



Reading Resources: Set 2

Reading 1

Title

'Excerpts from IT for Change's Forthcoming Annual Report'

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with



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Excerpts from IT for Change's Forthcoming Annual Report

IT for Change. Forthcoming (2010).

This excerpt seeks to capture the contexts that have led to shifts in the focus of our work beyond just examining exclusions in the information society, to probing the deeper structural issues connected to the very fibre of our democratic public life

IT for Change has been grappling with the epochal changes brought in by new information and communications technologies (ICTs). While we have tried to situate ourselves firmly upon the ideals of equity, social justice, democracy and development, it remains a constant challenge to find appropriate theoretical frameworks for our work. In the last five years we have defined our analysis and work vis-a-vis the theme of 'an information society for the South'. This theme itself proceeded from the logic of structural disadvantages that developing countries suffer, and within these countries, the exclusions that marginalised sections are subject to. Since the dominant idea of an information society was typically a global construction, a souped-up globalisation clone, it was perhaps logical that we took the geopolitical axis of North-South as the principal anchor for developing our critique and articulating the possible alternatives. In this regard, we did however use the term 'South' in its wider meaning of also looking at systemic exclusions beyond those based on geopolitical locations.

We define information society as one where a considerable part of social life is digitally influenced, if not mediated. The influence can be direct or indirect – on people and structures that may not directly come in contact with the digital phenomenon. The digital of course refers to the new ICTs, of which the Internet is the central artefact.

As we analysed and understood better the structural dislocations caused by the 'information society' paradigm, we found that the challenges it presented were at even more fundamental levels of our social organisation. We had always associated the dominant paradigm of the information society with hyper-neoliberalism. However, given the very significant impact it has had for over two decades now, neoliberalism still has largely been a counter-force at the level of society's basic institutions, be they those of democracy, welfarism, public life, education or media. These institutions typically are still strongly pre-neoliberal. We do look down upon corporate money influencing political agendas, even if it still does so, 'illegally'. We value the public-ness of the basic civic infrastructure, while we may lament its growing privatisation, even as it happens within some kind of public frameworks. Libraries and schools as basic enterprises of civilisation's knowledge and socialisation are seen as public concerns, although we may be concerned about the growing privatisation of education, and of knowledge in general.

On the other hand, the institutional ecology of the information society has very different fundamentals. This ecology has got built in a period of neoliberal sway, in the hands of neoliberal forces. Unfortunately, there has been little resistance to it by 'democratic forces'. The influence of neoliberalism on the information society paradigm is so strong and defining that it may be required to define our current social movements and political activism in relation to it. For many reasons of principles as well as of strategy, we think that 'democratic forces' comprise the best label to describe the forces that counter the neoliberal influence in the emerging information society. It is however significant that neoliberalism also seeks legitimacy in claiming the idea and space of democracy for itself.

The only significant resistance to the hegemony of dominant forces has been from techie-anarchists,

who have rebelled against corporatist power in the digital arena, often with good success, as in the case of open and free software. However, when caught between the two key poles of drawing out new institutional ecologies in the emerging information society – corporates and governments, so strong is the antipathy of a typical techie to governments (even the more democratic ones) that, either the corporate sector has been able to co-opt the power and legitimacy of techie groups, or the latter's strength has simply dissipated due to their resistance to building strategic alliances with the public sector for confronting the overwhelming power of corporates in the digital arena. Governments themselves have been lax to claim public interest spaces and institutions in this arena, because technology changes just too fast for their comfort, and it also basically challenges their devices of social control. Moreover, ICT companies, and generally the whole digital arena, is globally organised, and governments, especially those of developing countries, have very little leverage over them. We all know that there is no global governance system worth its name, except when needed for pushing the priorities of developed countries.

Consequently, the emerging institutions of the information society are almost all *post-democratic*, that is if we can get over their claim and outward semblance of ahistoricity. Built on neoliberal values of radical individualism and self interest, and post-modernist conceptions of absolute freedoms and anti-normativeness, the digital reality is a strange new being. In its claim of the 'technical' equality of all 'users' (defining human beings in their relationship to technology rather than vice versa), the 'post-democratic digital' seeks to largely exhaust the project of social justice. Users disembodied of all qualities other than what they themselves want to assume, taken to be interacting as equals in pursuit of glorified self-interest, and living in the world, and among 'people', of their choosing, defines a new post-human paradigm. As it greatly expands the technology-mediated 'private' space, the negative impact of the digital on the concept of 'public' is no less.

The Internet itself, which started as a public network, in the hands of public institutions, increasingly consists mostly of a few applications like Google and Facebook, representing the privatisation of the erstwhile public territory of the Internet. Google is increasingly the world's library, and Facebook, its 'public' meeting place. Both these functions were traditionally public, but now take place within proprietary spaces, of which rent-seeking opportunities, rather than public interest, is the main structural principle.

It is obvious that this new 'reality' presents a great challenge to constructions of democracy, social justice, public life and the public sphere. Since the virtual consists entirely of intangible informational exchanges, it may be tempting to conceive of it in terms of the historical continuity of the public sphere. The virtual does present a new public sphere, and thus has a great impact on the institution of democracy. However, the form and substance of the virtual goes much beyond, to embed directly into, and transform, many other institutions of democratic public life as well. Altogether, its impact is very pervasive and strong, and could define new directions for our political future.

For one, as more and more of our lives gets entangled with the digital/ virtual, the problematic impact of the above factors would keep increasing and thus they constitute forces that determine overall social change. On the other hand, the strong influence of the dominant ideology of the information society is already *directly* evident in the 'real' spaces, including key social institutions like those of politics and of knowledge production and sharing. Multistakeholderism as a policy shaping process is by far most common in ICT policy spaces, which, in practise, has turned out mostly to be a means for open and blatant involvement of big businesses in making policies – policies which are otherwise supposed to regulate their role as the most powerful players in the ICT arena. In the yesteryears, this kind of thing used to be done through back-door lobbying. Similarly,

in no other area is development research, and also development NGOs, so openly backed by corporate money as in the field of ICTs for development. Such legitimisation of corporate power and its role in the socio-political aspects of our society is a uniquely information society phenomenon.

In this framing of the information society phenomenon as a set of very diabolical challenges, there arises one obvious question; whatever happened to all the talk about the great egalitarian and knowledge equalising potential of the Internet? What about Internet's image as a possible weapon of people's power against tyrannical institutions? These opportunities are still there, and there is yet hope for them to come true, at least partially. We are in times of great social disruption, which is both an immense challenge and perhaps unprecedented opportunity. The new battle lines have to be recognised, and the urgency of the required action for progressive change has to be appreciated.

It is true that the already dominant forces have made early inroads, and are getting entrenched. On the other hand, the progressive forces have still not even developed sufficient theoretical frameworks, much less alternative frameworks, of practice. This is especially true for a Southern vision of an information society. A few dispersed efforts in this regard, while often ameliorating the damage, are as likely to be co-opted by the strongly systemic onslaught of the dominant forces, which look remarkable well-organised, if not by design, certainly by a keen recognition of common interests. The Internet may still become the instrument of organising people's power and overthrow unjust systems and structures. But for this, the protagonists must learn to use the Internet also to *build* new alternative institutions.

The Internet does provide very significant possibilities for ensuring the transparency and accountability of institutions. Once again, however, this power of the Internet needs to be used for institutional reforms, as sweeping as they need to be, and not for simply supplanting all institutional forms built over cherished democratic values. In fact, it is the power of the Internet to induce extreme, and perhaps, unbearable, transparency, and thus expose the gap between 'claiming to be' and 'doing' – between norm and action, that has largely served to undermine traditional institutions that survived on managing this 'gap'. Dominance, if it cannot be exercised by deception, must then be exercised by legitimisation of new 'enabling norms' – for instance, resorting to multistakeholderism, instead of shady lobbying. The new public sphere of the Internet itself acts as the key vehicle of the legitimising discourse, as are many other 'real life' dynamics around the ICT-society interface as have been briefly touched upon earlier. The sustained assault in the information society on our institutions thus mostly builds on their existing weaknesses, which neoliberalism has been able to exploit. Institutional reform thus becomes an even more urgent imperative today. Fortunately, as mentioned, ICTs themselves afford very good opportunities for such reform.

It is for these reasons that we felt that the focus of our work has to be taken to more fundamental levels – to concepts and practices of democratic institutions, and the lines between public and private/commercial, in the emerging information society paradigm. This battle frames and precedes, though is also concomitant with, that of getting the claims of disadvantaged people, groups and countries – the logic of our earlier 'an information society for the South' approach. Positing a citizenship framework as the basic determinant of social membership in the hugely changed social canvas of the information society is one of the starting points of the new focus of our work.

Two broad areas are important for progressive forces to work on, in this regard. One is to engage with the way the socio-technical phenomenon of the Internet is shaping up. And therefore to work towards ensuring that its architecture is as decentralised, open and empowering as possible for those at the peripheries, against strong moves to shape it as an instrument of control and dominance for

continued accumulation of economic, social, political and cultural capital. This is largely the policy arena of Internet governance, which has to be complemented by 'practice', of empowering the peripheries – local communities using the new technologies to take up control. Such efforts have to be supported by sufficient public funds invested into the area of 'community informatics'.

The second area to address is on the side of existing institutions like those of development, democracy and public service media. These institutions, and those involved with them, need to recognise that the information society changes the context of almost all institutions in very fundamental ways. All these institutions need to reassess themselves in the new context, but without jettisoning or compromising the values of democracy, equity and social justice that may underpin them.

Manuel Castells, whose trilogy on network society is considered one of the most definitive works in this area, in an interview, describes our civilisational dilemma as follows:

The problem with technology is: it reflects us and we are not really nice people, so if we're real nasty this technology is going to show it and produce many terrible consequences. If we address our psyche, our political institutions, our way of life and our relationship to nature, if we are able to change, then technology has incredible potential to empower us. So here is the problem: today we have the most extraordinary tools which can be either used to help us or to destroy us. Right now, we're doing the second. So, the crisis is not that we are collapsing, the crisis is that while we are having a very dynamic economy, we are not integrating in this economy our societies, cultures and political institutions. It's this gap we're suffering as a crisis, at a moment that we should in fact be rejoicing.