Communication

Masculinity and Smart Water management: why we need a critical perspective

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Our lives are currently being upended as a result of the pandemic. The bulk of public discussion is focused on 'when can we go back to normal?', 'normal' being of course, the way we lived prior to the onset of lockdowns and strict distancing measures. However, many now recognise that our previous normal cannot exist again. Hartley and Kuecker (2020) find a parallel for this thinking in water management, the 'normal' being our convenient and indulgent consumptive habits as one of the 'moral hazards' of 'Smart Water Management' (SWM). Resource optimism, the idea that technology will always be there to save us, is a pervasive notion that negates the need for collective responsibility and behaviour change. As Hartley and Kuecker contend, it only buys us more time until we have to face reality, in effect, it is the representation of the kicking of the intergenerational can down the road.

Technocratic approaches to water, Hartley and Kuecker argue, represent much of the problem. The recent IWRA report on Smart Water Management (2020) demonstrates the large number of projects employing SWM in practice. The report assesses 19 projects and all are technological in nature, with a high prevalence of sensor-driven, real-time modelling and gadgetry. This approach is not surprising, considering governments are increasingly moving to 'data-driven' decision-making, without a clear understanding of the inherent biased nature of metrics. The 'objectiveness' that comes from attributing figures to potential outcomes is a flawed, albeit alluring, system. Risk matrices are classic examples of these. Despite the risk literature having moved drastically away from traditional likelihood and consequence matrices, these still pervade much of water decision-making today (Kosovac, Davidson, & Malano, 2019). It is the pure magnetism of technocracy.

An area not explored in Hartley and Kuecker's piece, but well aligned to their argument, is the feminist contribution to the debate. As the overarching technocratic narrative represents one of 'control', such as rerouting waterways and 'creating' new water for use through updated treatment technologies, one cannot ignore the undercurrents of hyper-masculine identities of power pervading this field (Vera Delgado and Zwarteveen, 2017). For too long, the feminist input into water engineering has relied predominantly on increasing representation of women in water management, with little understanding of how the underlying structure is intrinsically masculine (Zwarteveen, 2008). An example is the endearing Smart Water Management approach, which essentially acts as an extension of this existing symbolism and identity of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) pervasive in water engineering. Autocratic power as a feature of such a system reveals the ongoing struggle to harness and control natural environments, with hegemonic and nostalgic notions of modernisation still firmly intact. Power is the key motif in such environments. What can Smart Water Management offer feminism apart from continuing an age-old paradigm of perceived rationality through technocratic, power-hungry means? Very little, I would argue.

Instead, I ask whether there is a greater role for feminist rhetoric to play in restructuring the relationships that we have with water, and also questioning the structural power that we, as water managers, try to impose on the resource. Masculinity is well acknowledged to be an obsessively technology-focused identity (Lohan and Faulkner, 2004) that disproportionately influences water management and steers it toward the power-hungry motifs that serve to reinforce hegemonic gender norms and ideals. The preoccupation with infrastructure and technological advancements goes to the heart of Beck's (1992) notion of the Risk Society, creating solutions for our own self-imposed risks, while in turn generating new risks through this process. This is true of projects that introduce inter-basin transfers, of desalination, and

of other areas of technocratic decision-making that favour infrastructure solutions to solve the wicked problems of today, in turn creating their own social and environmental problems. Could the imposed structural masculinity in Smart Water Management be creating larger risks than those that we are attempting to mitigate?

Progress is being made in some areas. In Australia, there are attempts to incorporate other forms of knowledge and attitudes, such as that of traditional owners, to the relationship with water as a way of sustainably managing the resource into the future. New Zealand is also currently incorporating indigenous knowledge into their own disaster risk management processes. Strides have been made in environmental law, in understanding water as a living being in the eyes of the law: essentially, that a waterway be granted legal personhood. There are many differing approaches to water management being undertaken that are not sufficiently addressed by Smart Water Management, Integrated Water Management or the Water Sensitive Cities model. These new narratives are not about taking the masculine preoccupation with 'control', but rather attempting to remove the power dynamic to work together with a resource that is essential to our existence.

Feminist and post-colonial framings therefore can provide valuable insight into critiquing current models of water governance to help us question the overreliance on technology-driven approaches to managing water, or whether there may be opportunities for social or fringe solutions to be incorporated into the water management mix. These framings buttress, rather than weaken, the arguments advanced by Hartley and Kuecker on the dangers of technocracy. The embracing of this new perspective provides the impetus needed to reconfigure our relationship to water, away from one that is paternalistic, to an approach devoid of control-based obsession that works to ultimately serve the environment, and in turn, us.

As we are full swing into one of history's worst pandemics, we start to question the level of collective action that can be relied upon to reduce our future exposure to risks. More than ever, social alternative solutions, based on collective action and away from pure technology, need to be adopted, and critically so in the field of water management.

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