



The big deal about the network age

Political economy conversations from the CITIGEN network

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The feminist project stands at crossroads. Rapid changes of paradigmatic proportions, ushered in by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), have disrupted known categories and strategies. They have also brought new hope and promise. How can we make sense of women's rights and gender justice at this historic conjuncture, as the information revolution intertwines with corporate globalisation? How do we define the space of politics that is being transformed by a technology-driven politics of space? Understanding anew the processes that create and reinforce structural exclusions in and through digital space, and framing an appropriate politics of resistance, is both a theoretical and practical imperative at this juncture.

This is the task that the 'Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society' (CITIGEN) research programme¹, defined for itself, going beyond the simplistic discourse of 'ICT access' to a deeper inquiry of 'network society structures'. The programme started as a space for research in select countries across Asia, expanding into a feminist dialogic forum with scholar-activists from other countries in the global South and North joining the initial network of researchers.²

This think piece builds on the insights from the work of CITIGEN. It brings together the conversations among the network of involved feminists through July 2010 to February 2012, to posit some key points of departure in feminist analyses, which could form tentative steps towards a feminist theory of change.

What is the network society and why is it relevant to feminists?

'Network society' is a term used to describe the complex social, political, economic and cultural changes caused by the spread of networked, digital information and communications technologies. It generates patterns of affiliation, organisation, production and experience through digital space and media networks, recasting social structures at individual, organisational and societal levels.³

Network society is seen to be characterised by the simultaneously totalising and democratising tendencies innate to digital technologies.⁴ It embodies the promise of justice, creating a new, horizontal social organisation, based on values of collaboration and sharing, opening up the public sphere for those in the margins, and ushering in new models of commons-based production. It is at the same time the material and the discursive scaffold of capitalism today, that co-opts and constructs digital space for expropriation.

Importantly, network society generates network politics⁵, which is both a site of the contemporary craft of government and of a global transnational civil society.

Feminists and gender equality advocates have been using ICTs, combining older forms of media with digital technologies, for enabling and encouraging women in the margins to tell their stories and participate in the emerging spaces of the public sphere as political actors. Going back to the scholarly traditions of feminism and technology, a significant task now is to theorise how women's lived realities – their bodies and worlds – are





shaped by, and interact with, ICTs. How are structures of society changing, and what are the emerging priorities for feminist agenda, constitute critical questions in the contemporary moment. Any attempt to answer these demands an engagement at the level of deeper inquiry and analysis, over and above the adoption of technology as tools for subversion and resistance.

On the positive side, the possibility to go beyond the everyday in the emerging digital spaces presents an exciting frontier.⁶ For marginalised groups and social activists targeted by authoritarian states, digital space, especially the Internet, presents a real possibility of liberation. It allows a critical subjectivity to emerge through connections with others, and for solidarities and communities of action that offer new possibilities for both personal-social and civic-political life. As the CITIGEN research in Taiwan and Hong Kong shows, for migrant women domestic workers, having access to communication devices like mobile phones has to be seen as a basic right. Without such access, they would not be able to realise their right to communicate with their family, access services of organisations working for migrant workers, build local networks or even seek help in the event of abuse.⁷

Yet, cyber-space is deeply implicated in the big struggle today, between the free market system and democratic political systems, marked by gender and other social attributes. Corporate power in the digital arena appropriates the labour of producer-consumers online for generating its surplus, thus commodifying digital labour. Web 2.0, or social media platforms, may seem like spaces for play or individual expression and sociality, but their production logic creates paradigms of exploitation. Platforms owned by powerful corporates, including search engines and social media, are in reality businesses capitalising on user time and labour, employing sophisticated surveillance mechanisms that undermine human rights like privacy. Ironically enough, these platforms thrive on claims of liberty and free expression.

Box 1: How the network co-opts the individual



Feminist analyses of power would urge that everyday practices are scrutinised for how power is reproduced and how all of us are party to this, as we use and validate technologies and the methods and paradigms around them. A feminist methodology is indeed a much needed epistemological tool in the network society arena. Our subjectivities are too tied down to Web 2.0. What if we do not realise what is happening here? In the older regimes, such as authoritarian Germany, people knew what the problem was. What if we do not know it here? So, we need to take a close look at our online behaviour and see how we are implicated. The political issue in the digital society is that you are not asked to be quiet, but asked to express yourself in multiple ways without threatening the political and the economic powers.

Adapted from Heike Jensen's input into CITIGEN network's meeting in February 2012*

Significantly, the distinction between online and offline space becomes redundant, as society morphs into something new in the paradigm shift effected by technologies. The virtual is not out there, disconnected from the real, but is at the very core of a seamless, even if complex, transformation of the human condition and of society at large. Norms, rules and practices of social institutions – education to government, family, entertainment and media – are changing in fundamental ways, with new patterns of flow of control and power. Thus, in this 'battle over the institutional ecology of the digitally networked environment'⁸, how an emancipatory and progressive feminist politics can be developed and proffered for radical action becomes a key agenda (See Box 1).

What would be a pertinent political economy critique for feminist action in the network society?

Political economy analyses enable a focus on how power and resources are distributed and contested in different contexts, revealing the underlying interests, incentives, institutions and ideologies that enable or frustrate change.⁹ Further, a feminist political economy analysis can also help the search for alternatives, going from critique to construction,





bringing visions of gender justice to the project of social change.

The story of network society, or the post-industrial journey to contemporary times, is one that has followed the path of 'hypercapitalism' or free market dogma. Paradoxically, the origins of the entire realm of Internet based communication go back to publicly funded research in the US. The early Internet was not only non-commercial, it was also anti-commercial. Yet, since the 1990s, a period that saw the deregulation of the telecom sector in most countries, industries connected to the Internet have transitioned from competitive to oligopolistic, creating winner-take-all markets, where the gap between the number one and number two players is typically very large and growing. Corporates in the digital space expropriate Internet resources mostly through rent seeking, exercising techno-social controls by commanding critical locations in the digital ecosystem. Techno-social controls are even more powerful than traditional controls like finance-based ones; they involve the advantage that players gain by controlling key nodes in the network. The network cannot function effectively without them, and in time, they begin to determine the network. Google is a classic example of economies of scale and monopoly power. Its network effects are so huge that it has drowned out all other search engines, selling the monopoly data derived from its network to others and conveniently mixing its avowedly 'neutral' searches with commercial logic.¹⁰

Today, the Internet is central to transnational capital's game of privatising the commons, control over Intellectual Property (IP) and the export of culture from the North to the South. It is also the backbone of new geo-political formations that consolidate the power of the global North. Global policy making in relation to the Internet and digital technologies is fragmented across different sub-global norm-setting processes controlled by powerful countries like the US (for instance, through its corporate monopolies and ICANN¹¹), and blocs of the rich countries, like the OECD,

which is writing many policy frameworks for the networked world¹². To give an idea of the emerging unholy alliances, 'Google Ideas', a Google initiative, works very closely with US foreign policy considerations. Outcomes of these processes directed by the powerful translate into default global law. Progressive civil society players, including feminists from the South, are completely excluded from these spaces (See Box 2).

The discursive power of capitalism in the network society reveals itself in the complete domination by free market forces of its institutional landscape. Network society capitalism also systematically co-opts the progressive possibilities of the digital environment. Spaces like Facebook are supposedly 'open' and 'public', where 'public' does not imply public interest or public ownership, but individual accessibility to privately owned digital space. The open source movement, nurtured and fostered by the Internet commons, has now been co-opted by big organisations for whom 'open and free' is big business. The result is a co-optation and depoliticisation of the very language and vocabulary of resistance. In general, the obfuscation of public policy issues in Internet governance as technical issues has also prevented progressive feminist response. ICANN for instance, is proposing a domain name .fam (as in, family) which Opus Dei, an institution of the Catholic Church, is interested in.¹³

Media, in the network age, have themselves become forms of capital. The means by which we most intimately know ourselves and our desires (our images and words) are themselves vectors of capitalisation, intent upon channelising our very life-process towards creating surplus value for capital. The expropriation of the cognitive-linguistic by capital, has transformed sociality into a constant preoccupation to garner attention. The micro-management of desire, the production of new needs, the capturing of the imagination, all in order to induce behavioural shifts in others, is no longer merely the province of advertising, but of most human interactivity.¹⁴ The Internet today is the prime site for the sexualisation and





Box 2: The Internet as a site of Northern dominance



The new manoeuvres of global political economy consist of the use of legal regimes of IP in conjunction with controls over the channels or pipes of flow of information and knowledge, i.e the Internet. An attempt to get this more potent new mix right – where good old IP controls (as in intellectual property) combine with new IP controls (as in Internet Protocols), is witnessed in the battle between new age Internet companies, like Google, and old age content companies (for instance, represented by Motion Pictures Association of America). Often represented as a fight for user rights by Google et al., it is merely a struggle for a new equilibrium of 'old IP' plus 'new IP' based global comparative advantage, which shifts global power structures in the emerging global network society only towards further entrenchment of power and control by the North. Big players, locked in the tussle to control Internet resources often use state censorship as a red herring to lobby against democratic global governance of the Internet. In fact, the EU's Anti-counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), and USA's Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) are essentially a part of a larger move to elude global Internet governance, and establish partisan controls over the global network.

Private interests have manipulated the construction of public interest consistently in the ICT policy arena. In the USA, Google hijacked the 'network neutrality' agenda¹⁵ and, even before civil society could react, struck a deal with the telecoms, and together, presented a policy draft to the government. The telecom industry has also been the nucleus of modern oligarchies, both in the developed and developing countries. The long term loss in terms of free access, information commons and a democratic communicative sphere is incalculable with private capture of public policy space. Within this larger techno-social architecture, smaller subversive actions may not make such a difference unless progressive civil society actors, including feminists from the South, can engage with the larger political ecology of the network society, taking on the big powers in this space. Understanding Internet policy making processes at global levels is vital to this task. Here, the logic of win-win, multi-stakeholder models is used to depoliticise governance and diminish the place of democratic values in policy processes. The UN Internet Governance Forum is an example of such multi-stakeholderism. Offering developing countries and civil society a share of the tech-goodies, its talk-shop methodology is no more than a theatre of co-optation. The democratic deficit in technology governance is multidimensional, but pre-eminent is the absence of political civil society.

Adapted from Parminder Jeet Singh's input into CITIGEN network's meeting in February 2012*

commodification of the everyday. By co-opting the individual and his/her 'freedoms' into its logic, it complicates the feminist question of choice. Feminist actors have, however, found it expedient to avoid engagement with the normative questions implicated in content regulation, fearing co-optation from pro-censorship actors. As the means of representation become the means of production, what we have is voice without agency, participation without politics and collaboration without appropriation¹⁶. The questions of and models for political agency thus need rethinking. Advocating for access to ICTs, may thus not be an adequate strategy, unless feminist intervention in network society can appropriately engage the powerful actors shaping the discourse (See Box 3).

As global capital follows its self-aggrandising instinct in the auto-mode of global information society big systems, feminist resistance from locally bound, small ecosystems is hugely challenged. The totalitarian powers operating at the global level represent what has been termed 'hegemonic business masculinity'. This includes transnational corporations and Northern multimedia entertainment conglomerates, their managers and principal stock holders.¹⁷ The big system does indeed make room for diversity, but its multiple public spheres also constitute a fragmented public sphere. In fact, a perverse confluence of interests may be at play because of opportunistic co-optations by powerful interests of the emergent network spaces professing alternative politics. Online spaces, or the realm of the digital, may also pose new contradictions for women's empowerment, where the hegemonic big system perpetuates itself by offering public-political roles for women that are not truly emancipatory. The CITIGEN case study from Pakistan shows how women marginalised from the local public sphere, while defying patriarchy within the household, can get co-opted into emergent 'publics' that are an antithesis to idealised spaces for public deliberation, and in fact instrumental in entrenching retrograde values.¹⁸ Thus, the totalising tendencies of network





Box 3: Bridging the micro and the macro – need for new feminist strategies



Supported by the CITIGEN programme, *Likhaan* in Manila, trained women from marginalised urban communities to become citizen reporters, who used an online blog space to tell their stories. The project sought to bring into the public sphere narratives of poor women's material realities, to influence policy makers to pass the Reproductive Health Bill. The action research process was empowering to the women, but the outcomes of their participation in the public sphere through the blogs did not go very far in shaping public opinion. In a country where the Catholic Church holds huge power, the forces controlling the Internet, the media and the national level debate about reproductive health, are formidable enemies. The Catholic Church did not need any branding. It did not need a web page. And so, going digital did not necessarily result in a radical politics of visibility for the women taking on the issue of reproductive rights politics. Assuming that the women had attracted attention, one would still need to look at how the dominant order of network society can appropriate women's struggles. For instance, it is possible that this group of women would be co-opted into the terms of engagement of the mainstream media with the Catholic Church. The citizen bloggers' efforts continue through *Likhaan's* support along with their engagement in old style activism, including street protests. Yet, membership in the expanding public sphere, as practitioners of a radical politics, is no guarantee of autonomy. The risk that the alternative will get pulled into the dominant hegemonic order of information capitalism is very real in the network age. Performing differently, and building the power of resistance, requires appropriation of digital networks. This in turn calls for knowing the modes of operation of digital networks, knowing how they can be overridden through appropriation, raising public opinion and creating a discourse that can go beyond the micro level.

Adapted from Lisa McLaughlin's input into CITIGEN network's meeting in February 2012*

society big systems may well be generative of new sites of contestation for feminist values (See Box 4).

For most governments of the South, ICT policy has been an instrument to reassert masculinised visions of the nation state in the era of economic globalisation. Telecommunications policy making has been synonymous with oligarchic nexus, ushering in new age crony capitalism. In countries like Malaysia, for instance, contemporary

citizenship discourse is characterised by new inclusions and exclusions.¹⁹ Diasporic networks that bring in money to serve the nation state's aspiration to become a 'knowledge economy' are conferred privileges, to the disadvantage of citizens who are marginalised.

State programmes for promoting public access to ICTs have been driven by IT departments, with no vision or imagination to build new information and communication cultures. Large scale programmes in countries like India have failed to make public access models citizen-oriented, with misplaced emphasis on business models. In Sri Lanka, as the CITIGEN research study shows, the wide network of telecentres supported by the government barely manages to impart computer literacy. Also, agencies such as the Ministry for Women's Empowerment, that could potentially play a vital role in mobilising women to access, control and create content and techno-social processes in relation to ICTs, have stayed away from the ICT policy and programme areas.²⁰

Meanwhile, the information society radically transforms the capacity of the state to gather, hold, manage and process information about citizens. A new alliance of convenience is emerging here through corporate support to state projects for sophisticated surveillance of citizens, and exercise of moral controls. For example in Brazil, the government is making an agreement with Google to remove abortion related advertisements. In the network society, the state can easily generate propaganda through a mass mobilisation of anxiety.

What is a feminist vision of the network society and how do we get there?

The network age presents a complex canvas of new turns and twists in global geo-politics. Feminist agency in the network society hence requires new thinking and new strategies. While global capital seems to co-opt network society propensities, driving the logic of information and cultural flows, civil society's strategies are not well orchestrated.





Box 4: Digital spaces as new sites of contestation



Right wing opinion leaders in Hong Kong have recently organised through digital spaces as 'netizens', mounting a campaign against pregnant women who come from mainland China to give birth in Hong Kong. The Constitution of China lays down that if a child is born in Hong Kong, the offspring will get Hong Kong citizenship. Branding the women as 'locusts', these online groups incite fear, blaming Chinese women for cornering public resources in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is the nexus of global capitalism, a point of transit for capital flows. The nature of this network society, where the majority are marginalised by neo-liberal capital in extremely disempowering ways, studied through this example of ethnic tensions, points to an environment of constant fear, the fear of exclusion from the network of capital. When the protests against the 'locusts' took place through online platforms, civil society in Hong Kong was a mute witness, and even the feminists did not react. The mobilisation against the 'locusts', reinforcing the culture of fear shows that digital spaces are not always spaces for progressive politics. They generate new imaginaries that cause anxiety at deeper levels of society, promoting new forms of prejudice. Some civil society actors are attempting to grapple with a new citizenship movement that can address the structural exclusions arising out of Hong Kong's unique history - its post-colonial context, and its place in global network capitalism and the emergent digital public sphere. The current constitution is quite unfair to people of non-Chinese ethnic origins. The right wing wants to deal with this situation by removing Chinese incursions and the left wants the removal of racial discrimination. This re-negotiation of the social contract is illustrative of the character of network society's new interest groups, symbolisms, discursive terrains and contestations. It needs a new imagination for feminist agency. How institutions respond and how the questions of citizenship are resolved in Hong Kong, is about norm setting, a social process that is still fluid.

Adapted from Lam Oi Wan's input into CITIGEN network's meeting in February 2012*

Arriving at a theory and practice of the appropriation of the digital that can serve the feminist project is the first task.

Reclaiming feminist foundational principles in political philosophy, a progressive theory of the network society must avoid the polarities of technological and sociological determinisms. While it is duly informed by the possibilities and proclivities of new ICTs, it must focus on normative

explorations of individual rights as also on the rights of collectivities. It must reclaim the feminist project of democracy, sharpening the conception of publicness and citizenship in the network society. Defining public access to digital spaces, not in its narrow relationship to specific technological platforms or media, but, in its deepest sense as informational and communicative power, it must elaborate an institutional analysis of the structures of network society. It must also offer a strong critique of neo-liberal articulations of the network society.

A renewed awareness of the discourse of body politics and collectivities in the network age is most needed. The network age complicates the question of representation. Performance assumes overriding significance, leading to an uncritical assimilation of the individual/ self into the everyday logic of the 'network'. Feminist practice of technology therefore demands caution about simplistic calls for 'putting ICTs in the hands of marginalised women'. A constant reflexivity about what happens when communities encounter ICTs, how this changes relationship structures at the grassroots, and how the promise of horizontal networks is to be negotiated through gender, class, language and other hierarchies in the digital space, are important issues to follow and understand. The vision and rule-setting for an emancipatory network society is predicated on these considerations.

In the current information society discourse, mobile phones are being seen as the magic bullet. But it would be instructive to know that the cheapness of the end device may come at the expense of a truly open, neutral network. Mobile networks are proprietary closed networks, unlike the open, non-proprietary Internet that has evolved through open, collaborative, distributed practices, ensuring that the Internet can be an egalitarian force. A core reliance on the mobile network in developing countries will result in a very different kind of ICT platform than the one we imagine as so creative and productive in the wealthier economies.²¹ An emphasis on cheap computers





from the lineage of the personal computer and the open network, rather than souped-up mobile phones, is hence important in developing country contexts. Equally important is strong civil society advocacy for regulatory interventions to keep phone networks open and 'net neutral'.

The democratic deficit in global governance of the Internet is part of the normative crisis in the information society arena. Feminist civil society must promote rights-based frameworks as a touchstone for a political philosophy appropriate to this age of flux that is altering profoundly the structures, institutions and practices of society, and the individual's relationship with herself. Evolving a strong communication rights agenda²² is part of this process (See Box 5).

Building on the historical continuities in the art of resistance, practices of horizontalisation that are valorised in the network age must go hand in hand with coherence of agenda and purposive leadership that connects across struggles, contexts and scales. New methods are required that can feminise the global and simultaneously enable place-based resistance. Innovative uses by women's organisations of digital spaces suggests that it would be empirically invalid to conceive of agency and radical politics in online and offline spaces as a binary, a common misconception held by many. 'Online activism' and 'in-real-life activism' are not rival goods.²³ The existence of 'slacktivism' or the hidden profit-motive, although important to consider, does not completely take away from the actual revolutionary uses of social media. Without easy access to Web 2.0 types of communicative tools, which allowed individuals to develop, organise and express the Occupy movement on their own terms, we would perhaps not have gotten the Occupy movement at all. As the think piece from South Africa, in the CITIGEN programme, argues, the digital expands the repertoire of subversive feminist tactics, in offline, real space, democratising critiques of the historical-material.²⁴

The power of imagination is most pertinent to feminist agency in the network society. Alternative

Box 5: A communication rights agenda for the network society



A communication rights framework in the network society would exhort that the whole structure of property in the means of communication be challenged. This also means challenging the architecture of technology at the level of the logical aspect of the network. Who develops the softwares that we use? What are they aimed for? What is the world view that is behind these codes, which we are incorporating in our lives without questioning? What are the values embedded in it? Whose intentions are we incorporating in our everyday practices as 'netizens'? These are important questions to raise. Global civil society has been connecting and collaborating on the proprietary structures of the network. Even states are dependent upon this huge proprietary infrastructure. Political engagement on issues as basic as bandwidth costs – differential pricing regimes of data transit – is imperative. This is something that affects everyone in developing regions, especially women and poor women, who are the most marginalised citizens in our society. Building a strong communication rights agenda in the network society is an important task. Equally important is the need to build a pedagogy of network citizenship. This pedagogy needs to incorporate an understanding that when you use a certain hardware or software, you choose ways of seeing the world and ways of thinking.

Adapted from Graciela Selaimen's input into CITIGEN network's meeting in February 2012*

imaginaries can feminise the global discourse, subverting dominant online mores, and facilitate place-based resistance. The China research of CITIGEN shows how activists have a motto – 'you can control my data but not my imagination'.²⁵ The world of imaginaries has been a very strong weapon in fighting the authoritarian state in China. The subversive deployment of digital space by activists is noteworthy; activists have used satire to create videos that circumvent censorship, young people have reported learning the ropes of good old street protests through video games! Claiming and occupying the different facets and spaces of the Internet is also a Gramscian 'long march through the institutions'; a capture of the imagination, discourse and rules of older institutions and those in the making, that feminists must apply themselves to in the here and now.





Endnotes:

* For the complete text of the presentations made at the CITIGEN research validation meeting, see: http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net/Meeting_February_2012

1. The CITIGEN-Asia research programme (www.gender-IS-citizenship.net) sought to examine how marginalised women can claim citizenship in the network society. Using different methodologies, the programme combined action research, with empirical surveys and theoretical work, to look at how digital technologies concomitantly shape social structures and present alternative pathways for a feminist politics of resistance.
2. See <http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net/Outputs>, 11 April 2012.
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6. Andrea Cornwall expanded this idea in the CITIGEN research validation meeting (15 - 17 February, 2012) held in Bengaluru, India. The details of her session can be read at: http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net/Meeting_February_2012, 11 April 2012.
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11. Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, the body in charge of the core logical infrastructure of the Internet. It is registered in the US as a non-profit, and works under the oversight of US Department of Commerce.
12. For instance, OECD recently developed the 'Principles for Internet Policy Making'. These principles place great emphasis on global IP enforcement, and also have extra-territorial ambitions. An important means of extra-territorial enforcement is private policing, using the power of global Internet intermediary companies, almost all based in the North. The principles can be accessed at: <http://acts.oecd.org/Instruments/ShowInstrumentView.aspx?InstrumentID=270&InstrumentPID=275&Lang=en&Book=False>, 11 April 2012.
13. Jan Moolman shared this example at the CITIGEN research validation meeting (15 - 17 February, 2012) held in Bengaluru, India. The details of her session can be read at: http://www.gender-IS-citizenship.net/Meeting_February_2012, 11 April 2012.
14. See Jonathan Beller's contribution to the 'ICTs and Society' e-list discussion on 'Blogpost about Google's "New" Terms of Use and Privacy Policy: Old Exploitation and User Commodification in a New Ideological Skin' dated 2 March 2012.
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22. For a brief account of the 'Communication rights in the information society' campaign around the World Summit on the Information Society, see: <http://www.waccglobal.org/en/20024-communication-rights-in-the-information-society/666-Communication-Rights-in-the-Information-Society-The-CRIS-campaign.html>, 12 April 2012.
23. See Ben Klass's contribution to the ICTs and Society e-list discussion on 'Social media, democracy and, politics in the information society' dated 27 February 2012.
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