchored in the random workings of the synaptic web, with its possibilities for a threshold effect. It is still early times in the world of Web 2.0, but there seems to be reason to believe that the widespread use of social networking tools in political organising does contribute to collective action – such as for example, petition signing, submission of online comments, attendance at events, etc. – in real time, through the strength of weak ties.[2] Further, connecting on Web 2.0 platforms seems to allow not only the production and maintenance of weak ties but also of strong ties that by extension, can influence positively trust and public participation[3]. The promise for change therefore is not empty; emergent configurations of community and collective action seem to suggest a democratic transition in contemporary life.

Feminist concerns quite obviously also gravitate towards questions of political and ideological change or deep transformational impacts one hopes can arise in and through political action in network society. This would require examination of wider questions of history, society and political economy. A fascinating analysis of the role of social media[4] emerges in the campaign to free Egyptian-American writer Mona El Tahawy, arrested during the Tahrir protests. Shortly after her arrest Mona sent out a brief message on a social networking platform and then with that, she went silent. The Freemona campaign that emerged organically thereafter was a striking testimony to the power of social media to enable complex, diverse and ad-hoc networks to come together in great speed, in a global public sphere, to bring pressure on the establishment to free Mona. However, obvious questions come up here not only about why the cascade to free Mona may not have impacted the freedom of the completely 'unconnected' but also whether such a campaign would have garnered enough momentum, in say Bahrain, given the country's strategic relationship to the US and the logics of the attention economy. The most important lesson also comes from how ideological change and transformation in Egypt, post

2 Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of how Advocacy Groups in the United States perceive and use social media as tools for facilitating Civic Engagement and Collective Action by Jonathan A. Obar, Paul Zube, and Clifford Lampe, Journal of Information Policy 2 (2012): 1-25.

3 Is There Social Capital in a Social Network Site?: Facebook Use and College Students' Life Satisfaction, Trust, and Participation, Sebastian Valenzuela , Namsu Park , Kerk F. Kee , Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication (2009) 875–901 © 2009 International Communication Association

4 http://technosociology.org/?p=566; The #freemona Perfect Storm: Dissent and the Networked Public Sphere, 2011, November 25

the revolution, lies in the institutional-social processes that are longer term and require much more than what social media can give. Dijk's[5] observation that virtual cultures and identities, being too partial, heterogenous and fluid, are unable to make up for a 'lost public debate' seems to thus provide an useful insight in contemplating the move from e-petition to hard social change.

Research done in the CITIGEN-ASIA network[6] also offers useful pointers here. The think piece by Farida Shaheed suggests how agenda-setting and political organising for feminism needs to contend with meso level structures (like religious fundamentalists) and their infiltration of media spaces. The limits of decentered action made possible by the Internet may need deeper critique in such contexts, where social change projects call for more than just the ease of reach of network age's communicative means and require vision, contention and strategy and hence the role of 'centres'.

Political change and ideological shifts in the network age therefore seem to be predicated upon more than individual access to technology. The strength of weak ties may bring serendipitous connections, and hence the possibility of random change or a threshold effect. Specific patterns of use may bring social capital. However, the project of political transformation demands not only multiple or vibrant publics but a search that is in the realms of the normative-structural. The evolutionary trajectory of the normative structural dimensions of the network age is what we now turn to.

**Digital reality – more than meets the eye**

Through claiming Southern feminist frameworks, it would be worthwhile to examine closely the nature of contestations in the digital environment, beginning with the rhetoric around the marvels of mobiles for participatory democracy. Needless to say, the communication revolution hit a new notch when telephony went mobile. 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 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 neutrality[7]. 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 does not come bundled! Violation of network neutrality - the principle that all Internet traffic should be treated equally - in wireless Internet also implies ISPs can block content, applications and services on your mobile phone (like AT&T did a couple of years ago preventing use of Skype).

Why is network neutrality important? The need for regulations designed to mandate the neutrality of the Internet has been subject to fierce debate, especially in the United States. Among the toughest civil

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

6 The network 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

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

society battles against corporate power in recent times is the fight for network neutrality. Advocates of digital rights and freedoms see net neutrality as fundamental for ensuring that the Internet remains a free and open technology, fostering democratic communication. Social campaigns have pointed to how cable and telecommunications companies seek to be Internet gatekeepers, deciding which websites go fast or slow and which won't load at all. According to SaveTheInternet.com for instance, companies want to "tax content providers to guarantee speedy delivery of their data ... to discriminate in favor of their own search engines, Internet phone services, and streaming video – while slowing down or blocking their competitors." Scholars like Lessig have pointed out that without net neutrality, a handful of massive companies would control access and distribution of content, deciding what you get to see and how much it costs.

The fact that companies currently have the right to influence users while storing user data like browsing history, text messages and call history on their servers, points to the invasiveness of corporate control into our everyday information, knowledge, communication and relationship architectures. Recently, when the US Federal Communications Commission notified net neutrality rules, it exempted Internet-on-mobile from its most important provisions[8]. Even as the mobile has become synonymous with the network age in developing countries, its promise for freedoms is caught in the fledgling institutional legal environment witness to heavy contestation. Recently, Bharati telecom, a leading ISP in India, accused Google and Face Book of free-riding and demanded that they share their profits with it. Given the fact that the Internet is a global public good, both global and national developments towards regulation for keeping it 'open' are critical for women's human rights activists.

Meanwhile, life on Web 2.0 seems to increasingly be a Hobson's choice; we are all in it and bewitched by the company that claims to be 'the' library of the world, smitten by the singularly biggest meeting place of the new age, and locked in a love-hate with the only globally distributed instant media. These synapses of our global network are all governed by the capitalist logic of expropriation albeit in ways less visible than in, what ironically seems, the good old times of feudal and industrial exploitation. As critical theorists have argued, Google (search, maps, translation), Facebook, YouTube as also, mobile Apps platforms like Apple Application Store, denote a model of 'collaboration' that is mediated, selective and oriented to private profit. Users contribute their free labour as producer-consumers or pro-sumers for corporate gain. Let us not forget that Face Book was designed as a socialisation space for college students with business innovation logic that perhaps predictably, has no regard for ethics. An ex-employee recently wrote about an app called "Judgebox" that the company developed, which would let users compare and rate women in echoes of another sexist "Facemash" app that the founder of Face Book, Mark Zuckerberg's, had developed during his early Harvard days.

In March 2011, it was reported that Facebook removes approximately 20,000 profiles from the site every day for various infractions, including spam, inappropriate content and underage use, as part of its efforts to boost cyber security. In March 2012, members of the LGBT community asked Facebook to add a "other", "third gender" or "intersex" tab in the gender option which contains only male and female. Facebook refused and said that individuals can "opt out" of showing their gender. The Pink Chaddi Campaign, in India in 2009, 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. The attacks continued despite

8 "Free Press Sues FCC to Get Real About Net Neutrality" http://www.ecommercetimes.com/story/73389.html

appeals to Facebook's support department for help, and eventually Facebook disabled the account of the group's administrator and access to the group[9]. It is a paradox that the company was exhorted widely to protect the democratic uprising in Egypt. Some democracies, at certain moments, seem more important than others!

The corporate shaping of cultures of participation in Web 2.0, heavily circumscribes political imaginaries of equity and redistributive transformation. How access is pre-configured, seems to determine the experience of social interaction within the Web 2.0 space. Those who own the territories of connection, the spaces between nodes, are powerful interlocutors in the emerging political economy of global democratic transition. They become key arbiters governing rights and freedoms, almost as powerful as totalitarian states. Youtube has digital autocops configured that can disable a video as it is being broadcast live it its algorithm senses use of material which is copyrighted. Recently, a live speech got cut off just because the speaker was using public domain material which had also been used in another video copyrighted by a corporate.

The absence of trans-national governance of the Internet and of a 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. 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 right into the male corporate stream, lock, stock and barrel.

Innovations in the North and South have attempted to explore variations of what goes by the name of e-democracy, that range from sms-based or web-based voting for public referendums and web-conferencing for public consultations to online grievance redressal systems. While it is clear that such 'bottom-up' democratic participation can presumably 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 consumer culture that displaces traditional discourses and practices of political citizenship. Telecentre initiatives not informed by a citizenship approach to public information and services nor supported with adequate public finance end up commoditizing 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) introduces distortions arising from resistance to change as feudal and patronage systems combine with neo-liberal forces. In local implementation of e-governance - whether it is in terms of selection of beneficiaries or distribution of entitlements - problems of opaqueness, lack of accountability and corruption are conveniently attributed to the 'computer'. While top-down, privatised e-governance models seem to be supplanting state-citizen interactions, responsive institutional innovations that can enable marginalised women to speak up in the local democratic space are almost non-existent.

As possibilities for local and people's media increase in the network age, popular media usurps both the space for citizen pedagogy as well as the aesthetics and semantics involved in creation of local

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

meanings of democracy. Women leaders of dalit women's collectives that IT for Change works with in villages in Mysore district admit to being addicted to serials that dumb-down critical cognition, relieved that they have at least some avenues through our feminist community radio and video initiatives to pursue their cross-learning, political mobilisation and collective discussion. New versions of 'public participation' are legitimised by popular media, seductively persuading viewers to exercise their 'choice' through premium or higher cost smses. Such tantalising spaces ostensibly for 'voicing', become the hegemonic discourse on public debate, posing huge challenges to political mobilisation on the ground with considerations for equity and depth of dialogue. Crony capitalism has stifled the decision making process to use people's resources, like spectrum, for democratising media access. The lack of support through public policy and financing to encourage, institutionalise and build a culture of diverse local media, reflects a political intransigence and fear perception of states in the network age.

**Women's Political Empowerment in the Network Age – A feminist prognosis**

Does the preceding analysis suggest a dystopic reading for the future of feminist transformation? The answer would lie in recasting the question to, what is key to women's public-political participation in these times of flux? In the discourse of rights, the contemporary moment requires us to think of the right to communicate much more closely than we have. This is of course about the valued freedoms and rights that have been long debated; but it is also much more. It is predicated on the need for an appropriate response to the still-emergent and often-nebulous nature of the network age and its curious but real techno-social architectures.

For feminist praxis in the network society, public-political engagement may be conceptualised at 2 levels, both suggesting a set of imperatives for the right to communicate:

1. Forging publics that are an interconnected conglomeration of small life-worlds.
   In the globalised world scaffolded by digital technologies, the public comes into its own. As Nancy Fraser[10] argues, in the Westphalian age, the normative legitimacy of public opinion was truncated due to the discussions only on parity, and deflection of attention away from inclusiveness. Today, the techno-social apparatus of the world potentially enables the inclusion of all people, regardless of their political citizenship, to be part of public debate. Alternative publics across the world are able to forge solidarities to counter hegemonic publics. What the Occupy movement has taught us is that the transnational public can be about corporeal politics, situated in the struggles of people's everyday, revitalising small life worlds through dissent and resistance, while staying connected. This is not a post-modern fantasy but real claims to legitimate political participation in a renewed idea of democracy both as everyday politics of community linked to material and culturally bound reality, and the quest for a global, transnational justice. One can picture local information and communicative ecologies making place for marginalised groups including women's collectives and communities with control over their information and communication architectures. (At IT for Change, our work with dalit women's collectives shows that locally embedded community media and information centre approaches, privileging women's ownership and appropriation can shift local power equations. Bringing women across collectives in the district together in their effort and struggle to claim entitlements and introduce a culture of questioning in the local governance ecology, this process seems to bring great legitimacy to marginalised women in the local community. A similar effort

10 http://eipcp.net/transversal/0605/fraser/en, Transnationalizing the Public Sphere - On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World, Nancy Fraser, 2007

to connect elected women representatives across geographies has also been attempted through the Kerala *Gramamukhya* project in the CITIGEN-ASIA network.)

While the stakes are high, the threat to community and small life-worlds, is not so easily discernible. Nation states do and can cut most citizens off from global connectedness, while public debate today is filtered through transnational corporate power. We have discussed how corporate power props up 'compromised publics' in the digital space for private profit. After an intensive six-week registration drive, just recently, Google has reported that almost 90 percent of the districts of Kansas City have signed up for its 1Gb/s fiber network project. Connectedness and community fuelled by corporate power rides on social anxiety about being disconnected, pushing "the at-best dubious and unfounded proposition that only through faster last-mile speeds can we achieve greater benefit ...by the very same companies that seek only to fatten content with advertisements and pay-for-view television feeds."[11]

2. Engaging afresh with the notion of social contract (including a 'global' social contract) to rearticulate the idea of commons (and publicness) in the network age.
Social movements have repeatedly flagged the need to preserve and nurture the commons for collective good, in struggles against the privatisation of the commons. An important element of public-political life in the network society is the ability to benefit from and contribute to the knowledge or informational commons. We have seen how the digital order defined by Web 2.0 is witness to platforms mobilizing voluntary community labour, and expropriating such collaboration for private profit. The possibility to counter this private usurpation of the public by 'programming network logic'[12] to serve collective interest, and creating the conditions for different nodes and networks to connect and ensuring their cooperation to deepen the knowledge commons, is truly exciting. The Wikipedia is a fitting example. Even till a few years ago, feminist movements in the global South sought to actively pursue the idea of community resource centres, as spaces that would affirm alternative knowledges and feminist histories. The network age makes it possible for creating informational and knowledge commons for public-political life. Participation in these can nurture women's political subjectivity and citizenship pedagogies.

As transnational capitalism erodes the autonomy of local communities, and neo-liberal discourses increasingly shape governance and public administration, a rearticulation of the social contract seems necessary to reclaim collective interest, and quite pertinently, across scale. The battle-lines are often invisible from the comfort zones of traditional feminist action. For instance, ICANN proposes to give out gTLDs with full words through its new programme. If ICANN will have its way, generic words can now be owned by mega corporates as .book, .cloud, .music, .media, .school, .beauty etc. Such legitimizing of the the privatization and monopolozation of words, is bound to alter not only the foundational semantics of communication, but also of civilizational cultures.

Democracy in the network society needs what Fraser refers to as the efficacy condition for a transnational public sphere[13]; the existence of global institutional norms and institutions that

11 Dan Cameron, Community Informatics elist, posting dated 12th September 2012

12 Castells, m. (2004). Informationalism, Networks, and the Network Society: a Theoretical Blueprint in Castells, M. (ed.) *The Network Society: A Cross-Cultural Perspective Northampton*, MA: Edward Elgar

13 http://eipcp.net/transversal/0605/fraser/en, Transnationalizing the Public Sphere - On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of

are fair and just. This inter alia, calls for democratic global governance of the Internet, an issue that some southern civil society organisations are fighting for, as also of the emerging digital commons. Indeed the Wikipedia is a striking illustration of network age self-organisation and collaboration, as mentioned earlier. But it is equally a hegemonic public! And despite its tremendous value, is a high-conflict, mostly-male environment with powerful "wikignomes" who wield a lot of power.[14] A renewed engagement with the question of social contract is therefore imperative to ensure that governance mechanisms in the digital space correspond to new forms of community and citizenship in the network age that can go beyond the hyper-connected.

Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World, Nancy Fraser, 2007

14 Zeynep, http://technosociology.org/?p=566