

## **World Summit on the Information Society Gender Caucus (WSIS-GC): Debates and Dialogues, WSIS, 8-13 December 2003, Geneva**

Roundtable focusing on **Academic Research and North-South Collaboration**  
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Abstract

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### **ICT and its non-neutrality - Borders between academic research and techno-politics provoked**

#### *Feminist ICT Research and Transformation Goals*

Feminist technoscience with emphasis on ICT (information and communication technology) is certainly motivated by transformation goals. The reasons for transformation are not only seen in the ongoing difficulties of achieving appropriate ICT system solutions especially in low income countries, but in the way we phase contemporary processes of knowledge and technology development (ref. Gibbons, Novotny). The prerequisites for the latter are still to be met, and urge for transformation not the least within academy and technical faculties (ref. Etzkowic et al. el. Novotny?). Feminist technoscience within technical faculties is a driving force for the transformation processes in demand (ref. Trojer HSV, Björkman).

#### *Contemporary processes of knowledge and technology development / Distributed systems*

Within international feminist research closely linked to dominant areas of technology, i.e. information technology, biotechnology and material engineering, there exists a deeply rooted understanding of knowledge and technology production as processes which occur in distributed systems. In other words, knowledge creation today takes place on the boundaries between universities, private sector, public sector and the political spheres. Hence the role of the university comes into sharp focus and its (dis)ability of transformation. These processes are no less prominent in research and development carried out at Blekinge Institute of Technology (BTH). The concept 'technoscience' is connected to this view of knowledge and technology production. The way in which technoscience is currently defined by such leading researchers as Donna Haraway has led us at Technoscience Studies, BTH, to focus on issues related to boundaries and transgressing boundaries between science, technology, politics and society and between human beings and non-human beings as well as hybridisation processes between people and machines (cyborg theories).

#### *New technology travel on old social relations*

Developing appropriate and relevant technology (system) solutions is a complex and context-dependant issue and worked up in many technology fields (ref. Rydhagen). As an illustration we face in the field of wireless telecommunication an almost technical revolution experienced in a low income country like Tanzania by the implementation and use of mobile phones with prepay function. Such a technology for direct communication between people seems to be

appreciated as appropriate, relevant and affordable by a larger group of people than the income strong elite. The technology of cellular phones with prepay function has trickled out to more income weak masses. In its turn this implies a further elaboration of situated use and socio-technical development. A 55 year old Tanzanian woman living in the poorer surroundings of Dar es Salaam said<sup>1</sup> she and her family could not afford a fixed line telephone. But having a second hand cellular phone for prepay rechargement makes it possible for her to develop her businesses, necessary besides her scarcely paid teacher job as well as to communicate in different ways for the safety of her children, grandchildren and extended family members. Two motivations for this technology are brought out. The possibility to reach the very person you need to reach is higher with a mobile phone, especially in a country where the mobile phone connections are three times the fixed line connections. The woman in question also emphasized the possibility of self control by the prepay function instead of a “salted” bill for the fixed line telephone use. The latter is a sign of very low trust in public (and private) institutions in Tanzania – an understandable attitude under earlier and present circumstances.

### *Provoking borders*

We can realize ICT as one of the technological science fields most evidently provoking the borders between academic research and politics/society. We can experience how the ‘negotiations’ about the character of academic research takes place in society.

Postcolonial ICT is certainly provoking the dominating ICT discourse characterized by neutrality and universality. When ICT development issues are situated in the context of knowledge- and technology co-development between low and high income countries, the need for understandings and praxis of postcolonial ICT emerge and the challenges for the academy and its technical faculties enhance. Relevance seems to the multiple stemmed, core concept and the change of position from merely transfer to co-development is strongly in demand.

The situation in developing countries addresses the emerging implosion of postcolonial situations and ICT development. The theories of post-colonial identities and situations are research areas of great importance and volume. I want to address some threads of thoughts in order to come closer to understand the process of combining post-colonialism and ICT.

Gabriella Hecht and coeditors in the journal of *Social Science Studies* special issue on Postcolonial Technoscience (nr. 5-6, 2002) provide examples of how postcolonial theory is, after all, related and deeply integrated with technoscience. They identify the theme thus: ”A postcolonial perspective suggests fresh ways to study the changing political economies of capitalism and science, the mutual reorganization of the global and the local, the increasing transnational traffic of people, practices, technologies, and contemporary contests over ‘intellectual property’. The term ‘postcolonial’ thus refers both to new configurations of technoscience and to the critical modes of analysis that identify them” (Warewick Anderson, 2002: 643). The development of postcolonial technoscience includes the study of how technologies travel and how ideas about difference act on technoscientific practice. The implosion of the two; postcolonialism and technoscience will not only show how Western technologies travel outside the West. It will also destabilise Western technoscience at home (op.cit. 646).”

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<sup>1</sup> in an interview September 2003.

### *Lets bring up some thoughts about Postcolonial ICT and Identity*

We can ask ourselves who is actually postcolonial. Gabrielle Hecht (2003) elaborates in her paper “Globalization meets Frankenstein? Reflections on Terrorism, Nuclearity and Global Technopolitical Discourse” on “if we are indeed in a ‘post-’ or a ‘post-post-’ Cold War world, then it’s the same kind of ‘post-ness’ that we find in the ‘post-colonial’. The infrastructures and discourses of Cold War technopolitics continue to shape the parameters of global and local action, just as the infrastructures and discourses of colonialism do. We ignore those roots – and the contradictions they produce – at our peril (vår egen risk, vårt eget ansvar).” (Hecht, 2001, p. 7)

The emancipation of the individual is also not a neutral claim, but rests on Western values of individualism. The use of the Internet to create and inhabit new identities lies quite far from what ICTs are planned to be used for in Third World contexts. The fear of nation-states to loose control over what citizens read and hear can be regarded as a conservative, undemocratic activity (e.g. Melinda Robins and Robert Hilliard, 2002:164/40), but it also contains elements of protection of cultural traits and national virtues, especially in the fragile postcolonial states that have to mobilise around nations geographically determined by the former colonisers. As long as the need/desire for national security persists, some kind of nation-state will need to be maintained. And the identity of the nation-states will also be influenced by the new ICTs.

In a study of 29 African governmental Web sites, this particular issue is raised (Elfriede Fürsich and Melinda Robins, 2002). What they found in their study was that the Web sites were directed towards foreign investors and tourists, rather than its citizens. This might reflect the small share of citizens who have access to the Internet in most African countries. The self-image of the nations and their citizens that was presented was very much in line with Western colonial image of exotic Others. The Web sites generally aims to present the countries as nations of harmony and aspirations towards modernisation and capitalist progress, with an additional flavour of traditional cultural heritage. While the sites seem to aim at emphasising the nation-state as a unity (in reaction to internal differences and in line with the colonial mapping of Africa), the different nations have set out to compete with each other for foreign investment, rather than creating a potential for a pan-African identity. In addition, many of the Web sites were produced by commercial companies in the West, and the technological logics and aesthetics “reinforce the dependence of these texts on Western knowledge production” (p. 190).

The images that reveal themselves on the Internet and Web sites are important, as the Internet is an important arena of negotiation of the “global identity crisis” that globalisation has brought with it (Fürsich and Robins, 2002: p. 204).

With reference to the local and contextual understanding of the world, this story also reminds us of the nature of the Internet. It is not just a global blanket spread over us all, but a myriad of localities that are no longer entirely locally geographical. Still, they are local, which is especially understood when the language is not English, but obviously, English, too, is local. The content of each web page is not of universal interest, but of interest to a specific group of people.

### *Global Technopolitical Discourses*

Insights into the context dependence of technical applications is increasingly recognised in theory and in policy, but it is still often overlooked in practical applications. The reason is a

lack of recognition that the actual technology is not a neutral device that allows the user to choose his or her own way of using it according to the local understandings. The actual difference in local understanding and preconditions is also often underestimated. The colonial time has indeed spread European ways of doing things, but these ways have also been adjusted to the local context. In Lucy Suchman's (2002) account, the perspective from locations outside the West magnifies the situatedness and the fluidity of technologies, although these are actually within the western context as well.

Paraphrasing Donna Haraway, Lucy Suchman (2002) argues that the *design from nowhere* is a result of the idea that technical systems could be constructed with a minimal cultural connection "as commodities that can be stabilized and cut loose from the sites of their production long enough to be exported en masse to the sites of their use" (p. 140). Suchman (2002) calls this phenomenon "the fallacy of the empty vessel" or "mistaking one's own ignorance of what exists elsewhere – knowledges, information systems, practices – for their absence" (p. 140).

The position of "having never as much" (Redfield, 2002:810) will for a long time be the position from which people in the Third World will receive ICTs. Redfield among others has showed what reactions and tensions this position may create. Are ICTs yet another way of imposing control, of deciding what is important to know and to have, of showing who is in charge of globalisation? Are ICTs yet another tool "to make the poor dream the same dreams as the rich" (Martín-Barbero 1993:165)?

#### *Trying transformations within Technical Faculties*

Academic ICT and its applications in society and everyday life force our attention towards the relation between dominating actors, of which the university is one. It stresses not only the development of innovation systems but a relevant knowledge about its prerequisites resulting in transformation challenges for the traditional universities. One model explored for these processes has been the triple helix model stating that the three institutional spheres university, industry and Government are increasingly working together.

In order to be able to understand and learn about distributed knowledge and technology production you have to be situated in a very concrete, day to day practice as well as achieve broad contextual knowledges. My own experience comes from being one of the actor building a new university campus as well as an innovation node, where the university, the local political system and the private sector cooperate. The fields of competence are media technology and intelligent transport systems and logistics and we represent the university actor. Why then is feminist ICT research a driving force in these processes? To be very straight forward the answer is to be found in the identified potentials of feminist ICT research for the following, which meet some of the prerequisites for the discussed cooperation, namely the potentials to:

- expand the knowledge frames and practices for technology development in increasingly complex realities.
- open out preferential rights of interpretation in selections of standards, which always are reality producing activities.
- indicate alternative directions of ICT applications.
- contribute with competences for situating knowledge and for context dependence concerning resource allocation from high income to low income countries.

- create explicit cultures within technology related institutions at the universities (phase out "the culture of no culture") and thereby make clear that no research positions are innocent.
- develop epistemological infrastructures relevant for a society heavily dependent on research and technology
- establish new arenas (agoras) for developing understandings of relations between research and politics.
- constitute a catalyst in the negotiations between science and society
- create driving forces for inter- and transdisciplinary constellations.