

Technology & Feminist Inflections on Media

What has changed about the media with the popularisation of information and communications technology (ICTs)?

I remember in early 2000, there was great reluctance to acknowledge much change by women's rights organisations. Instead, ICTs were reiterated as just another tool towards ending gender discrimination, and caution is issued against over-emphasis on 'new' ICTs as the primary viable solution. The resistance is valid, since ICTs had an access cost – in terms of money, equipment, skills, language and the accompanying cultures of privilege. In many ways, this temperance is important to provide an imagination of 'digital-futures' that is materially rooted in the realities of those at multiple margins. Instead of pursuing hype, appropriate application and solutions are advocated.

Whichever way approached, there are disparities between people located at different points of social and associated power relations. This is the starting point and basic premise upon which any discussions about the impact and transformative potential of ICTs has to begin from.

At the same time, the developments of ICTs and its appropriation by mass numbers of users deserve a pause for closer interrogation. In 1988, when more than 3000 people were killed during the last major Burma uprising, it was days before any news from the country emerged. In contrast, within hours of the current mass movement, information and images are transmitted and diffused across the internet to Burmese people and foreign news agencies around the world¹. Likewise, the Revolutionary Women's Association of Afghanistan used ICTs to great impact when they hid video cameras under

¹“Technology gives world rare view of Myanmar's rage”, 26 September 2007, *The Star Online*
<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2007/9/27/worldupdates/2007-09-26t173317z_01_nootr_rtrmdnc_0_india-297263-2&sec=worldupdates>

their burkhas to document and disseminate systematic abuse of women in a country where information outflow is strictly regulated².

There are evidently transgressive potentials with new ICTs. Exactly what, to whom, where, how and to what impact is something that women's rights advocates and feminist activists need to unravel.

The larger women's movement still tend to relate to ICTs as de-politicised tools – useful to amplify advocacy issues to an audience larger than what is possible with limited resources. Technical needs are usually outsourced, and investment to build capacity – both practically and politically – is still deprioritised as a whole compared to more established women's rights agendas.

Even though feminists and women's rights activists have long recognised the media as an important site of power, particularly in the construction or reinforcement of gender roles, there is discernable lack of engagement with the ICTs at the same level of commitment and energy. The most recent Global Media Monitoring Project in 2005³ analysed content and representation of women in radio, newspaper and television, omitting the story of gender construction through mass information dissemination platforms like weblogs⁴ and video sharing platforms.

Online Publishing – Re-territorialisation of the Media?

The mass popularisation of information and communications technology (ICTs) has troubled the way we understand and relate to media as a concept and institution, and its role in information and knowledge production, ownership, valuation and diffusion.

Although there has been an increase in the concentration of mass media ownership, there has also been an increase in participation by civil society actors as active contributors to the range of information and news available enabled by ICTs.

² Jac sm Kee (2005), Cultivating Violence Through Technology? Exploring the Connections between Internet Communication Technologies (ICT) and Violence Against Women (VAW), <<http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=r90501-e91306-1>>

³ Who Makes The News, <<http://www.whomakesthenews.org/>>

⁴ Blog, in wikipedia, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weblog>>

Since the introduction of free blog hosting services in the late 1990s, there are currently more than 100 million blogs in multiple languages⁵, covering a staggering range of subjects by an equally diverse terrain of narrators. Immensely popular video and photo sharing platforms such as YouTube⁶ and Flickr⁷, combined with the increasingly normative ownership of camera phones, create unruly composites of visual representations of culture, politics and society. Alternative and community based media like Indymedia⁸ and Isis-WICCE⁹ have utilised ICTs creatively and energetically to collectively generate, own, disseminate and render visible previously marginalised accounts of current history and reality.

Behind the development of online publishing technologies that support many of these platforms is a shift in approach¹⁰. The user is imagined and understood to be an active and participating subject, transforming the value and purpose of technology through interaction and use. Accompanied with political engagement by civil society actors on intellectual property rights, and creations of applicable counter-copyright licenses such as GNU General Public Licence¹¹ for software and Free Art License¹² for creative outputs, the intent can become tangible.

Importantly, community building and networking feature as important facets in their configuration and evolution. Apart from enabling the prioritisation of local and relevant content, individuals gain power as they connect with each other, and exchange knowledge, information, resources, experiences and perspectives. The personal voice becomes public, and each singular only gains significance by being embedded in a

⁵ “Estimated 100 million blogs worldwide in early 2006”, 11 Jan 2007, *SPU News*, <<http://www.itu.int/osg/spu/newslog/Estimated+100+Million+Blogs+Worldwide+In+Early+2006.aspx>>

⁶ YouTube, <<http://www.youtube.com/>>

⁷ Flickr, <<http://www.flickr.com/>>

⁸ Independent Media Centre, <<http://www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml>>

⁹ Isis Women’s International Cross Cultural Exchange, <<http://www.isis.or.ug/>>

¹⁰ Sometimes clustered as web 2.0 applications and platforms, they share some key development principles, including using the web as platforms as opposed to software that needs to be installed, data being the driving force, architectures of participation that enables networking, modular systems that draw from independent and diverse developers, content sharing and ease of adoption by users among others.

¹¹ GNU GPL Licence, <<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/gpl.html>>

¹² Artlibre Free Arts Licence, <<http://artlibre.org/licence/lalgb.html>>

complex and divergent mass. In other words, a familiar feminist conceptualisation of power: where power is infinite and limitless, regenerative through use and sharing.

The accessibility and massive appropriation by internet users on many of these applications and platforms effectively disrupt the concentration of power by mass media institutions by creating a ‘crisis of abundance’. The aggregated avalanche of multiple discourses on multiple issues and the employment of sometimes personal yet at the same time, socially reverberating metaphors and meanings make it difficult to retain monopoly of ownership over what constitutes valid information, and who constitutes valid authorship.

We are no longer passive consumers of truth with limited points for information and perspectives. Instead, armed with some level of access to ICTs and literacy, we can become user, editor, evaluator, creator, owner and disseminator of knowledge, rendering the meaning and distances between these concepts a little more slippery.

But the start of any conversation about the revolutionary potential in ICTs must first acknowledge and deal with existing unequal power relations. Who has access to and control of ICTs and its developments will determine what kinds of truths are circulated. Many groups, no matter how earnest the objective, grapple with the difficulty of creating a truly open, non-hierarchical, collaborative and participatory space. Women in Free/Libre and Open Source Software communities have responded to entrenched sexism by creating their own lists and networks¹³, while female IndyMedia members set out to document and study the problematics of gender prejudice within the network to come up with effective solutions¹⁴.

Regulating Reality in a Digital Space

There is a funny paradox about reality that is constructed in digital spaces. It is at the same time imaginary and tangible.

¹³ For example, LinuxChix groups have been autonomously formed in various countries as a response to the masculinist culture in online F/LOSS technical spaces.

¹⁴ See for example, “Leftist Techies and Patriarchy”, <<http://de.indymedia.org/2002/01/13720.shtml>>

Technology mediated communication occurs through re-presentations of what is perceived and experienced in the physical world. In other words, visuals, text and audio stand in as signifiers of reality. The capacity for ICTs to enable large volumes of information exchange is facilitated through data compression. Translated to practicality, containers of communication are stripped to their most basic form of intelligibility. Surrounding them are gray spaces that necessarily calls for active interpretation. As such, communicating and exchanging information via a technological medium compels an assumption of active agency – to decode, connote, signify, interpret, actualise, thicken and transform.

At the same time, digital spaces are materially connected to the person tapping on the keyboard. Subjectivities and power relations are reified, performed and destabilised through encounters in this space, with very real consequence in the physical world. This is clearly evident when looking at the phenomenon of violence against women in and through ICTs.

For example, in situations of online harassment and cyberstalking, ICTs have become sites and tools for tracking, monitoring, surveillance and repeated harassment a person. Often, targets of harassment are women, and the paradigm of abuse rests on heteronormative accounts of female sexuality. In March this year, a prominent blogger at the US received threats of death and sexual violence at various online spaces. She is a relatively privileged subject in the field of ICTs, with strong networks of considerable influence – sufficient to initiate an ad-hoc global online campaign amongst bloggers, marking March 30 as Stop Cyber Bullying Day¹⁵.

This event reverberated strongly with many online users and content producers, many having faced similar encounters with internet trolls and harassers. The fear that results from these targeted harassments can impact significantly upon women’s sense of safety

¹⁵ “Participate in Stop Cyberbullying Day this”, Andy Carvin’s Waste of Bandwidth, 27 March 07, <http://www.andycarvin.com/archives/2007/03/participate_in_stop_cyberbullying_day_th.html>

and ability to confidently access and engage with a particular environment. The blogger in question cancelled her presentations at public events, and removed the blog post that catalysed the temporary visibility of this phenomenon.

Whether or not the threats are actualised, **speech** has become an **act** of violence. When personal information, communication and online activities are extracted without knowledge or consent for the purposes of enacting violence, ownership and control of **data** become critical political sites. Advocates of domestic violence and sexual assault have long contended with the difficulty of effecting laws with the absence of physical marks to evince harm. In a space where embodiment requires a certain amount of active reflection, how then are notions of harm, privacy and violence against women reconfigured?

Concurrently, how can advocacies related to governance of content in ownership, dissemination and production in digital spaces negotiate with advocacies related to violence against women? The domestic realm has shifted from private to public when women's rights groups called for State intervention in the legislative recognition that domestic violence is a crime against the community as a whole. Should control of data also be acceded to the State to ensure that women have adequate redress and protection from new figurations of violence against women? In other words, should personal digital data shift from the private realm to the public, and to what end?

What we have is a push for the expansion of spaces, tools and rights to subvert dominant versions of reality through eclectic, independent and community based media networks, as well as the capacity to self-represent. Gender and other forms of disparity present at all aspects of ICTs mean that this struggle is much more critical for women's rights and feminist advocates. At the same time, there is a need for interventions, mechanisms and processes that can respond to issues of accountability and violence. So where do we go from here?

Take Back The Tech

The first step is to take on ICTs as a deeply political matter, one that is embedded and connected to women’s rights advocacy agendas. To shape and realise a feminist imagination and potential of ICTs towards transformative power relations, we need to claim a material stake in its developments. We have to demand for our right to freely move, create knowledge, self-represent our diversities, communicate, form networks with each other, and be safe from harm in this space.

Recently, Hamadoun Toure, Secretary-General of the International Telecommunication Union stated that secure access to the internet is a basic human right, where governments have an obligation to ensure this as part of citizens’ right to communicate¹⁶. As diachronically exemplified, such rights are framed between the State and the private individual in default. It took women’s movements decades to articulate and assert for an idea of rights that takes into account disparity in gender relations, and a reconceptualisation of the private-public.

Presently, we are confronted with a tremulous reality where the junctures between representations via data and the material realm needs to be untangled and located firmly from women’s multiple standpoints and lived experiences. How we choose to strategise and begin this political journey is really up to us; what work we are already engaged in, and how to craft analytical and practical bridges between our area of knowledge and the different movements struggling within and around us. This paper is only a tentative attempt to negotiate between tensions that are emerging or re-cast into new questions.

For more in-depth examination on the connections between violence against women, sexualities and ICTs, please see:

- Namita Malhotra (2007), “Search history: Examining pornography on the internet”, <<http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=r90501-e95146-1>>

¹⁶ “Internet shutdown is human rights abuse, says UN telecom chief”, Oct 08, 2007, Associated Press <http://telecomasia.net/article.php?type=article&id_article=5953>

- Mavic Cabrera-Balleza (2006), “Content Regulations From Gender and Development Perspectives: Some Thoughts & Suggestions for Next Steps”, <<http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=r90501-e95147-1>>
- Jac sm Kee (2005), “Women's human rights: violence against women, pornography and ICTs”, <<http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=r90501-e91654-1>>
- Kathleen Maltzahn (2005), “Digital Dangers: Information & Communication Technologies and Trafficking in Women”, <<http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=r90501-e91637-1>>
- Jac sm Kee (2005), “Cultivating Violence Through Technology? Exploring the Connections between Internet Communication Technologies (ICT) and Violence Against Women (VAW)”, <<http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=r90501-e91306-1>>