

The New Communication Technologies and the Dynamics of Feminine Subaltern public Spheres within the Virtual Space

Brief notes on the lines of research

The emergence and rapid adoption of the **Internet** by a wide range of individuals and social groups have given rise to a vast literature discussing the democratizing capabilities of the Internet and **ICTs**, and its potential to increase the scope, intensity, and forms of individual's involvement in the democratic processes and the expansion of egalitarian participation in the **public sphere** (*Öffentlichkeit*). This latter concept was firstly and significantly promoted by **Habermas** in his locus classicus: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, which was published in (1962) and translated into English in (1989). Habermas's work is immensely useful since it provides the most systematically conceptualized theoretical account of the public sphere presently available. The public sphere can be seen as a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk, a realm of social life in which public opinion can be formed (Asen, 1999).

By contrast to Habermas' assertions that the bourgeois public sphere was built upon the disregard of status, inclusivity and equal participation, **Nancy Fraser** (1992) claims that the bourgeois public sphere is based on a discriminatory structure against women and other historically marginalized groups. Inspired by the **Gramscian legacy**, Nancy Fraser (1992) identified the fact that **marginalized women** are **excluded** from **the dominant public sphere**, and thus that **marginalized** women formed their own public spheres, and termed this concept a **subaltern counterpublic** or **subaltern public spheres**. Fraser argues that these "**subaltern counterpublics**" function dynamically as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups or women invent and circulate their counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1990:67).

The theory of subaltern public spheres criticizes the Habermasian public sphere on different points: the historical exclusion of, namely women, proletarians, racial and cultural

minorities, within the bourgeois public sphere. In addition, Habermas assumed that a single and comprehensive public sphere is always preferable to a nexus of different public spheres. However Fraser (1992) pointed out that a universal public sphere can work only for the advantage of dominant groups. Members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for expressing themselves and disseminating their discourse. Conceptually speaking, we would define the subaltern public spheres as collective virtual or spatial platforms which aim at resisting systematically a systemized condition of subordination brought about by distinct forms of economic, social, racial, linguistic, and/or cultural dominance and coercion.

The subaltern approach is an epistemological countertendency within the critical theory tradition which is inspired originally from the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci about ‘subaltern classes’. It has been developed later by group of South Asian scholars. It focuses essentially on the non-elites, subaltern individuals as agents of socio-political change. They adopted the vision of society from below, focusing more on what happens among the ordinary people at the base levels of society. The subaltern approach has perceptible influence on variety of disciplines including historiography, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism and communication studies.

On the other hand, **the Internet** provides new applications that range from **social networking sites (Facebook or MySpace, etc...)** to collaborative sites (Wikipedia or Flickr). Their modus operandi is based on the collective creation and sharing of content, manageable forms of self-publishing and social networking. Consequently, the **subaltern women** are now dynamically networking and communicating through text, video, blogs, pictures, tweeting, status updates on social networks sites such as Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn or microblogs such as Twitter. In this regard, Spilker and Sorenson argue that computers are no longer about ‘programming, systems, controlling and calculating’ but that they are a gateway for communication and cultural activities. Furthermore, Hynes et al. argue that as a result of the conceptual shift in the relation between technology usage and other variables (e.g., **gender** ...etc.) larger groups of users, especially groups that have been excluded from the social participation (e.g., women...etc.), may use the Internet in their everyday life in ways that are meaningful to them.

To certain extent the Internet provides subaltern women with the platform to become ‘cultural insiders’ to **exclusion, oppression and marginalization** (Nayar, 2011). In a similar vein, the Internet allows women to identify and collaborate with others who have similar

social and political interests, allowing for the formations of powerful new interest groups. Through low-cost web-based communication methods like e-mail, and social networks, women with similar interests can form themselves into groups which can take action around issues important to the group. The different spaces of the internet encourage not only more meaningful individual participation but also a more egalitarian dialogue. Increased participation and dialogue enhance the prospects of successful mobilization against the society. Grounding on that, The Internet might strengthen the subaltern discourse in two ways: First, the Internet technology supports an unrestricted and equal access to information; second, the Internet facilitates the opportunity for interaction. Both access and interaction are fundamental for voicing the voiceless social categories. Consequently fostering subaltern public spheres reflects the potential of the Internet in expanding the democratic inclusiveness (Weiyu Zhang, 2006).

In the Algerian context, the studies and published articles have shown that **women are both underrepresented and almost invisible in the Media**. Furthermore, Algerian women aren't being equally represented in comparison to their male counterparts; therefore Media representation of women is nowhere close to achieving **gender equality**. On the other hand, the Algerian society is a largely **patriarchal society** and hostile to women's presence in the **spatial public spheres**, therefore **women are not welcome** in marketplaces, souks, cafes, libraries, museums, beaches and leisure spaces. Consequently the presence of women in the spatial **male-dominated public sphere** is very timid, and women would face verbal abuse and different forms of **symbolic violence** as a direct result of that presence.

On the other hand, multiple Algerian studies found that women's voices are growing in new media spaces, and although the **gender gap** in accessing the Internet, the number of women who are using dynamically **social media sites** such as Facebook and Twitter is in increase. Obviously, the fast adoption of the Internet by Algerian women is due to the **societal and cultural exclusion**, therefore they would find the virtual spaces more open and welcoming arena to express themselves and exchange their voices and create their self-identity.

Nevertheless, studies that adopted a subaltern approach to examine the role of the Internet in empowering subaltern women and the relationship between gender and technology are relatively. Therefore in this thesis I intend to contribute to this area of research, by adopting the subaltern public spheres presuppositions as the theoretical framework, and

considering that the Internet is expected to empower women , and significantly extend their **social participation** and **visibility** and to offer them **discursive and expressive vents and spaces** . I will investigate how the communicative spaces provided by the Facebook groups of women function as subaltern public spheres within the Algerian societal context with its complexities and diversities, and I will approach the emancipatory capabilities of these Facebook groups as subaltern public spheres, moreover I will examine how the Algerian women use these online subaltern spheres to exchange their opinions and construct their own discourse and how they resist the patriarchy and exclusion by using the Internet.

Data gathering tools, sampling and research society

To obtain the required information from the subjects and, to respond to the objectives of our study, I will use multiple tools. A questionnaire, which is a research instrument consisting of a series of questions and for the purpose of gathering information from respondents. Secondly, an interview which is a tool for obtaining reliable and valid information from the respondents. It is a conversation in which the roles of the interviewer and the respondent change continually. Thirdly I will use the online participant observation or the E- participant observation.

A purposive sampling strategy will be adopted. I will choose some Algerian Facebook groups for women; I will gather data from its members by a questionnaire and, in-depth interviews and online participant observation.

The basic concepts of the research:

Internet, gender, technology ,women cyberspace, philosophy of technology ,gender and technology , feminism , cyber feminism, feminism 2.0 ,women empowerment, visibility, gender equality , gender gap , digital gender divide, Habermas, Gramsci , Fraser , virtual communities , virtual reality , offline world , counterpublics , Algerian society, misogyny, patriarchy, exclusion, subalternity, subaltern approach, Facebook, public sphere, subaltern public spheres, ,democratization , discourse ,feminine activism, social networking sites, symbolic capital, online participation ,netnography.