SESSION V: Can we grasp the big picture? - A panel discussion

This session addressed the ecologies shaping gender and citizenship in the network society. It took on the big questions of democratic deficit in global governance, the complexity around free speech in relation to the national and global Internets, network capitalism, and the commodification of sexuality.

Presenters:

Heike Jensen, Think-piece author, CITIGEN, and Post-doctoral researcher and lecturer, Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany
Parminder Jeet Singh, Advisor, CITIGEN , and Executive Director, IT for Change, India

Moderator: *Andrea Cornwall, Advisor, CITIGEN, and Professor, University of Sussex, UK*

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

Heike began her presentation by mentioning that her involvement with the concept of citizenship has been to look at it with regard to censorship and surveillance. The rationale behind the concept of exercising citizenship has hinged on the existence of a public sphere, which would not be possible without the freedom of expression and the right to privacy. Hence, in the CITIGEN paper she authored, the questions that emerged by looking at the gendering of citizenship and the public sphere, were - What structures of opportunity are created for women in the emerging digital society? Who gets heard? Who gets silenced? Who gets placed under surveillance? Also it was important to understand the relationship between the offline and the online world.

Heike Jensen

As baseline, she took the offline public sphere. Historically, when one examines how the public sphere has been created in Western societies, one realises that there have always been two blind spots – patriarchy and property relations. They were considered as matters of the 'private sphere' which were not to be discussed by citizens in the public sphere. We know, of course, that the term 'private companies' comes from this. It is still useful to recall that these are matters that are excluded from discussions by those citizens who have the power to speak in the public sphere.

We all come from different places, and we know that public spheres have been created very differently, by mass media, by news media, and by very different set-ups. We have privately owned media, we have publicly owned media, we have state controlled media and we have society controlled media - however that works. But the bottom-line that emerges after looking at all the documents coming out of the UN World Conference on Women and also taking into account initiatives like the Global Media Monitoring project, there is a problem that is basically a part of all public spheres we are used to – women are not really represented as they want to be. They are either completely ignored, or their concerns are twisted, or they perpetuate stereotypes, such as depicting underprivileged women as victims. These are problems that are a part of the public spheres, even before the emergence of the information society.

Coming to points on censorship and surveillance - Usually censorship and surveillance discussions centre around state actors but we must remember that there are a whole range of actors involved here. For instance, in addition to the state that exercises censorship through laws and violence, media administrations and media business heads engage in censorship practices. Of course, ever since Lawrence Lessig published his seminal book, we can no longer ignore the power of digital architecture and technical code in creating censorship effects. And we have censorship by social norms as well.

Heike said her approach to investigating censorship was as a gendered phenomenon, and this she depicted through an asymmetrical

pyramid.

The left depicts possibly how women get censored in their societies and on the right it depicts how men get censored. The point is that while there is a cause of recognition that all public spheres are idiosyncratic in terms of their actual set up of the media, there are certain underlying factors which make women relate to each other all around the world. One of the things we then realise is that the harshest kind of censorship women confront is not exercised by the state, but by society, especially by very close social actors. The closest one is yourself — self-censorship. Family members also engage in censorship. We must realise that women not only get censored by men, but also by other women. So women are victims, as well as perpetrators of censorship. Also keeping in mind that women all over the world are disproportionately poorer than the men, economic censorship blocks affect them.

Hence at the top of the pyramid, when you look at who can freely articulate in the public sphere, you see that men are in the majority. Not all men of course - because other types of social stratification intersect along with gender - and poor men also have a hard time being heard in the public sphere. But there are proportionately more number of men. Censorship debates in the mainstream usually do not take into account these multiple censorship agents and multiple levels. Usually they are articulated from a very privileged position, which is always a class position. That is really important to realise. This also applies to surveillance issues.

The upshot of all this is that public spheres have marginalised women as political actors in general, especially when they have attempted to forward feminist claims. And public spheres by and large have been largely created by men, whether media business operators, or owners or administrators, or decision makers. We have also heard about how the construction of use-value has been male centred, and how women need to take this on, to make their use of reality note-worthy. While women have been silenced, they have not been really absent. We have heard about gender stereotypes, but women have also often been promoted as symbols of the nation within public spheres. This creates a unique censorship context for women because even as they are held as symbols to exemplify the nation, they can be silenced by claims that they betray the nation. Of
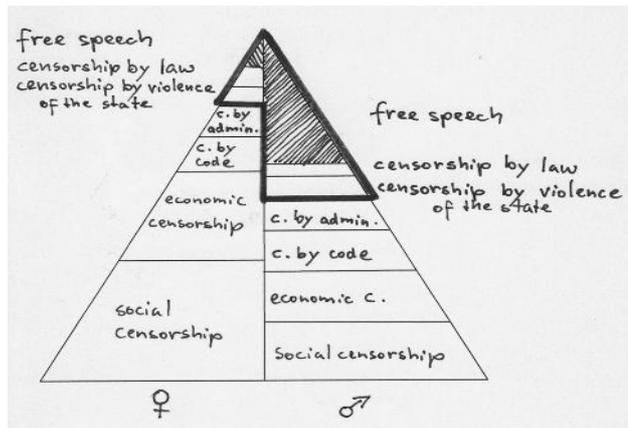
course, within each nation, there are different kinds of factional issues that get mediated through these kind of debates. The bottom-line is that it is possible to try to take away women's claims to freedom of expression, by saying they besmirch the nation. Often times this has happened when women have tried to discuss feminine ideals and moral order, and very crucially, sexuality. The public sphere as it was originally thought up excludes any mention of patriarchy and of course, sexuality was one of the prime areas where women's self determination of their pleasures without patriarchy was possible.

Coming to the information society, Heike mentioned, that indeed Web 2.0 has made it possible for women to access spaces for self-determination, self-expression and creation of communities — especially in the area of sexuality. Some of the CITIGEN researches has pointed this out as well. In doing so, they have challenged the relegation of sexuality to the private sphere, the ideals of femininity that are propagated in different nations and the ideas of morality that are propagated. Yet the question remains whether these encounters have been able to create more counter public spheres, or whether they constitute fringe arguments. That is open to debate and dependent on what evidence is coming from various locale.

We have to be conscious of information society's flip side, especially the threat of ICT based violence against women.

Parminder Jeet Singh - Advisor, CITIGEN , and Executive Director, IT for Change, India

Parminder began by saying that the big question was — How do we invent spaces that are not

limited, but are for the whole world. Continuing from earlier discussions, we recognise that there are continuities between woman's online and offline body - where does one inhabitation end and the other begin? This is a question of social structures around technology, one of the many that are getting constructed. How are these paradigms around technology getting constructed? These were the questions, Parminder said, he meant to address in his talk.

Parminder Jeet Singh

Even those involved in Internet governance tend to give an impression that it is about technical governance. But that is just a minor part of it. There is also a very crucial element of political governance within this – about conflict of interest, trade-offs and so on.

IT for Change is one of the few organisations which focusses on the political economy questions related to the Internet. What does this mean? This means we understand the ongoing game of transnational capital's struggle to control intellectual property and its rent seeking behaviour linked to the export of cultures from the North to the South – and in this game Internet is central. While the big players are engaged in this game, it is in their interest to pretend that Internet governance is about struggles against state censorship, but it is actually about their struggle to control the Internet resources.

How do they do this? They establish rent-seeking of Internet resources through physical controls, but mostly through techno-social controls. Seeking monetary payments for intellectual property, is an example of a physical control. Techno-social controls are much larger – they involve the advantages players gain by controlling some key nodes in the network. Taking Google as an example – Google ostensibly supports open source philosophy and is for liberal IP regimes, but that's because they stand to gain when IP regimes are weaker. Also, what are the alternatives you have if you are unhappy with Google?

He stressed that the new developments of Anti-counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) etc. are essentially a part of this larger move to govern the Internet,

for a few players to profit. One can imagine how initiatives such as Wikileaks would get badly affected in this move, and what this means for the Internet.

He also brought to light the other side of the smokescreen – the Internet Governance Forum (IGF). The IGF has become a space where the civil society can be happy feeling that they are being included in decisions of the Internet, and they can think that there is a spirit of participation around it. However, this space has no links to policy making arenas.

So what is the larger point? Within this larger techno-social architecture, what are the 'invited' and 'invented spaces' we can claim? Our subversive actions do not make a difference unless we realise the larger political ecology we are dealing with. So, the space for our actions depends upon our ability to deal with the 'Googles' of this world.

Discussion:

Lisa reflected on her own experience on how/ when does our participation in forums such as IGF, where we have such strange bedfellows, compromise us. She mentioned that IGF did not have many women participants and the argument of which was that not enough women have the technical expertise to talk about Internet governance. She said it was reminiscent of Heike's point about women being marginalised from the public sphere.

Srilatha mentioned that historically, women have always been 'surveilled', but they also have ways of escaping this surveillance. All women have stories of 'how grandmother evaded grandfather's surveillance'. Those strategies need to be reapplied to governance contexts.

Graciela had a question for the presenters. Where is the civil society in the IGF today? Not to criticise multi-stakeholder perspectives here, but she felt that the civil society has lost its space in the IGF.

Anita commented that if we say global politics works by keeping certain spaces opaque, this segmentation points to an important lesson for the civil society. Before the Arab spring, through the consecutive failure of the Seattle round of the

Third Ministerial Conference of WTO and the Doha Ministerial round, the global powers had realised that it is not by international governance but by multiple coalitions with select partners at different forums that the power game can be played. This is why Google can sit with you in IGF and work against you elsewhere and we cannot challenge this, as it is multi-stakeholder politics. That is what Lisa Veneklasen is talking about. The totalitarian powers operate at a global level, the aspirational works at a local level. The local is essentialised as feminine, and the global as masculine.

Ranjita added that there are huge differences between offline and online public spheres. In the real world, public sphere is not a given, there are huge contestations around defining its boundary. Yet in the online world, it is not like that. You can log in and access. The online gives you the safety of anonymity but then is it not like being in your private sphere? Where is the actual struggle in the online public sphere? Looking at the same issue from a citizenship angle - What kind of democratic abilities get honed in the online public sphere? Are cyber spaces really sites of resistance?

Heike mentioned that she was in disagreement with the point Anita made in the morning about privacy being key to the formation of subjectivity. She stressed that older techniques of resistance may not help so much using a Foucauldian argument. Power is generative, and it creates its subjects accordingly. Her argument regarding surveillance would be - What if 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? We need to take a close look on our online behaviour and see how we are implicated. For instance, one uses Google everyday.

Coming back to the issue of self-censorship, this idea brings together the ideas of censorship and surveillance. But what if 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?

Going back to WSIS here, and the dwindling of civil society at the IGF, she felt, had begun here. At the IGF you may burn your resources, but you will never get to the centres of power. We need a more powerful analysis of that.

Lisa added that in the first phase, Gender Strategy Working group was marginalised and in the second phase of IGF, there was only the Gender Caucus which was co-opted.

Phet pointed out that he had been a part of a lot of these processes that were termed 'evil' but the battle, he felt, was to keep everyone to the principles of 'open and free', but even this has been taken to the extreme.

Oi Wan felt that the IGF was not a useful process. In Hong Kong, she said, people are encountering Hollywood lobbyists who are pushing for a strong censorship regime and the activists have to ally with Google in that struggle, who are also interested in a weak censorship regime. This is how the spaces of Internet governance work.

Desiree added that we are just bombarded by images and information, and there are spaces for voice but not enough spaces for agency.

Parminder asked why we hate Google? Not because of its product, but its political power. So we do not have to boycott its product.

Lisa asked if then at this point do we get compromised. This is a important question. From her experience with the IGF, she felt this requires constant self-reflection and governance of civil society.

Srilatha wondered if whether we should continue with old strategies of politics and felt that the answer was yes - for new strategies have to emerge from old strategies. But for that, people dealing with old strategies have to recognise that this is the new context where the online and off-line are not two different worlds, but they mix. So old strategies are relevant. There is no discontinuity in political action in the new network age. We have to deal with the fact that we are dealing with big systems. Internet is a big system, globalisation is a big system. So our resistance has to be big and small. Quoting Anita, she said, the big system needs to be feminised. Our subversions have to be small as well.

The other issue, Parminder felt, was – would transparency work? Transparency is being given a new meaning in the present context. When you have no option other than Google, how can we

accept the self-governance of Google? Actors like Google are playing a role of their own. We must remember that the digital revolution was enabled by two regulations:

1. IBM was forced to separate software from hardware by regulation.
2. Telecom companies were broken up by a simple competition law in the US.

So, it is time to regulate this new digital space, to enable other developments. We have been fighting for a space in the UN for normative discussions on the Internet. In WSIS, we had communication rights - why did we move to 'freedom of expression' in IGF? This is a problem which Graciela also has pointed out.