

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2013

Women's rights, gender and ICTs



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Participatory citizenship

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Tracing the impact of ICTs on the social and political participation of women

The cat is out of the bag. With the Snowden affair, it is unequivocally clear that the network society's emancipatory potential is more or less just that: a promise in the distant horizon that is weighed down by the political-economic surveillance complex. The turn of events is deeply disturbing for global justice. And for the feminist project, it is a sobering moment. Just as we were beginning to creatively bend space with digital tools for building community, forging social movements, organising dissent and publishing perspectives on gender justice, we begin to realise that the "network" may indeed be monolithic, pervasive and unexceptional.

However, feminist activism requires an abiding commitment to constructive, forward-looking analysis and theory that can assist action for change. There is a need to move conceptions of contemporary life from dystopic readings of the network society to productive interpretations that can assist action. What would equal participation in the network society, the experience of "networked citizenship", entail? How can we understand digital space as political terrain? What outcomes for gender equality arise through the discourse and practice(s) of technology? How does political counter-power emerge in and in spite of the hegemonic network? These are some of the questions that need to be explored to articulate the citizenship and public-political participation of women in the network society.

The connection between digital space and the public sphere: What network politics seems to bring for women

A starting point in the exploration of a framework for action is knowing how political discourse and practice meet the affordances of technology and how

in this interaction, gender relations are realigned.¹ Indeed, politics in the network society imbues the logic of the technological paradigm. From activist distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks to hackathons-for-a-cause and mass texting or tweeting to galvanise flash mobs, what constitutes political life has changed. This is not just about vocabulary. The social discourse of politics today emerges through networked pathways that are more diffuse, adaptive and decentralised. Politics seems to be everywhere, and as Wendy Harcourt observes:

Today's vibrant, young, "unruly" movements that throng together over one issue and then move on again before analysts can catch them are not negotiating, nor seeking to build institutional stability. They are on the streets, in the piazzas, blogging, tweeting, texting, performing, meeting on Facebook and YouTube. The size, the energy, the multiple images and words in so many languages hardly allow you to catch your breath. This type of civic action provides possibilities for new alternatives....²

The performance of politics today does indeed derive from the propensities of a networked society. Borrowing from game theory, network theorists explain how with the use of digital technology a leap of faith occurs, when a "known" becomes a "known known" – a "common knowledge" – which shows you that you are not alone in a particular set of beliefs. What then arises through the dispersed and anarchic performance of politics follows Hannah Arendt's description of transformative revolutionary moments when ordinary people abandon their routines – when common assumptions about the way things go are thrown out – and people come together to invent a new way of doing things. These moments may not last, but they punctuate history

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- ¹ Of course, it is equally important to look at how feminist practices of technology transform the public-political sphere. This would be another entry point in the analysis. But looking at politics also means taking into account the dynamic interplay between political institutions and political praxis – the framing of gender by political structures and discourse, as well as subversive feminist interruptions in this canvas.
 - ² Harcourt, W. (2012) The Challenge of Civic Engagement for Development, *Development*, 55(2), p. 151-153. www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v55/n2/pdf/dev201211a.pdf

and set the scene for a new point of departure for human society at large.³

In this tumult of a scale unprecedented, women activists have embraced online spaces to create a safe harbour; feminist movements deploy social media to inform, organise and mobilise; feminist organisations forge translocal solidarities for concerted “real world” action; individuals across geographies are “interpellated”⁴ to political community online in new formations of transnational organisations. Digital technologies create the in-between space in liberal democracies, where marginalised women build collective political articulations as citizens contesting the state.⁵ These practices across a wide spectrum, from the self-discovery of political subjecthood and bonding with a “community of fate”⁶ to exercising active citizenship, endow the feminist project with immeasurable possibilities for seeking new paths to gender justice.

Understanding these emerging practices as everyday experience of micro-power is not sufficient. The flow of information and creation of community inhere in a changing, even if fluid, order of macro-power. Politics in the network age may just be a new variant of the old craft – but it arises in and through a new technological regime that intertwines with old hierarchies of power. Contemporary society reflects a contradiction, witness as it is to the consolidation of power through new alliances of the powerful, alongside the birth and proliferation of a global public sphere where technology decentres political action, creating a new class of digital citizens. Emerging through these contradictions, the pluralities of network society politics, instead of coalescing into a cogent narrative where power is contested, may degenerate into a “tyranny of structurelessness”⁷ making way for default powers that co-opt the powerless into the myth of “power for all”. Those excluded from access to technology – like marginalised women – may be rendered invisible, and their politics insignificant, in the emerg-

ing political discourse. Even with access to digital resources, marginalised individuals and groups would still need to garner other resources that can amplify their informative and communicative power. In the network society therefore, decentralisation of information and action does not necessarily imply a democratisation of power. Politics as process may in fact overtake politics for (democratic) content, displacing radical transformation and rendering resistance an empty signifier.

Historically, the public sphere of nations has been structured by an exclusion of women and by an inhibition to critically discuss patriarchy, particularly as it relates to sexuality, and private property. Even though the internet enables women to exercise freedoms – of expression, association and assembly – the structures of Web 2.0 have commoditised all these initiatives. Also, patriarchal forces have utilised digital media for censorship and surveillance of women’s sexuality. Meanwhile, the broader public sphere may not be characterised by a greater plurality of voices at all.⁸

What we see therefore is that the wide swath of political actions, including those that renegotiate gender through the appropriation of digital space, tend to be “fragments”⁹ of micro-power that do not necessarily add up to making a political agora. And as the particular trajectories of the different Arab uprisings show us, how these fragments can challenge and subvert patterns of macro-power, and what a “politics of resolution” would look like, would be highly contextual. It would be contingent upon how situated practices encounter institutional power.

Participation, citizenship and gendered faultlines in network politics

Feminist opportunism in the network society would demand theories of power that speak to the emerging discourse of power ushered in by the internet and digital spaces. The discussion below focuses on the new forms of subjectivity and community, and the new structures of representation arising in the network society, ruminating on how these developments impact the discourse of participation and citizenship and of women’s empowerment and gender equality.

3 Price, T. C. (2011) Cupid’s Freedom: How the Web Sharpens the Democratic Revolution. www.opendemocracy.net/openeconomy/tony-curzon-price/cupids-freedom-how-web-sharpens-democratic-revolution

4 Interpellation is a term coined by French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser and refers to the process by which ideology addresses the pre-ideological individual and produces him or her as a subject proper.

5 Claudio, S. E. (2011) Workshop Report of the Review of the “Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society” (CITIGEN) Research Programme. www.gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/CITIGEN_Workshop%20Report.pdf

6 Fraser, N. (2005) *Transnationalising the Public Sphere*, p. 4. www.republicart.net/disc/publicum/fraser01_en.pdf

7 Freeman, J. (1972) *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, Berkeley *Journal of Sociology*, 17. www.jstor.org/stable/41035187

8 Jensen, H. (2011) Workshop Report of the Review of the “Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society” (CITIGEN) Research Programme. www.gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/CITIGEN_Workshop%20Report.pdf

9 Habermas, J. (2006) Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research, *Communication Theory*, 16(4), p. 411-426.

The individuated female political subject

In countries of the global South, especially in post-colonial contexts, political citizenship for women materialises through a subjectivity rooted in everyday actions and collective histories.¹⁰ This process of individuation is tied to how material life experiences translate into contextual struggles for rights. Cyberspace can be a harbinger of such a process of individuation, enabling women to have a space of their own, reflect upon their location, and become public-political subjects. By learning how to be citizen journalists, marginalised women in Manila, for instance, wrote blogs that captured the everyday marginalities experienced by women like themselves in their slum communities, publicising the personal and arguing what reproductive rights meant for their citizenship.¹¹

In tightly controlled cultural and political environments, women activists and journalists have emerged as a proxy “free press”, disseminating news that challenges misinformation and falsehoods. The internet has allowed the space for activists and journalists to support one another (as the case of the #freemona campaign¹² indicates), forcing regimes to be more accountable, taking local events to the international community and risking their lives in the process. Chinese and Iranian bloggers have raised women’s rights issues consistently through the online space.

An interesting facet of political discourse today is the participation online of young techno-savvy women, who embrace subversive semiotic tactics, using technology as sites of contestation. Negotiating and deconstructing the authoritarianism and consumerism encoded in their everyday cultural environment, these “netizens” use humour and satire to challenge network power through counter discourses.

In the network age, political subjectivity encounters the *problematique* of authenticity: what is *real* political activity and who is the *real* political subject. Consider the following:

- The advent of Web 3.0 (personalisation, intelligent searches and behavioural advertising) and digital capitalism’s rising interest in women as a viable consumer market have created a version of online participation that is entrenched in a culture antithetical to radical political action. The segmented spaces of Web 2.0 make debate less probable as

individuals can exercise greater “choice” in what they “like” or who they “follow”. We are witnessing a moment of mass exhibitionism online, with specific forms of self-presentation.

- It is quite possible that online participation can push action towards a depoliticised post-feminist discourse. As research in Hong Kong indicates,¹³ the neoliberal economic context, liberal political environment and always-on connectivity have created a “post-feminist” culture. In such contexts, grounded discourses of gender may not get sufficiently politicised for renegotiating gender power.
- The sexualisation and commodification of digital space complicate the process through which subjectivity coheres in digital space. The discourse of “choice” in this context gets into a messy entanglement with feminist concerns around empowerment. The real, authentic self is now transported online with Web 2.0, a phenomenon that the “reality porn” niche, which has expanded significantly over the past few years, makes evident. Recovering agency and problematising empowerment is a sticky challenge for feminism, even if necessary.

The bottom line is also that despite the many positive trends, women remain far behind men as producers of information online.¹⁴ Gender ideologies do not disappear. They reproduce in the virtual environment.

Community and collectivity for feminist solidarity

Network society architectures of information and communication have given rise to new organisational forms, making it possible to reimagine alliances, collective action, social capital and interest groups. For women, access to the online public sphere is a powerful key to breaching traditional barriers to public participation. The possibility of transcending geographic location and forming new communities of interest allows for new imaginaries of identity and solidarity, and for garnering support on a global scale.

As has been demonstrated in the case of Egypt, online spaces can be schools of democracy. In Egypt, activists collaboratively created the online political space with specific repertoire and forms of

10 Third World feminists like Chandra Mohanty and political theorists like Ranabir Samaddar trace citizenship through the material everyday practices and collective histories of women and subaltern post-colonial subjects.

11 Claudio (2011) Op. cit.

12 technosociology.org/?p=566

13 Lam, O. (2011) Workshop Report of the Review of the “Gender and Citizenship in the Information Society” (CITIGEN) Research Programme. www.gender-is-citizenship.net/sites/default/files/citigen/CITIGEN_Workshop%20Report.pdf

14 Wajcman, J. (2007) *ICTs and inequality: Net gains for women?*, in Mansell, R., Avgerou, C., Quah, D. and Silverstone, R. (eds.) *Oxford Handbook of Information and Communication Technologies*, Oxford University Press, p. 581-599.

activity, exhorting citizens to exercise their agency. For a few years before the 2011 revolution, a small but influential group of urban, highly educated, middle-class, primarily young Egyptian activists, coordinating and operating through multiple social media platforms, formed an array of loosely affiliated grassroots activist networks throughout the country.¹⁵ New media tools were used to educate citizens, achieve consensus, mobilise citizens to exercise their public will in street protests, achieve non-violence and maintain discipline during protests, and inform the international community about the regime's debasement and suppression of ordinary citizens.¹⁶ In feminist movements across the world, activists have resorted to the internet as the bricks and mortar for learning and building solidarity and for democratising political agendas. In the mid-2000s, in the fight against the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), the feminist movement in Costa Rica put up an unprecedented display of creativity and coordination, using information and communications technologies (ICTs) for spreading its message and building alliances.¹⁷ In India, Brazil and South Africa, local organisations have evolved radical pedagogies using a range of digital technologies to enable women from marginalised social groups to develop collective identities and assert their claims *vis-à-vis* local public institutions.¹⁸

It seems like the possibility for community building was never so good for the women's empowerment project. But while it is true that online platforms galvanise community building, the fact that Web 2.0/3.0 is almost completely a "commodified space"¹⁹ presents a political structure for collaboration that is embedded within the market. This compromises the "publics" that emerge within cyberspace, curtailing severely their control over the platforms they build. Their destiny in social media spaces online is precarious, subject as it is to moral policing by state and non-state actors, arbitrary private regulation by corporates (many times in re-

sponse to diktats from the state) and even blatant misogyny.²⁰

The pluralism generated by network politics has caused a shift from interest-based politics toward a more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence.²¹ Whether and how "political" groups and communities will emerge as coherent social movements, while remaining decentralised bottom-up institutions, is an open question. Decentralisation is also not meaningful unless it can promote a shared vision of democracy. A role for feminist leadership in balancing these two considerations becomes critical, but the autonomous nature of communities forged online may defy centralised value-based organising. While it is unclear how feminist movements can combine flexibility for horizontalism with structures for coherence, traditional organisations such as right-wing religious groups have been effectively harnessing the propensities of digital spaces for centralising and consolidating their power.

From voice to representation: Can the politics of presence become the power to negotiate?

Direct representation, enabled through online media, offers many of the same benefits as direct democracy, but fewer of the burdens, allowing "citizens the prospect of representative closeness, mutuality, coherence, and empathy without expecting them to become full-time participating citizens."²² Online digital media – as we have discussed earlier – may not really revive the public sphere. Nevertheless, they do inject a healthy dose of plurality to a maturing model of representative democracy.²³ For resource-poor groups, like women's rights organisations, online political channels bring spaces hitherto absent, for engagement with traditional policy settings.²⁴

15 Ishani, M. (2011) *The Hopeful Network*, *Foreign Policy*, 7 February. www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/02/07/the_hopeful_network

16 Khamis, S, Paul B. G. and Vaughn, K. (2012) *Beyond Egypt's "Facebook Revolution" and Syria's "YouTube Uprising": Comparing Political Contexts, Actors and Communication Strategies*. www.arabmediasociety.com/articles/downloads/20120407120519_khamis_gold_vaughn.pdf

17 Salas, M. (2010) Internet, Power and Politics: Gender and ICTs in the movement against CAFTA, *The Journal of Community Informatics*, 6(1). ci-journal.net/index.php/ciej/article/view/530/468

18 www.gender-is-citizenship.net/women-and-governance/node/3

19 Fuchs, C. (2012) Some Reflections on Manuel Castells' Book *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*, *Triple C*, 10(2), p. 775-797. www.triple-c.at/index.php/tripleC/article/view/459/433

20 As in the case of the Pink Chaddi campaign (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pink_Chaddi_Campaign). Shortly after the campaign took off, the campaign's Facebook group began to be attacked by trolls and was eventually broken into. Attackers renamed the group and included racist slurs and death threats in its description. The attacks continued despite appeals to Facebook's support department for help, and eventually Facebook disabled the account of the group's administrator and access to the group.

21 Bimber, B. (1998) The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism, *Polity*, 31(1), p. 133-160. www.jstor.org/stable/3235370

22 Coleman, S. (2005) The Lonely Citizen: Indirect Representation in an Age of Networks, *Political Communication*, 22(2), p. 197-214.

23 Papacharissi, Z. (2012) The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Beyond, in Chadwick, A. and Howard, P. (eds.) *Handbook of Internet Politics*. www.ciberdemocracia.net/victorsampedro/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Papacharissi-The-Virtual-Sphere-Revisited-Handbook.pdf

24 Breindl, Y. (2012) The Dynamics of Participation and Organisation in European Digital Rights Campaigning, *JeDEM*, 4(1), p. 24-44.

While it is less clear how far online organising can push states toward drastic political change and greater democratisation, especially in states where offline restrictions to civic and political organisation are severe, in an interconnected world, international pressure does seem to count. In an unprecedented case, the appeals court in Vietnam overturned the sentence of a female activist recently. Young dissidents have been using the internet, blogging and fighting for a multi-party democracy in the country, where the Communist state has had complete monopoly over information traditionally.

The rise of the internet has quite clearly enabled powerful organising around international law – making states reckon with global standards for human rights. Organisations mobilising migrant women domestic workers in cities of Asia have used mobile connectivity to reach migrant women domestic workers of different nationalities, bringing them out of their isolation in the “receiving countries”, and enabling them to become political collectivities and exercise their rights to assembly and association. Through the communities they forge, women’s movements pry apart the seam between territory and citizenship, showing how network globality can work in favour of greater democratisation.

But the pathways to representation and democratisation in the digital age are not self-evident. They obtain in very contingent ways where neither the role of traditional power structures nor of the need for leadership can be undermined.

As states become increasingly integrated into the global structures and processes of the network age, and indeed, also use digital technologies to shape socio-cultural discourse within national boundaries, managing public sentiment through digital means has become an essential part of state-craft. Social media tools may be used to encourage “citizen” voice, but such a “right to vent” may just be an escape valve to deflect active resistance against state totalitarianism.

The space for women’s rights organisations to bring gender-based debates into the public sphere may be expanding. But the drift of political change seems to suggest a great malleability of post-welfare state neoliberalism²⁵ – despite gains for women’s rights, we see little change to the structural aspects of exclusion. The recent anti-corruption campaign in India reflects the rise of a protesting middle class wielding new technologies. While furthering a discourse around new social rights, the movement has evaded completely questions of exclusion. Many

Dalit, feminist, queer and rural groups have pointed out how the movement against corruption has been essentially urban and flattened out older forms of political protests and battles in the country.²⁶

In fact, negotiation at the formal political levels and intervention in policy spaces has always entailed technical and political expertise. In digital environments, it also necessitates technological access and skills. As a result, and contrary to claims of inclusiveness and openness, internet-based campaigning is in fact dominated by a small group of highly specialised movement entrepreneurs.²⁷ Movements online often have no recognised representation. Their diffuse character makes it difficult for them to develop a coherent set of norms or even demands, or achieve significant gains that go beyond an agenda of negation. Saying “no” to a specific event or framing is easier than elaborating and negotiating an agenda of justice. The latter needs organised institutional leadership, often not easy to identify in online movements. In his book, *Revolution 2.0*, Wael Ghonim recounts how Mubarak’s top officials tried to negotiate an end to the demonstrations with him. He could only chuckle as he had no such power.²⁸

The hope for a new politics of representation is certainly latent in the power of the internet. With new actors and new constellations, network politics subverts old political equations. The use of social media in the Arab uprising was able to alter the very structuring of the meta-narrative about politics.²⁹ But to the extent that informational and communicative power is but one resource, albeit potentially game-changing, shifting democracy in favour of gender justice in network age politics will remain a wider social-institutional struggle. It will manifest a complexity not possible to contain within a formula of colinear attributions.

Obtaining participatory citizenship for women in the emerging public sphere: What is the feminist agenda?

For a majority of the world’s women, citizenship would imply the potential to re-politicise development, to examine unequal relations of power, to promote participation, inclusion, democratic process and citizen agency, and to increase accountability of governments

25 Ong, A. (2006) *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, Duke University Press.

26 Shah, N. (2012) Resisting Revolutions: Questioning the Radical Potential of Citizen Action, *Development*, 55(2), p. 173-180. cis-india.org/digital-natives/resisting-revolutions/resisting-revolutions.pdf

27 Breindl (2012) Op. cit.

28 Tufekci, Z. (2013) Networked Politics from Tahrir to Taksim: Is there a Social Media-fueled Protest Style? dmlcentral.net/blog/zeynep-tufekci/networked-politics-tahrir-taksim-there-social-media-fueled-protest-style

29 Ibid.

to citizens.³⁰ The situated experiences of women and marginalised genders as they engage with digital technologies in advancing their struggle become valuable sites for envisioning micro-power and strategising for transformative change. In this way, feminist technology practice presents a useful crucible for the study of what participatory citizenship – as an aspiration and a normative project – would look like in contemporary society. The CITIGEN-Asia programme,³¹ for instance, throws up interesting insights for theorising citizenship in the network age; to imagine citizenship as practised solidarities, as dislocated from notions of state authority, as civic-republican practice. Online space, the programme found, allows women, and especially those who lead non-normative lives, to imagine the world differently, going beyond the everyday and finding creative ways of self-representation and publicity.

Citizenship also defines relationships between society, government and individuals: classifying who belongs to the “public” and what obligations and rights membership in that “public” confers.³² The unbounded fluidity of membership in digital space enables us to breach geographic boundaries, connecting to a global public. Yet, this global space does not guarantee equal participation – it is a privatised pseudo public, controlled by powerful countries and corporations.

Through digitally mediated association, women’s collectives have shown us that the enactment of citizenship impels translocal practices of contestation and claims making in which the internet is a critical resource and site. But the publicness of the internet is a precondition for democratising membership in this space. The struggle to shape the norms and ethics of the global internet – influencing the macro conditions for participatory citizenship – is therefore integral to the struggle for gender justice.

Nation states continue to matter. In a neoliberal economic paradigm, they deploy techno-regimes in the name of efficiency and national security, aggrandising power, eroding the rights of the marginalised and reconstructing meanings of citizenship. For a majority of the marginalised, especially women, the actualisation of citizenship is enmeshed in the geographic local, mediated not only by the state but also by family and kinship structures. Access to digital artefacts and to participation in digitally mediated spaces of local governance and democracy are vital preconditions for

activists, women’s NGOs and groups to come together, find a voice, negotiate with community structures and local government, and build the new capabilities required for traversing a more fuzzy public sphere that straddles offline and online space.

The mobile revolution did make access to digital technology more widespread, also bringing to feminist organising new possibilities. Yet, connectivity in the sense of broadband internet access is still a distant reality in most developing countries, especially for a majority of women. The information flows and horizontal ties of the network age require alternatives to informational consumerism – public infrastructural approaches to catalysing and creating civic and cultural capital for women in the form of public access centres, local media processes, community information systems, etc. These capabilities require a positive rights approach to digital technologies, something that the security versus privacy debate in internet circles clouds out.

The autonomous contagion in communication that mobiles can set off cannot be conflated with public sphere participation. Neither can social protest be seen as the universe of political activity. Participatory citizenship in network society is wider and deeper. It derives from a conception of politics as an unceasing practice, through which a new political subject appears in a performative way. It concerns the appropriation of digital space for voicing disenchantments and dreams and seeking discursive equality in very particular everyday contexts of survival and identity struggles – as individuals and collectivities. It proposes network society membership as the capability to belong in democratic process, not as an “isolated public”,³³ but as legitimate participants using and transforming the digital in their own unique ways. As an ethical framework, it calls for a re-politicisation of informational and communicative realms; casting the digital as intrinsic to the future of democracy. Digitally mediated change is not only about those dramatic twists in history; it is equally about women running their own telecentres – collecting their village data to document exclusions from entitlements under government programmes, using this data to dialogue with local public authorities, spreading awareness through video screenings about claims making, and getting together to ideate for and listen with a sense of togetherness and joy to their community radio programmes. ■

30 Cornwall, A. and Nyamu Musembi, C. (2005) Why Rights, Why Now? Reflections on the Rise of Rights in International Discourse, in Pettit, J. and Wheeler, J. (eds.) *Developing Rights?*, IDS Bulletin 36:1.

31 www.gender-is-citizenship.net/citigen

32 Dahrendorf, R. (1996) Citizenship and Social Class, in Bulmer, M. and Rees, A. M. (eds.) *Citizenship Today: The Contemporary Relevance of TH Marshall*, Routledge, London, p. 25-48.

33 Habermas (2006) Op. cit.