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Harcourt, Wendy

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Wendy Harcourt

Women and Politics on the Internet

Introduction

The central question I would like to raise in this talk is to what extent the Internet is making women's politics in the North and South more effective in terms of personal and collective action. I will draw on the experience of the SID – UNESCO project Women on the Net as described in the book 'Women@Internet: creating new cultures in cyberspace' 1999 (reprint 2000) London: Zed Books.

A history of Women on the Net (WoN)

The project Women on the Net (WoN) was set up in 1997 by the Society for International Development (SID) with UNESCO funding. WoN aimed to do several things. First, to encourage women particularly in the South and in marginal groups in the North (and Central and East Europe) to use the Internet more easily as their space in an effort to 'empower' women to use technology as a political tool. Secondly, to open up and contribute to the new culture that was emerging on the Internet from a gender perspective that is at once local and global. Thirdly, to bring together individual women and men working from different institutional bases (women NGOs, IT (information technology) networks, academe, women movement activists) to explore a transnational women's movement agenda in response to and shaping evolving telecommunication policies. And fourthly, to create a resource (community and support) base which different women's groups could use to assist their analysis, knowledge and skills for navigating the Internet.

The group is made up of individuals (mainly women), many with strong institutional affiliations, who dialogued with one another intensively from 1997-1999 using a listserv as the main mechanism for communication. The group met twice, initially at the SID World Conference in Spain in 1997 and at a second meeting at a Conference on 'Gender and Globalization' in March 1998 at the University of California, Berkeley. There have also been two WoN training workshops held in Kenya and Tanzania, a book Women@internet, two Internet guides for women, a stream of articles in books and journals and provided resource people and material for several UN meetings, higher learning courses and NGO workshops on the topic.

Although WoN members these days meet in a more fragmented way, responding to requests rather than having a very regular or active set of discussions (the listserv has been discontinued) it continues as technical and political agendas are intermixed with personal histories and events.

The WoN dynamic

The dynamic which has evolved through the WoN experience is somewhere between the personal, political and professional. The discussions have been intense over the crossing of academic and activist knowledge terrain, over language and meanings, over concepts of place and identity. The lively discussion brought out new ideas and concepts but most of all it created a dynamic that helped people from close to forty countries to explore how the Internet is a tool for creating a communicative space that can be an empowering mechanism for women.

The WoN experience recording different geopolitical and cultural response and use of the Internet revealed how women are building on their strengths – particularly networking and lobbying for women's rights – through the Internet. The exploration by WoN suggests that political women are creating and managing new knowledge systems deeply conscious of the different realities of women from marginalized communities. These groups of women have been careful not to take up cyberspeak, analytic jargon and assumptions that a wonderful new world will open at the touch of a button. They openly voice doubts about the Internet – the need to overcome a resistance to technology fully aware that screen to screen contact can never replace face to face. The maleness and the elitism of the tools – the exclusivity, the language barriers, the costliness, the Western biases and the divides – run too deep just to be overcome by more information and 'skills.' Nevertheless, they embrace the possibilities to break down personal and public divides, to experiment in a mix of personal, political and professional and to mediate the crossing of boundaries.

Crossing of Boundaries

Perhaps the most obvious and celebrated crossed boundary is the geopolitical one – thousands of kilometers fade in chats across the screen. Access to terminals at all hours in homes or cybercafes, allows messages to reach the Pacific, Asia, Europe, North America, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East instantaneously with the cost of a telephone call. But the continual crossing of the here and now divide brings the need to create a sense of reality and the sense of place starts to creep in – at least to say what the weather is like – to give a sense of humidity of the Zanzibari breeze, the heat of Rome summer, the deep winter snow of Toronto, the buzz of the people around the clatter of the keyboards. The WoN conversations, for example, expressed the need to embed and to root deeply virtual discussions in the political reality being fought every day. There is an attempt to anchor the happenings of the real life community to the virtual global discourse in order for the cyber communication space to have meaning.

Even so the sense of community becomes unsettled – where is that community located? In space – which space? Whose space? As one member of WoN Fatma Alloo raises – where does the Zanzibar community locate itself as people log in throughout the world to discuss *kanga* patterns and learn home news. And as other members: Arturo Escobar and Kekula Bray-Crawford suggest, where is the fight for indigenous

rights happening – in jungles or on the cyber battle fields – or both – and what does this mean? And for those who do not have a fixed physical location like Laura Agustin and Siliva Austerlic – and potentially all migrant women forced to move from their home to look for work – can virtual communities exist to provide services, information, education and to build another kind of knowledge base?

Other boundaries being crossed continually in the group are those of intellectual and activist, of feminist and women centred work. Labels become fluid as people find the words to understand each other divorced from concrete ways of judging – there is no actual class room, no trade union hall, no ancestral ground to defend, no government office to lobby. These remain virtual points of reference that are imagined not actually embraced and shared. Those who would not meet with professors or high level policy makers find themselves in correspondence with them through e-mail. Papers that would never have reached an African NGO in rural Senegal are translated and sent in a few days of delivery at a scientific or intergovernmental event. Women who will never meet exchange on a daily basis their worries about the men and children in their lives. Women engrossed in their own battles for survival suddenly find groups living in other countries share the same concerns and exchange valuable strategic knowledge. Academics and activists engage in a vigorous debate that each will use in different contexts enriched by what they have exchanged.

Then we see the crossing of the personal and professional boundaries. For those able to afford and access easily in terms of time (even if squeezed between family needs) and equipment, the Internet offers a sense of being able to share your life more easily. People provide the personal in an e-mail communication – something that perhaps would never be placed in a fax or letter. There is something wonderful about this – news of a baby born to a never met transnational group of cyber friends, breast feeding problems discussed among women isolated in rural settings, urgent messages sent by refugee Afghan women throughout the globe. But there are also the dangers of never ending conversations running into other issues, messages too quickly sent, tempers flaring, unwisely shared fears and hopes.

Less vitally but still worth noting, is the boundary of good or bad writing (beyond the issue of English as the dominating language or cyberspeak technical jargon). E-mail is producing the tendency to produce quick and ungrammatical messages sent without rereading – telegraphic in brevity and almost in code, listserv messages left unread by some. This too changes the face of communication.

In mediating these boundaries, at least within the WoN, there is an attempt to delineate the borders and the exciting possibilities in crossing them as women open up new political spaces. Nevertheless it seems a tiny area women are inhabiting, controlled and designed usually by others. The question remains: are we truly connected or just scratching at the surface of a fast changing world that is evolving without our design or needs in mind? Hence the attempts by some members of WoN for example Sophia Huyer and Nidhi Tandon to venture into the world of decision-making and policy

agenda setting on telecommunications and other areas affecting access and use of the Net and Web. In this some brave women are charting the ground into which women are yet to venture as a critical mass. For now, these seem power battles which women are not well equipped to fight. The world of Microsoft, high finance and telecommunications business are not the spaces in which women or those pushing for an alternative agenda easily find a voice.

A sense of identity

Although WoN never found its true institutional identity members continue to interact because of their interest in political activism. For them using the Internet as a global tool for local political needs continues to be an exciting and important prospect. To go a little further, perhaps what was of most interest was the relationship between the local and the global or 'global delocalization.' The experience of WoN suggests women and men activists are seeking not to be trapped in the excitement and hype around the cyberworld but are trying to map out virtual reality as closely as possible to their place-based politics. And in this resides some sort of identity in cyberculture.

Based in NGOs, resource centres, academic institutes, UN agencies and homes in rural and urban Europe, Asia, the Pacific, the Middle East, North America, Latin America and Africa and as intellectual and visionary migrants on the move, WoN provides an eclectic mix who are involved in women's issues in different ways – as migrant and indigenous rights activists, policy lobbyists, women in development researchers, journalists, technical communication experts, ecologists, anthropologists and policy makers. All brought together because from their local position – as they try to fight for change, build their political analysis and skills, sort through the maze of information, the types of knowledge required and the potential allies – they have recognized the power of the Internet. The Internet has become an increasingly accessible learning space, a place to network, and to gain power and strength. They introduce their local needs into the global space of the Internet in order to help them with their local battles but also to understand the process and transform cyberspace so that it reflects theirs and other women's needs in the creation of a 'glocality.' The notion of place is inherent in these women's lives and struggles.

WoN and the Politics of Place

WoN defines the meaning of place and gender in relation to cyberculture on several levels. Due to the gender bias of social and cultural processes, women's bodies are their first environment or place. It is the female body in all cultures that defines women as the other, as the reproductive being, the mother, as the sexually desired. It is the body through which women are primarily to mediate all gendered interactions including those from which they defend and evolve their identity. The cyborg woman has evolved an identity which on the one hand breaks this notion of biological body by extending communication of self through the sexless machine of the computer and modem. And on the other hand, cyberculture offers the possibility to celebrate and

share the feminine space with other women from many diverse situations, giving credibility to women's bodily experience through an oral medium which encourages a more open personal discourse – if the safe space speaks about can be nurtured. It also, in its darkest interface allows for manipulation and misuse of women's bodies – another area for women to fight against in their struggle against bodily violence.

A second level is the domestic space of the home which for many women still defines their primary social and cultural identity and lived domain. The home and immediate community are the safe places for women to express themselves, and it is here, potentially, that the possibilities of the terminals in the home, the personal and political exchanges this potentially facilitates, could change women's political lives. Women, calling on long traditions of flexibility between reproductive and productive work, could weave new political spaces while maintaining their reproductive work space. Already Northern women are increasingly working from home raising on the one side the problems of exploitative work conditions but on the other the potential of new feminine spaces from which to launch plans for change.

The third place is that outside the home – the political and social public place – the male dominated domain to which some women still have no access, and where many women find themselves silenced and few women rule. The women's movement for many years now has been creating diverse avenues for entry into that space, even if marginal to the pulse of political power. The cyberculture now being created in this public domain is a new type of political space which has power and impact in the public domain. Its current accessibility for women suggests a possible opening that could promote women's public political battles and link these three different levels of place: the body, the home, and political and social public space. The critical point is that women have to be ensuring that they are part of the design and crafting of the cyberculture in order to produce new types of gendered communication spaces throughout the Internet. They need to craft a process where their voices are heard in ways that can mediate through and change radically the public political domain.

The vision of WoN is to use the potentially globally accessible tool of the Internet to open out the corridors of power and create a new politics emanating from place. Such a place based strategy is being mapped out and defined by women based on their sense of the feminine, their everyday life realities, their current questionings of hierarchies, resistance to male domination and confidence in their own creativity.

What the Internet offers to women's politics

From my experience, Internet is allowing some creative experiments for women's empowerment, individually and collectively. If we unpack that statement a bit more, ICTS allow political women (feminists of varying shades) around the world access to diverse knowledge, a speed of communication, new ways of networking and getting to know one another that has pushed us into new leagues in terms of a powerful discourse. We are still wondering where all the interconnectivity could lead us. What

barriers we are changing or creating and at what we cannot tackle economically and politically because feminists are just not there where the power decisions over technology are being made and therefore with whom and what we are colluding. Nevertheless there is the sense in which this is a medium that can give women tremendous scope to go far beyond traditional cultural experiences, allows for new types of gender relations and new types of development. Of course we have to use the barbarian English mostly and there are hugely varying degrees of access, but once on there is no bureaucratic red tape, and a great deal of knowledge and groups to tap. We are still trying to work out what works and what doesn't, what type of culture we are creating and what type of new politics, even new languages, new structures of feeling (to take up Raymond Williams' definition of culture) we are evolving. I don't want to celebrate all the hype that is around, but from my experience women's groups are finding that the Internet does provide a support and puts political women in touch with knowledge networks, and women and men they would not otherwise meet, on issues that a few years ago would not have been discussed or acted upon beyond their own immediate small groups.

Arab women are setting up safe cyberspaces where they can converse across geopolitical divides in Arabic about religion, rights, body politics – subjects they would not talk about in public. NGOs in Rajasthan and Punjab calling for and getting needed international support when the repressive regime were throwing members into jail. Central Eastern European Sex workers holding chat rooms.

Despite the undoubted problems and concerns around access and control, women are adapting the medium and making it a powerful tool for women's place based politics. It is stretching out experiences and moving forward the political terrain for gendered social change.

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