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New Communication Technologies: Potentials And Pitfalls
For Women And Development

By

Rahmah Hashim
NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES: POTENTIALS AND PITFALLS FOR WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

A decade ago, Moody (1984: 85-89) articulated the technology options for Third World countries. Among her concerns then was whether Third World countries had the financial resources and technical infrastructure to sustain the technology, and whether the option would promote dependency or imitation in hardware, programming, organisational structures or professional values. Today, similar questions continue to confront economically developing countries, including the choice of investing or not investing in advanced technology such as communication satellites (see AMIC, 1985) and other new communication and information technologies (NCT) resulting from the convergence of microelectronics, information technology and telecommunications.

Tengku Mohd. Azman (1995: 79-87) discusses some of the impacts and issues of the new communications era, including the following:

0 transformation and restructuring of economies around the globe
0 provision of a positive environment for the acceleration of development through efficient use of the knowledge-based economy.
0 democratisation of access to information leading to democratisation of opportunities
0 Programme of information acculturation, including IT literacy, to provide human resources needed to develop and operate IT systems.

The Malaysian Scenario

In the past decade, Malaysia has seen the rapid growth of its telecommunications industry, especially under the leadership of Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir who once said at the Malaysian Business Council Inaugural Address (February 28, 1991):

In the information age that we are living in, Malaysian society must be information rich. It can be no accident that there is no wealthy, developed country that is information rich and underdeveloped... no effort must be spared in the creation of an information rich Malaysian society.

As Malaysia moves closer toward becoming an industrialised nation by the year 2020, in accordance with the nation's own mould, it is determined not only to become a scientific
and progressive society that is innovative and forward looking but also to become a contributor to the scientific and technological civilisation of the future.

The National Telecommunication Policy (NTP) 1994, has been formulated to develop Malaysia's telecommunications industry in the next century. NTP encourages the utilisation of the IT superhighway network for information services such as data communications, video-conferencing, voice information as well as facsimile services. It outlines the availability of high technology, cost-effective, sophisticated, quality services comparable with those in the developed countries.

To improve Malaysia's telecommunication infrastructure, the Malaysian Government has also allocated RM876 million under the 1995 budget for the development of a fully digitalised network, a multi-media system and other transmission systems in the hope of integrating Malaysia into the global communication network (Anwar Ibrahim, Budget Speech 1995, 28 October 1994). Among the programmes planned are the expanded use of office automation and information technology (IT) through the Public Service Network (PSN), Electronic Data Interchange (EDI), and Civil Service Link (CIL).

New Communication Technology and Human Resources

One of NTP's objectives is to ensure that human resource development is in consonance with the needs of the telecommunications sector in the country. As such, the Government has provided the largest ever allocation for education and training amounting to RM 10 billion (20% of) of the 1995 Budget allocation including the construction and upgrading of vocational and technical schools, polytechnics, and institutions of higher learning.

At the same time, society is warned of the "barbarism of specialisation" (Anwar Ibrahim, 1991) if it merely focuses on technological competence. Anwar Ibrahim emphasises the need for professional and technical institutions to be responsible for providing religious education, instilling positive values and attitudes, good work ethics and love for the nation (See text of 1995 Budget Speech in New Straits Times, October 29, 1994).

The need to consider the social and cultural factors is also addressed by Tengku Mohd. Azman, Director of the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS) (1995). He states that intellectual ability, social and cultural change is the root of IT development, and implies that the future measure of progress is not so much the technological push as the ability to acquire and use knowledge which is the real content of IT (1995, 79).

Indeed, the availability of an electronic superhighway or multimedia super-corridor will be meaningless without people and human resources who are able to use it for social and economic development, and use it well.
New Communication Technologies and Women

Since women make up half the population, it is therefore reasonable to wonder whether NCTT development will augur well for women in society.

A. Challenges

1. More open global communication and exposure to other cultures, values and way of life, because NCTT transcend geographical boundaries.
2. Assimilation of new values and knowledge culture including computer and cultural literacy
3. Social, political and cultural re-orientation
4. Citizen’s access to electronic superhighways/multi-media supercorridors
5. Empowerment through communication capacity
6. Endless opportunities for intellectual enhancement (e.g. open education)

B. Pitfalls?

1. Skills and jobs rendered irrelevant unless willing to learn
2. Marginalisation of women decision makers in communication information...
3. Exploitation of women via pornographic images and stereotypes
4. Loss of traditions, values, and loss of parental control
5. Loss of community well-being
6. Lives shaped by the information providers

REFERENCES


