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Gender-Power Relations At The Turn Of The Century

By

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Gender-Power Relations At the Turn of the Century

Perhaps the most influential institution of civil society, this century has been the fourth estate. And few institutions have changed as dramatically as the media. Much of what we accept today as the media was unheard of at the turn of the century. The ability to adapt to and adopt new technologies has been the hallmark of the media. It is therefore not surprising that the media is perhaps the institution of civil society which has changed the most this century. Many of these changes were forced by technological advances, others more significantly have been led by social movements.

In all the hype for and against the freeing of the airwaves, the impact on disempowered groups --- minorities, indigenous peoples and women has rarely been examined. In controlled environments these groups constructed spaces within the mainstream media and also within the alternative systems to voice concerns. Slowly over decades some progress was evident. Women had begun to make their presence felt as producers and as consumers of media products. However, as with other marginalised communities and groups, women have lagged behind in getting access to and control over the technologies which govern the progress of the media.

Though the media, particularly the mass media, is the most common manifestation of new communication technology, it is perhaps the least profitable of its uses. The facilitation of information flow is the

main task of these new technologies, and its the power to control and manipulate the flow of information which makes communication technology so powerful.

This particular aspect of new technology was recognised a long time ago. Two decades ago, the Sean McBride Commission in its seminal report, *Many Voices, One World*, pointed out that there is an urgent need to work for a more just communication order. Sean McBride, the Irish thinker who headed the Commission pointed out:

“Human history is becoming more and more a race between communication and catastrophe. The full use of communication in all its varied strands is vital to ensure that humanity has more than a history ... that our children are assured a future.”

While the McBride Report has been justly hailed as a landmark in the process of democratisation of communication by extending our understanding of the implications of new technology, it is perhaps interesting to note that the recommendations in that report have no reference to women.

At around the same time, UNESCO took up the issue of democratisation of communications as a principal issue and in line with concerns raised by many Third World countries, called for the evolution of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). It is interesting to remember that around this time, the Non-Aligned Movement, a coalition of countries of the Third World

had also issued a call for a New World Economic Order based on the needs of the people, not the vagaries of the market.

The appearance of these two statements marked a high point in the politicisation of the debate on technology and economic rights of nations and peoples. The acknowledgment that these two issues are inter-related was significant. For immediately after the first serious attacks on UNESCO as an institution began. It was also around this time that the United Nations system itself began to be marginalised in the conduct of global politics. Not coincidentally, the international financial institutions emerged as important actors in framing international policy.

Without reading too much into the calendar of events, it is difficult not to make the link between the rising importance of fast and accurate information flow to the conduct of world trade and the anxiety to retain control of cutting edge technology.

II

The just concluded Fourth World Conference on Women for the first time raised the issue of women's access to and control over media production and distribution. However, only two of the regional Platforms of Action actually included media as an area of strategic concern. Not very surprisingly Asian and African women were the only women who raised the issue. In hindsight it appears remarkable that in none of the earlier three conferences, (in Mexico in 1975; Copenhagen in 1980; and Nairobi in 1985), was the issue of

women and media raised. Particularly as the mobilisation to back the call for the NWICO was its zenith.

It says much for the divorce of the women's movement from these other movements that on an issue which so obviously concerns women, they were not consulted, nor did they raise the issue independently.

For women communicators however, inclusion of media in the Beijing Platform of Action remains a hollow victory. For despite last minute efforts by some women's groups, the document does not address communication as a concept. What is indeed of greater concern is that women's access to technology has been separated from her rights with regard to the media. Thus technology is clubbed with science and women's access to and control over technology is mediated through the discipline of science.

At face value that would appear to be a positive step. Research has shown that science, particularly the history of science has been a gentlemen's club with women almost automatically debarred entry. Communications technology is however slightly different from other forms of technology. It is closely linked with the right of peoples and nations to complete, accurate and timely information. By separating media from technology and not including communication as a concept, women's right to information and her access to and control over information technology will be treated as separate issues rather than as related concerns.

Thus women's access to and control of information flows and communications technology is not seen as part of a political process of empowerment. This is perhaps the most critical lacuna in the document. While this paper is perhaps not the place to discuss the issue, it is important to remember that the emerging global media conglomerates are not discussed in the section on economic structures.

The deliberate attempt to keep the political economics of the emerging communication technology use out of the women's sphere is interesting to note for its implications for efforts to engender the political process, as is now happening in India.

III

To illustrate the power of communications technology, I had wanted to provide some examples from India. It proved difficult, almost impossible to find Indian examples which would be immediately accessible to an international audience. One is aware that explaining an example, can be tedious, time-consuming and in most cases a near guarantee of losing the audience's attention. Using internationally acceptable examples as metaphors helps circumvent this barrier. But in doing so, the frame of reference is limited and the language of communication is reduced to a discussion of the familiar. At the same time it also re-emphasises the power of technology over the most important aspect of our lives, our thought processes and ideas. What implications does this have for the process of democratisation of communication?

On the night (in India) when the O.J. Simpson trial verdict was to be telecast LIVE on the cable network, hotels, pubs and the other haunts of the English-speaking elite wore a deserted look. All over the world, there was a collective sense of tension: Would he walk free?

A fortnight earlier, India witnessed a miracle. The fun-loving god, Ganesha began to drink milk in temples all over the country. Within hours, reports streamed in from every continent corroborating the phenomenon. Phones, faxes and electronic mail had sent the message out. For a little over 24 hours, the world watched bemused as believers and non-believers alike queued up at temples to feed the gods. Not surprisingly, the capital and a number of other Indian cities reported a shortage of milk.

The final image. The most difficult to visualise but also probably the most interesting is of the Internet, which is billed as the world's first free space for unhindered communication.

Each of these images is a testimonial to the power of new communications technology. Without these technologies each of these events would have remained as local news headlines. The ability of new communications technology to minimise time and space barriers meant that local events can become international news. More important, these technologies make it possible for people to participate in events long-distance. This ability to facilitate the universalisation of experiences gives these technologies and those

Internet is well-known as and largely accepted as the first global 'free' space for unhindered communication and information sharing. It is extremely powerful and like most communications technology is little understood by women, even those who are regular users of the Internet.

It would be easy to be seduced by the hype and the seemingly unlimited possibilities of access and sharing of information offered by the Internet. But in the context of the global political economy and the experiences of women and other marginalised groups it is necessary to re-examine the issue. The most attractive aspect of the Internet is its accessibility to everyone i.e. everyone who has a computer, is computer literate, has a modem, a telephone, can communicate in English and of course is literate. How many people is that in the poorer countries and of those how many are women?

The other attraction of electronic communication is the access it provides to information from every part of the world. But that information cannot be provided to people in the language of the marginalised. To be accessible to people all over the world, the information has to be moulded to fit the form, the technique and indeed needs to be in the operative language of the Internet. That in this process, the message being sought to be transmitted may actually be lost or is distorted is rarely understood or taken into account.

For the Internet appears to be the alternative means of communication being discussed for decades. It is two-way, non-

hierarchical, promotes dialogue, actively seeks new participants to the debate, is accessible and inviting to everyone. Most important, it is democratic to the point of being chaotic. The internet is all of those things and yet it is not the alternative being sought.

One of the most common buzz words on cyberspace is 'web'. It is particularly appropriate for everyone is treated as a fly to whom the Internet is a welcoming, inviting, extremely accessible web. Unlike earlier technologies however, there is not even a possibility of one of the flies replacing the spider and controlling the web. The distinction between the information users and information flow controllers has never been so obvious and at once invisible.

This homogenisation of communication allows for the universalisation of certain experiences at a superficial level across cultures. But in this process, new information technology are reframing our concepts of time and space and forcing everyone to proceed at a pace dictated not by local needs or demands but by the speed of communications. The gender-power equations are thus being reformulated while maintaining the status quo.

Without realising it, we are allowing these new communications technologies to redefine our idea of progress. The right to dream, to envision a secure future is the basis of human dignity. Should the next step to an intelligent society take that away from us?