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The New Communication Technology:
Pitfalls And Potentials In Development (Of Democracy)

By

Stephanie Sim
The New Communication Technology: Pitfalls and Potentials in Development (of Democracy)

I have taken the liberty of narrowing the field of discussion by adding 'and Democracy' to the end of the title of this brief essay. However, while I will not preclude other forms of development, these will be accessed in so far as they impact upon democracy. The title of the essay thus now reads 'The New Communication Technology: Pitfalls and Potentials in Development (of Democracy)'. This however should not limit anyone in discussing these other aspects in their own rights in the discussions that follow.

Democracy does not refer to a political system widely practiced around the world today in its various bastardised forms. It also refers to a way of life, a set of ideals which hope to give each individual a place, a voice and equal opportunities within a community and society. Democracy is about choice -- and not only at the ballot box. It is about living a life shaped by informed and intelligent decisions. It is about being fully aware and empowered with one's potential and rights as a human being and being unafraid to speak up should these rights be trespassed.

Seen in this light, very few, if any countries practice democracy towards humankind in general, let alone women, who have been a traditionally oppressed lot, even in birthplace of democracy. In the world today, there are less than five countries in which women make up more than 30 per cent of the traditional institutions of power. In a recently published UN report, women still earn less for every male dollar in every country. The highest matching wage was found in Sweden where women earned just about 80 cents for every male dollar. The famous figure back in 1980 that women do between two-thirds and three-quarters of the work in the world, produce 45 per cent of the world's food and yet are granted 10 per cent of the world's income and less than 1 per cent of its property still holds true today. If this was such a thing as a society which attempted to be democratic towards women, surely the Scandinavian countries would show the way. Yet, male managers outnumbered female managers 3 to 1 in Norway in 1992.

I recite this relatively short litany of outrages, to remind us that it is on this society which the new communication technology and the Information Society will be built. It is neither a clean slate nor a pretty inheritance. In fact, in an almost Wellsian take, nothing could be worse than a rich, powerful ruling class manufacturing machines and ISDNs which will make their control over the present oppressed lot even more effective and efficient. In a world where instruments of information are used as tools of control, it will be an uphill struggle to fight against the tide of increasing automation and efficiency of a culture which has been entrenched with so many deep prejudices and disadvantages towards women.

In this essay then, I attempt to outline the basis in which the Information Society with the help of this New Communication Technology will be built. Stopping to examine the inheritance it will have to work with. I will then go on to outline the systems already in place and how they contribute to the control and oppression of women. Finally I will try to offer suggestions as to how we may break this information monopoly and try to turn a potential pitfall into an asset. I do not pretend to offer anything new or pathbreaking. My examinations will apply previous methods of
assessment to a new field and thereby stop to examine from a woman’s perspective, what has been heralded with such enthusiasm as the Information Revolution.

To begin, I would like to examine what we mean by “communication” and information and its place in the ideal democratic process.

For a true democracy to function, a stable environment must be created. This is best done through the consultation of a populous who have the ability to make well-informed and responsible decisions. How does this occur in an urban pluralism or a homogenous rural area? Through the dissemination of information in a process which has been termed ‘communication’. With the advent of satellite, optic fibres and converging systems of telecommunication, this process is no longer a slow, haphazard, oral one. It has become superefficient in the hands of the mass media and in the case of the Internet, the multimedia.

This in theory enables and equips every citizen to exercise her ability and her right to KNOW. Forcing her into making decisions based on abstract concepts such as logic, perception and projection, rather than sensation and experience. Decisions such as these can maintain or dispose of those in power. Information has thus become an political tool.

There has been a recognition of this in the sprouting of regulatory authorities in the form of ministries or more subtle ‘independent’ bodies. These all have one purpose in mind -- the management and control of information.

I quote from Walter J Martin’s The Information Society: “In an open society, it is clearly in the common interest that such important public institutions such as the mass media function to best effect. Indeed, with the kind of personalised, truly interactive media now becoming a realistic possibility because of the new information technologies, there is the prospect of greatly enhanced public and private communications networking together to provide hitherto undreamed of facilities. The extent, if any, to which this potential is realised depends very much upon the human factor. It is upon such considerations as individual and group norms and values, private and corporate interests, the desire and ability to communicate, willingness to share, to listen and to see the other person’s point of view – it is upon such considerations that the communication process and its development stands or falls.”

In other words, those with access and/or with control over this information will be able to shape the way society develops – and the farther this reach, the more opinions it will affect and the greater its political clout. We thus begin to establish the increasing importance of information in the process of decision-making between individual and society. Based on this information people make decisions which will effectively keep other people in or out of power. Control has become so efficient as control the media, the main conduit of information, equals the control of perception and thought. Let us apply the existing information system to the case of women and examine who controls the media and how exactly they have used this power to forward the cause of women and their equality. Let me rephrase that: How has the traditional, popular media assisted in the emancipation of women and their right to equality? Allow me to briefly examine the present political, economic and cultural conditions.

With regards to policy-making, a short survey of broadcasting stations in Australia, Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong, Brunei, the Philippines and Pakistan, found that 57 broadcasting stations were headed by men and five by women (four in
Australia, one in Indonesia and one in New Zealand). Publications fared a little better. In another random sample of Asian countries, 23 magazines and newspapers were edited by men and nine by women. Most tellingly, in countries such as Japan and France which have been highly progressive with regards to the importance of information and the role it plays politically, no broadcasting station was headed by a woman.

Of course there is a difference between being a woman and being woman-friendly. For this one has to look at the content and the angles of reporting which are featured in the programmes and news items. Time and again we see that women’s issues suffer from low or/and sexist coverage. The most recent example would be the UN Conference in Beijing where even CNN ended up focusing on the pre-Beijing fiasco, the rain, the police, Hillary Clinton and pictures of women dancing on tables and singing. The event was also used as a China bashing event -- not as it should have been -- a patriarchy-bashing one. All together it gave the impression that women were as usual badly prepared, unserious in their methodology, and one wonders if they would have covered the conference at all if the wife of the President of America hadn’t made her way there. Till today no media I have had any access to has covered or done a serious programme on the Platform for Action and if not for the Internet, I would still not know what was in the document.

Misogynist and sexist programming is perhaps most telling in what men think women want to watch or what they think women should be watching. Radio shows and television stations all programme day-time television with ‘junk shows’ such as cooking programmes, fashion shows and soap operas because it is believed that housewives, their target audience are only interested in such programmes. In women’s magazines, perhaps the single most influential source of information for the teenage girl and career woman today, women are told that we are generally too fat, we are ugly (so we need make up), we are stupid (which is why we believe that wearing three-inch heels will make us look better), we should behave weak and helpless to be attractive (turn on the feminine charm) and we hate each other (women are naturally envious of each other and your best friend always steals your boyfriend.) If this is a sample of the regular information diet of the urbanised woman, is it any wonder that few are interested in changing things or believe that they are capable of doing so. The media has propagated women into believing that this position of subordination which we have been harassed into is one which is natural and should, at best, be borne bravely.

The New Communication Technology talks great of gain and progress. However, should remember that one person’s gain is another’s loss -- especially when it comes to fighting for the dollars in the financial pie. If for no other reason we do not think of participating actively in the coming IA, we should remember how much we have paid for it and enjoy the fruit of our sacrifice.

I mean that this new communication technology did not come free -- someone had to pay for it. And who, but women and the underprivileged have lost out where it has gained. Some examples of the expenditure it has already incurred are: 10 billion pounds in the UK for the laying of cable television networks. It has been estimated that cable operators are investing almost as much in the UK annually. In 1987, Germany invested 60 million pounds in the construction of Europe’s first DBS satellite. The first round of investment for British Sky Broadcasting was put at 222.5 million pounds by over 10 independent bodies. This figure of course is nothing
compared to the amount spent on research and manpower developing and maintaining these communication system and gadgetry. Billions of dollars spent on electronic gadgets and communication systems, could have been used to fund women-friendly projects and development programmes. As an estimate of how highly the development of half of the human race is regarded by the United Nations, the annual budget of Unifem in 1994 was USD$30 million.

This new age of communications has cost women much already. Men who have the ability to control expenditure have allocated it to the development of technology which to date has not improved the status of women by one jot. While it is now possible to enjoy 24-hour television, pictures of the moon and Mars, surfing the Internet and yakking free over continents, we can still say that really, this is more of the same. If at all the media can be seen to have exacerbated the problem as it disseminates the dominant view even more efficiently, spreading sexism and misogyny even more effectively.

The media has always been antagonistic towards feminism from the start -- after all it was a journalist who coined the term bra-burning. In the early 1990s, the United States media was an active partner in what has been termed as the ‘backlash’ against the progress of feminism. TV and film have given us the most cruel images of sexual stereotypes and repeatedly depicted the violent treatment of women. A study carried out of Hollywood the late 80s found that there were fewer strong, independent female characters in film today than there were in the 40s and 50s.

If anyone needs further evidence that this information age is one which is run and dominated by men who have their own agendas and are not interested in the welfare of women, they need only look at the Internet subscription rates. In the United States, which has the highest penetration rate to date, women make up 30 per cent of Net subscribers. The pages on the Web which receive the highest number of hits per day are the ones which advertise on cars and feature pornography.

This is the history of communication technology which we will have to contend with, fraught with sexism in its worst excesses. And we now stand at a threshold of a new age where gender-biased values will be able to proliferate with even greater impunity we must ask ourselves the question: are we ready for it?

The fastest developing area of communications technology is multimedia systems riding on the backbone of cable networks and optic fibres. Given the great progress made in technology today, the home PC and the Internet will be the work, education and entertainment space of the future. Anyone with no connectivity -- in terms of an education, financial ability, resources or the country she stays in -- will lose out drastically. The Internet will once again sort out the haves from the have nots.

Those who welcome the Internet as a wonderful resource of data and as a potentially liberating tool do so rightly. But the operative word here is potential. The myth that one can put up anything on the Internet has been an over sold one. Information on the Internet is traceable and because it can be put on it can also be pulled off. Websites do not have a life of their own. One requires some capital to start running a Website and the more money you have the better and more obvious your Web presence. In other words, the richer your organisation, the more you will be able to put up on the net. It takes a great deal of technical expertise to put up a Web site
and once you have one up, if people don't like what they see, they will have no compunctions in denying you their servers and tell where to take your act.

It seems very bleak so far, but it was not my intention to preach doom and gloom here today. My intention was to give us a glimpse at a realistic picture of this brave new world of information. For if we do nothing to recognise its realities, then we will be at a loss as to how we may use this technology to recapture what has been denied to us in mainstream media through the sheer brute force of economics and prejudice. That is a valid, independent voice of our own, a language which we have fashioned on our own terms. Essentially, the ability to construct our own visions of reality and what is thought of as important. Thus as we look forward to a future filled with uncertain promises, it is back to the basics we must return to in order to get our bearings and perspectives right.

The approach to the new communication age must look at the ideologies and politics which support it. For women we realise that it has been far from democratic in all of its aspects -- from the funding of the technology to the culture it has come to create. How can democracy be returned to the medium then? The only way any effective changes can be made is through unity -- solidarity. Only when several voices are heard as one will change ever take place. The only way several voices speak as one is when they are agitated or conscientised to do so -- this can only be achieved through education -- and what is the basis of democracy if it is not universal education? What is the purpose of democratic information sharing if it is not education?

Information and especially the Internet, must be realised for its potential in educating as many as possible in the quickest time. In other words, what poses as our greatest threat is also our best assets. But now we enter into a Catch-22 situation. Media can be used to educate for change -- but the media is presently controlled by those who fear this change. The Internet is also the most technologically sophisticated common communicating devise. It is expensive, requires high maintenance, its structure is incredibly disorganised and like most other development programmes, ironically, it tends to preach to the converted. However, ironically it remains the cheapest media with which to establish a presence in and it has the widest dissemination of information. The trick then is to get as many people looking at your Web pages as is possible -- but how?

The problem which feminist have faced with the Internet is the problem which we have faced with all other media. That is while it may be exciting and wonderful to behold, and its potential immense, unless we have control of the media we will not be able to use it effectively in encouraging a more egalitarian society. To galvanise the population, the Internet will be a tool. But not the tool in agitation for change, but a tool for the purposes of education.

Perhaps this at stage it will be useful to return to communication its education component and to recall it's root -- language. Language as an empowering tool. Language which enables the visualisation and construction of alternative realities through new vocabularies which in turn shape concept to give a concrete meaning to feeling.

"Language is a tool for representing experience, and tools contribute to creative endeavours only when used. Language -- even literacy -- alone does not lead
automatically to reflective, abstract thought. In order for reflection to occur, the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who speak and listen or read and write — sharing, expanding and reflecting on each other's experiences. Such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter the social and intellectual life of their community. Without them, individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self."

In other words, we must equip women with the ability to process and understand the information they read, hear or see. They must be able to deconstruct not only external information, but their own realities as well. Through a knock on effect awareness will take place and the call for democracy and equality will grow.

But no computer is going to walk an abused housewife through the painful, traumatic but liberating steps of self-awareness. No TV station will devote half an hour a week, let alone a day to conscientise women. While the Internet may be used as a secondary resource of data, the process through which democracy takes place is still primarily human.

Communication technology should not be seen as an ends in itself to the construction of equality or even a means to an end. It must be recognised for problems which it is fraught with and used to rectify itself. Old political chestnuts such as pressure groups, conscientation programmes and counselling sessions must still exist. They may use the new technologies to aid them, but they must always be aware of the difference between technology and the ideology which support it.

I want to end on a positive note, because it is only through positivity fired by belief and inspiration that anything will ever be done. I want to say that yes, I am very excited about the this wonderful new age. Its potentials, its freedoms and the way it will shape the world. But as a woman interested in forwarding the rights of my own kind and constructing a stable, sustainable democracy, I believe that we must look beyond the seduction of the high-tech, the ease of information, examine closely the quality and with that knowledge shape the future and ensure that half of the world not only listens, but speaks and hear.

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