

SESSION VII: Issues at stake – The nature of participation in virtual reality / real virtuality

The term 'real virtuality' was coined by Manuel Castells to emphasise how the Internet has completely infiltrated our social fabric. In the network society, reality itself (that is, people's material/symbolic existence) is embedded in the structures of the virtual environment. The nature of this new social environment requires to be unpacked and grasped. How do the material and ideological basis of the virtual environment create specific conditions for participation and freedoms? Who controls freedoms and who mediates participation online? These issues of the technological DNA of the emerging social order are critical to theoretical formulations of women's citizenship in the network society.

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

1. Presentation by Evangelia Berdou, Research Fellow, University of Sussex, UK

Berdou began by outlining the two dynamics that shape technological possibilities for collective action. The first one concerns the forces, actors that control information flows largely but not exclusively for profit. The second dynamic concerns social movements that are working towards establishing an information commons, a collection of shared information resources that are, in principle, freely available to all. She argued that both these dynamics invite us to rethink the connections between citizenship and collective action, advocacy and technological literacy by showing us that technologies are not mere tools. They are processes that express specific values and agendas that structure participation in very concrete and specific ways.

She first emphasised the role of the new gatekeepers, that have a critical role in regulating the online environment and controlling access to global public goods. She shared that although debates on these issues are becoming more and more prominent in certain circles, the concerns that they reflect have yet to inform development practice. She used the example of the mobile phone industry to explain further. Sharing her colleague Claire Milne's work, she pointed out some of the key factors that render mobile service providers an important force. The importance of this role largely derives from the character of the mobile spectrum, which is a naturally limited resource. There are only so many operators that a country can have and most countries are stuck with a mobile network oligopoly which has implications on affordability.

Furthermore, the fact that most people in the global South access the Internet through mobiles allows operators to exercise an inordinate degree of control over what parts of the web people have access to. Groups have been working to promote awareness of issues around security and privacy and equip activists with tools and solutions for advocacy enabled by mobile phones. A look at the information provided at the Tactical Tech website reveals that, for example, the level of technical proficiency required in order to set up a secure network and bypass censorship is far from trivial. Even such groups do not necessarily work at larger level policy issues.

She took up the case of Facebook. Facebook is a corporate entity that has been made through its success, the steward of a global public good, social networking, and a default choice for many activists and social movements but it was not designed for human rights advocacy, collective action and political engagement. Its purpose is and has always been to generate revenue through advertising, through manufacturing audiences. These two factors, combined with its lack of accountability to the users, makes it a potentially problematic solution for social movements. She argued for the need to move beyond an opportunistic use of ICTs that sees them only as tools and start thinking about their adoption more strategically: what are the long-term implications of choosing one platform over



Evangelia Berdou

another, what risks are there for a movement to become locked in a technology beyond its control, what do we lose and what do we gain by adopting different solutions including the barriers to access that we might be creating for others.

ICTs are processes that express specific values and agendas that structure participation in very concrete and specific ways.

Evangelia Berdou

She then shifted to the second dynamic: social movements and communities that are fighting against these forces by promoting the idea that some forms of information are important public goods, whose production cannot be entrusted to private actors, but need to be managed collectively. The main advocate of this idea in Internet politics has been the open source software movement which has also provided us with innovations such as Wikipedia and Creative Commons. She said this alliance was increasingly

relevant as open software technologists are increasingly taking an interest in development. She shared her experience of Map Kibera, a pilot project in Kibera, one of Africa's largest slums in Nairobi (Kenya) where inhabitants of the community mapped themselves using open software. The question that emerged was how much can we learn, how much can we become fluent in the language of technology or in the politics of action without losing what is important to us. The answer that she suggested was that we do not need to do this in isolation. There is enough common ground between certain technological communities, like those coalescing around open source and development practitioners and researchers, to start learning from each other. In her experience, the main way to do this was by finding new ways of working together that weaves new connections between theory, methodology and practice. She ended by saying that there was a need for intermediaries, for people and organisations, who can move between these two communities, who can help unpack the vocabularies of different communities and spell out the implications of different technological and policy choices.

2. Presentation by Heike Jensen, Think piece author, CITIGEN, and Independent gender researcher and consultant, Germany



Heike Jensen

Jensen titled her presentation 'Women and Virtual Citizenship? Gendered experiences of censorship and surveillance with regard to sexuality'. She began by quoting two definitions of the Internet, one privileging the male citizen subject and the state while the other spoke of attempts of censorship through misogyny,

intimidation and sexual harassment. She then studied the question of who censors women and through a pyramid representation brought out censorship effected by state or non-state actors through law, violence, market, administration, social norms and architectures. She said the pyramid was also demonstrative of the continuity of censorship online and offline. She also added that these censorship debates either miss gender

concerns or are constructed in their own gender universe.

She then spoke on sexuality, a central issue as the reproduction of social groups and boundaries is based on the reproduction and negotiation of gender and (hetero)sexuality. She mentioned that feminist interventions in the debate of gender and sexuality are a double-edged sword. They may be liberating by exposing and critiquing gender hierarchies, misogyny, gender-based violence, heteronormativity, ideologies of race, class and the nation, as well as by allowing individuals to find their own voices and define themselves. Alternatively, feminist interventions also run the risk of reinforcing the status quo or of being co-opted by third parties for purposes such as: reinforce the association of women with sexuality, they can easily be twisted to cater to

the voyeurism of third parties, they are compatible with the increasing sexualisation of everyday life that is spearheaded by the advertising industries to constantly create sexualised desires, etc.

Coming to the issue of privacy, Jensen said that it was a layered concept which indicated an individuals right to control boundaries aiming for solitude, intimacy, anonymity and reserve. As with censorship, social agents rather than state agents may play a paramount role in invading women's privacy. Digital privacy is not a well-studied field which makes it even more disturbing when digital natives celebrate aspects such as lateral surveillance, peer to peer monitoring and

participatory surveillance. Furthermore, there is a lack of a gendered understanding of the digital realm. In the face of these realities, Jensen looked at implications for women's virtual citizenship. She asked the question that if surveillance/data mining was at the root of the business of Web 2.0, can Facebook really further women's citizenship, which is understood as resisting neo-liberal market power. She also mentioned the presentations of Berdou and Lewis to further point out the need to carefully examine which aspects of ICTs are useful and how they might be reconfigured to put more power to shape society in the hands of women and thus to also overcome more censorship blocks and regimes.

3. Responses and Perspectives – Lisa McLaughlin, Advisor, CITIGEN, and Associate Professor, Miami University, USA

McLaughlin began by responding to the session description which incorporated Manuel Castells definition. Looking at the two papers, she said, we began to see why Castells might not be the best frame to view this conversation about gender, citizenship and democracy. He has written about the current economy focussing on informational modes of development where the source of productivity lies in the technology of knowledge generation, information processing and communication through symbols. He links the

where informational labour is defined as well as educated and integrated in the knowledge economy and the generic labour is seen as disposable and exchangeable. He recognises that there exists a structural divide and social exclusion



Lisa McLaughlin

but assumes that generic labour then has to assume the flexibility required in the global context of informational capitalism. This relates to women in particular, as he talks of feminisation of paid labour and the creation of the 'flexible' woman who replaces the organisation man as the harbinger of the new type of worker. And this is a kind of professional person who is highly skilled in ICT and in turn challenges patriarchy which falls into crisis as women gain power through workforce, and ultimately leads to more inclusion to women. According to McLaughlin, Castells seems to forget that the flexible woman not only refers to the woman in the North but also to the woman in the South who puts together parts in assembly factories and is numerically flexible. She felt that this was missing from the discussion so far.

The Castellsian framework does not serve feminists, especially if one is interested in the category of people who might be called informational labour but are still excluded over issues of gendered harassment, have their privacy invaded in specific gendered and sexual ways.

Lisa McLaughlin

category of informational labour to citizenship and social movements. He further discusses informational labour versus generic labour,

Additionally, McLaughlin mentioned that in the context of the two papers which bring out many issues, we can see how the Castellsian framework does not serve feminists, especially if one is interested in the category of people who might be called informational labour but are still excluded over issues of gendered harassment, have their privacy invaded in specific gendered and sexual ways. As Berdou pointed out, people have not only gained something by accessing information society membership: they have also

Discussion

Bhattacharya reacted to Berdou's presentation by bringing out four aspects. First, she wondered why common spaces such as Wikipedia although seen as neutral did not reflect information on movements. In reference to the Map Kibera project, she wondered about the mapping process and its potential uses by real estate brokers. She felt that a cultural dimension of the idea privacy also needed to be incorporated in the discussion as it has an impact in mobilising and creating critical mass on an idea. She added that 'consent' as a concept needed to be studied more in terms of this discussion. Berdou responded by saying that information commons certainly were far from being free of biases but that one was glad for a space of participation. In the case of creating community maps, she said the risk was not much as the State already had detailed maps of these regions. Jensen also responded to the comment on cultural dimensions of privacy and said that it had several layers including one based on age. She also said that the concept of consent while being useful was often relegated to only content. It would be interesting, she felt, if it could be used to make operations such as Facebook share the worth of our information to the advertiser for instance.

Devika felt that while it was useful to have conversations on structure, a more contextual

lost something because their increased incorporation in the information society requires them to deal with issues of citizenship, privacy, sexuality, etc. Besides, the analysis needs to include those who are excluded, because they are not a part of the network society and will never make it to the category of informational labour. She concluded by pointing out that even though the right to privacy has to be considered, the right to publicity defined as the right to voice, is as much a central issue when discussing ICTs.

analysis was required to take decisions on such dilemmas. She felt that we needed to grant more agency to people who use the Internet, even if it poses them as consumers. Gurumurthy responded by saying that the question posed to feminists was: what is our feminist responsibility to embrace the tenets of collaboration, reciprocity and the rest that are espoused by other progressive movements, such as the open source and what would be our structural response in embedding within our feminist analysis the principles of that movement. Berdou added that from the perspective of functioning online as an activist, one makes others vulnerable if one is not aware of the issues regarding the platform being used.

Cornwall was intrigued by the questions on identity and how one could practice multiplicity and splits on the Internet, which is deeply related to how we think of the public and private.

Berdou also addressed the issue brought up by Gurumurthy K. on the alternatives to the Google search engine which is increasingly becoming the gateway to knowledge for people online. She shared that it is astonishing to see the resources spent on the search engine, which makes creating a parallel equivalent platform difficult.