

Sub theme 7 New Media and Inequalities: Surveillance, Regulation and Resistance

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Freedom of expression is a constitutionally guaranteed right and has been interpreted by the courts in India as synonymous with media freedom. As early as 1950, the Supreme Court had ruled in *Romesh Thapar vs Union of India*, that freedom of speech includes “the right to express one’s views and opinions at any issue and through any medium”. The gender implications of media freedom are many, and include the right to equal access to media use as readers, viewers and users, as well as fair representation across gender, caste and class lines in media content. Yet, as feminist theoreticians have argued, women’s presence in the media is often their absence; that there is what Gaye Tuchman framed as “symbolic annihilation” of gender through omission, trivialisation and condemnation. There is also the recognition that global capital flows, corporatization and institutional surrender to market forces have played a disproportionate role in determining the nature of gender representation in the media. Alarming statistics on the absence of women, Dalits, Adivasis, and people of diverse sexual orientations in professional roles in the media, have long been a matter of concern. These absences have systematically contributed to the deprivation of social capital, and have prevented the everyday experiences of these categories from being represented by the media, thereby rendering such knowledge invisible in the social realm. The accelerating social divide, not only in terms of class, but increasingly in terms of caste and religion, gets reflected in the media, leading to renewed discourses of violence and ethnic cleansing.

Much of the early theorisation on gender vis-a-vis the media had been done in the context of legacy media, comprising largely print and television. Today, with the market-driven consolidation of new communication technologies and digital media, communicative practices are being fashioned and re-fashioned literally by the day. This is all the more so because the internet has engendered a coalescing of media content. Old media draw on new media to create wider readerships and audiences for themselves, even as new media mines the content of old

media and circulates it. Old media have had to face up to the challenge of responding to a sudden plethora of voices on the internet, including that of a wide range of women and other gendered and sexed persons, and forced to create new news communities representing a range of interests not usually referenced by them earlier. On its part, new media practitioners have had to understand the importance of the practices of due diligence that had marked an older form of journalism in order to make their content more credible, accurate and trustworthy.

What are the new forms of inequality, disempowerment and control that are emerging in this new media terrain? Conversely, how have these new technologies and social media platforms been deployed to create more equal spaces across genders; how have they helped to counter repression, and build new forms of sociality? Our sub-theme, 'New Media and Inequalities: Surveillance, Regulation and Resistance,' for the 16th IAWS national conference, will seek to address such questions, and we call for papers that would elucidate these and related aspects.

We know that old media, whether print or visual, are today coming under increasing pressure from corporate interests which seek, more and more, to capture them in order to further their own interests. Simultaneously, there is the phenomenon of central and state governments exercising ever greater control on media narratives in ways that make mainstream media narratives homogenous and supportive of the State. We live under a political regime that is increasingly holding the media to ransom; with compulsions to selectively withhold or generate news in order to cater to a narrow, undemocratic and unconstitutional rhetoric of nationalism. Have the internet media, in contrast, been able to strike another path and exist as an independent public sphere that holds the promise of the constitutional safeguards, in keeping with the early ideals of an internet that belongs to all, and which everybody can access? Clearly, as the internet came to be increasingly dominated by giant monopolies like Google and Facebook, those earlier expectations have disappeared. Today awareness has grown about the capacities of social media platforms to create and facilitate the flow of false information on a mass scale. We are witnessing, what media analysts call the 'algorithmic turn', or the automated manipulation of news and the manufacturing of views and arguments -- what has come to be termed as 'fake news' in a 'post truth' era. Alongside this, greater digitalization has also seen the emergence of disturbing trends that further disempowered the unlettered female subject, such as the mandatory use of digital technologies in order to access welfare. Social analysts have also pointed to the

limits that the social media imposes on collective resistance, with opposition to power beginning and ending with the keyboard, or what has sometimes been termed as ‘clicktivism’.

The gendering of these developments, particularly new forms of sexual preying, surveillance and control, in and through digital modifications of sexed and gendered bodies, have proved consequential. Amidst a patent culture of misogyny on the internet, we are seeing new forms of gender-centric crime, from trolling and bullying, which is today widely prevalent, to specific threats like online grooming, cyber stalking and revenge porn.

While we recognize the dark side of the new media, we also recognize that they lend themselves to a variety of dynamic and positive uses. They have enabled the emergence of political communities that connect across vast geographies. They have also helped foster new forms of feminist creativity within what Manuel Castells has conceptualized as the “network society”. The humble mobile phone has enabled flows of information and challenged gender dynamics; the internet and the internet-enabled mobile phone have contributed to the creation of innumerable new sites of resistance. These have ranged from those engaged in anti-caste politics to varying shades of feminist and queer activism; from anti-nuke activism to the struggles of green warriors trying to raise awareness and combat the deleterious effects of climate change. Older political traditions, including that of the Left, have also remade their presence and relevance, drawing on the resources of the World Wide Web. Having stated this, we also recognize the asymmetrical nature of access to media, especially new media, given the larger realities of social exclusion in India. Gender remains a major aspect of the digital divide, with women and girls less likely to have used the internet than their male counterparts, especially if they also happen to be poor and from dalit or tribal backgrounds. We would like to closely consider the consequences of being a female or a transgendered ‘digital have-not’ in a world that is increasingly connected.
