

Interview with Dr. Leslie Shade

Dr. Leslie Shade is an Associate Professor at Concordia University's Department of Communication Studies. Her research and teaching focuses on social, policy, and ethical aspects of ICTs, political economy of the media, feminist media studies and Canadian communication studies.

The CITIGEN team of IT for Change interviewed her on 4 February, 2012 over e-mail, to understand her perspectives on feminist engagement with digital spaces.

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1. How do you assess the potential of digital spaces for participation and collaboration? Is 'community ownership' realisable or is it just in the realm of some perpetual promise?

There's no straight answer here. It depends on the particularities and specificities of communities. What was the initial formation of the community? Was it created as a top-down process with a hierarchical organisational structure, or was it created in a more bottom-up fashion with participatory input? Is the community inclusive of the demographics inherent in the community? Is there an equal representation of youths and seniors, men and women? Are governance processes within communities assessed and tweaked in an iterative fashion according to the needs that arise over time? How is transparency and accountability enacted? Community ownership can be realisable,

but it can also be tough to maintain. What is the role of volunteers in these organisations – how do you deal with burn-out? And many communities have champions – this can be very good – but if a community is meant to be collective in orientation, how do you make sure a champion doesn't become a megalomaniac?! It's tough! So, how to assess: you talk to the people in the community – those responsible for its design and management, and those that use the community resources. And you ask them what the questions are that need to be asked, for starters. Observation and immersion is also an apt strategy for assessment.

2. How does the issue of governance of digital space fit into the wider struggles for democracy and citizenship? Where do they intersect with feminist politics?

Given the centrality of digital media in our everyday lives – for keeping in touch with family and friends, for our work, entertainment, pleasure, civic participation for our lives and livelihoods, the governance of digital spaces is intrinsically

linked to struggles for democracy and citizenship. It's thus really important that women be at the literal tables of policy decision-making, and that feminists be savvy about their rights as digital users.

3. Does feminist scholarship and practice recognise gendering national information infrastructure and telecommunication policy, as an important agenda?

Some scholarship recognises the importance of digital policy issues, yes. But in my field of communication studies, this topic isn't on the agenda for many and I would venture to say that if one did a content analysis of syllabi for 'women and gender' courses in North America, policy issues related to telecommunications and digital issues are not very prevalent. When

I've taught communication policy classes at the graduate level, many students (and I would say I've had about 60% female students) are initially hesitant to take the class. They're 'policy adverse', but once they understand how the issues are so fundamental to citizenship and feminist politics, and their use of technologies for their everyday practices, they're hooked!

4. What are your views about feminist theoretical endeavours in grappling with the network society phenomenon? What frontiers does feminism need to explore to retain its radical edge?

Feminist political economy in analyses of the network society is now needed more than ever. When we consider the highly commercial nature of social media today – when a projected valuation for the \$5B IPO on Facebook is estimated to be between \$75-100B!, we need to ask myriad questions about who profits, and who loses, in advertiser-driven economy. Users become a lucrative audience commodity, and it's also a very gendered audience

commodity. Let's also not lose our focus on labour and how it is gendered– the labour that is enacted in many affective and emotional ways (as users), the labour of those working in the social media companies themselves (the more corporate 'head office labour' – what's the gender division of upper management, board of directors..?) and what is the labour of those working in the manufacturing and production of software/hardware, etc.

5. What are your thoughts on how northern and southern feminisms / feminists can come together on the network society agenda?

We need to have way more communication flows between north and south -- in particular, northern scholarship needs to hear more about southern scholarship!

Translation is of course a key issue here. But in general we need more exchanges of information, strategies, and tactics.