

Session X: Pointers from CITIGEN - What do we need to take away for theory and practice

This session presented a review and assessment of CITIGEN's research and conceptual contributions from scholars who are a part of the network.

Reflections from:

Lisa McLaughlin, Advisor, CITIGEN, and Associate Professor, Miami University, USA

Andrea Cornwall, Advisor, CITIGEN, and Professor, University of Sussex, UK

Phet Sayo, Senior Programme Officer, IDRC

Moderator: *Heike Jensen, Think-piece author, CITIGEN, and Post-doctoral researcher and lecturer, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany*

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Heike, the moderator of the session, asked the panelists to begin the session by discussing what they liked and what they were disappointed by in the researches. She added that this was not to be taken as a value judgement but as a learning. As a feminist researcher, she felt that the advisors should also speak about their personal journeys in CITIGEN.

Andrea began by sharing that she was initially reluctant to become a part of the network as she felt that she did not know enough about information society. Yet she was persuaded into joining as she had worked on participation, gender, equity and such issues, especially in the light of her work with 'Pathways of women's empowerment' research programme. Since then she has grown more and more interested in information society issues, and this project has been a big learning experience.

Her comments, she said, would reflect her pre-occupations with participation, democracy, democratisation of the public sphere and citizenship.

One of the most interesting issues that emerged from the project was how women can use digital spaces for publicity, and this emerged most significantly in the case of the women political candidates using the digital sphere. This also opens up spaces for women's creation of their worlds, and their engagement such as the case of the *Minmini* news network where they create their own versions of the news or journalists in the Philippines choosing the stories they think are significant to report. Even with all the caveats we have been discussing about privacy, the publicity

is important, she felt.

Also following from the discussion on how 'the master's tools cannot be used to destroy the master's house' – she felt that the new media had something substantial to offer and that is why the discussions on resistance were interesting. She felt that it would also be interesting to observe how people who are leading non-normative lives discover themselves online.

The idea of how women change with the camera in their hand or by going online - the opportunities online spaces offer for women's play - is interesting. Hence, women's play online and their creativity and the issues of self-representation need to be looked into. Both representation and the re-presentation of the self are an important part of going into the public sphere. Who is doing the representation is also an important point in the context of participation along with the ways in which people can speak back if they feel they are being misrepresented. Andrea explained this by giving the example of a film which was made by a journalist on the sex workers of Maharashtra. This film was very racist and outrageous and it somehow reached the women. The women were deeply offended and used the camera to make a recording of their feelings and so in this manner, media provided an opportunity to talk back to power.

She said that the digital media provided the possibility to 'imagining the world differently' and this possibility to go beyond the everyday was exciting.



Lisa shared that what excited her the most about the network was that people seemed to really own their research and were not hesitant to contradict/disagree - which was important. The fact that these studies are very grounded and focus on the local specific commonalities and differences is very important.

Phet added that the previous session about reading and silences really resonated with him as he grew up as an immigrant in Canada, and grew up feeling like a second class citizen. He was left with the feeling only the words within were his although they were not articulated. He always cherished his silences and that has always guided his sense of justice, equity, aspirations. He felt that what ICTs offer, is a window to one's dreams and aspirations. Having listened to the projects, the focus on dreams and aspirations came back to him, for working at the policy level he often misses these conversations.

Heike then asked the panel to reflect on stumbling blocks/failures.

Andrea felt that the theorisation of citizenship needed to be sharpened up. Theorising citizenship in the post-colonial world, she said, was complex as one had to work through Western paradigms of the state. She felt that there was need to engage with the broader literature on citizenship such as the work of those who write about citizenship as practised solidarities, citizenship as dislocated from notions of state authority, work of people who write for and against communitarian notions of citizenship, and citizenship and spaces - that she thought might be interesting. The work of civic republican authors, the work of Hannah Arendt - she said, might be interesting and useful.

She also brought up the question of writing - what does it mean to write in a language? The movement between writing and the visual needs to be investigated, she felt. Also what are the broader implications of people spending more and more time online? This would make the question of the relationship between lived, real spaces and digital spaces important.

She added that she was also critical of the tendency of developmental and empowerment literature to deny women the opportunity to engage with spaces for pleasure and leisure.

Lisa added that one thing that troubled her about

the researches that came in, and not the think-pieces, was that, most applications that came in had inadequately developed theoretical frameworks. Not only referring to citizenship theories but also public sphere theories, feminist technology studies, political economy, cultural studies, new media and information society theory. Yet, she felt, that the network seems to have learnt along the way.



Lisa McLaughlin, Phet Sayo and Andrea Cornwall

She congratulated the teams on their work but also urged them to take their work forward. She also added that all of the studies were potentially publication worthy and that should be taken forward. It would be disappointing, she said, if this got put away just because the grant period is over.

Phet responded to Heike by saying that he felt that we had to get out of the trap of thinking that access is inclusion. We cannot think that solving the question of the digital divide will solve the questions of vulnerability, equity and inclusion. Access we have is an exclusion for someone else.

The other issue that he pointed out was regarding donor constraints and he urged the researcher community to push back on issues and constantly endeavour to negotiate with the donors.

Heike added to the discussion and said that coming from a gender studies perspective, it was important to ask why is it that we are focusing on women? She felt that the gender dynamics picture was missing and hence maybe we are not clearly seeing or analysing situations of power. A fuller look into how these powers operate might be better, she felt.

Heike added that through the course of the

meeting we had heard a lot of grounded experiences but the tough question was: Are we aiming at a grand theory? Can we do this at all? Can we do this in a regional context? Have we learnt something because we chose the South Asian region?

Discussion:

Sepali said that her organisation came into this project kicking and screaming because they did not know much of about the Internet and digital spaces except for using email, but the journey of the research she felt had been a great learning experience. They discovered that there were women bloggers in Sinhala and Tamil, and for them this opened up a huge area of communication. While computer use is small and access is limited – yet to find that amidst that women are accessing these spaces for their own personal reasons, is exciting and it opens up a huge area for the organisation.

Srilatha felt that another area the group needed to work on was to debunk some of the myths on the fear of technology. She felt that there was a need to examine these very complex, interesting and diverse relationships - especially to posit ideas about how certain groups of people relate to technology in a certain way. Here she gave the example of a research by a Western researcher who studied traditional stoves and bemoaned their vanishing status considering it to be a loss of culture, whereas the women who actually used that stove jokingly responded and said that they would be happy to exchange their technology with hers. She felt that this possibility of re-examining ones relationship with technology was possible through all the research projects presented.

Phet mentioned that a book he would like to recommend was - 'The nature of technology' by Brian Arthur.

Lisa responded that when speaking of stoves, she was reminded of a study on the microwave oven and how it developed in a gendered way. The microwave was actually made for single men who could not cook but then this brown good became a white good for women to use. These sort of studies need to be looked at, for the talk of fear of technology can become a self fulfilling prophecy.

Parminder posited a question for the reviewers. One of the challenges that faced this research was that what it deals with – the network society - is still formative, but we know that it is critical and will become a huge issue in the future. This is challenging for both activists and researchers - dealing with a phenomenon that is not fully formed.

Oi Wan also alluded to the tricky relationship one had with technology and the need to understand it. She additionally pointed to her dilemma of constantly swinging between her research and activism aspirations. She said that initially she had been hesitant to joining this network as her organisation was not a woman's organisation. Yet now she feels that this markedly brings out the need for different types of organisations – communication rights and women's for example – to come together.

Desiree responded to Heike's comment on how gender studies demanded a larger understanding which went beyond women's experience with technology. She said that from her own experience with South African projects on making men a part of the solution, she felt very uneasy about opening up the project.

Crystal added that she felt that many Southern women's organisations were conservative in their analysis of the Global South and hence there was a need for the women of the South to assert their voices. They are far over shadowed by Western voices currently, she felt.

Anita responded by saying that this was a *deja vu* moment for her. She was once asked to write a piece for the IDS Bridge series – a primer on gender and ICTs. The editor and the reviewers said that the piece was fine but it is about women, and not about gender. She said that she then wrote a mail about how she felt it was an immense paradox to write about gender structures as superior to an opposition to patriarchy. She felt that talking about women is implicitly talking about gendered structures. Why should we follow the Western norms about analysis? Why should we just be playing with categories? For her, the politics of gender in this sense is interconnected with analysis of patriarchy and needs to be. This is the Southern point, she felt.

Andrea responded by saying that this was the exciting part of the research. Why do we have to

be academic? It is very important to keep the activist side alive to enrich the North-South academic debate. The conversation around including men, is a very contested arena. Yes there was a move towards men, but that was quickly surpassed by focussing on girls and women and boys and men as separate areas of programming. Masculinity studies has tended towards being a depoliticised area that does not touch on patriarchy or such structural issues. There is a need to get away from the essentialism in this, she felt. We need to be careful not to romanticise oppressive relations among women themselves and need to be able to look at the hard questions.

Lisa added that the theory-practice debate has been with us for long. She often felt that the

sharpest most critical people are often from NGOs and some of the least capable people are sometimes from the universities. Yet she felt polarisation does not work and is not helpful. She considered herself to be an activist and an academic. She also said she believed in situated knowledge but it did not mean that one cannot be home and studying a topic. While she will never be able to experience the lives of women interviewed in Asia she does realise that there are power differentials and aspects of hierarchy that need to be taken into account.

Phet added that in IDRC, the intent behind funding was to work towards policy change but they were aware this happens in complex ways and that in development research, both theoretical and empirical studies are thrown up.