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Electronic Democracy: Between The Vision And Reality

By

Helen E Lopez
Electronic Democracy: Between the Vision and Reality*

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The information revolution that has swept many parts of the world may simply be conceived as dramatic changes brought on by so-called "information technologies," the most epoch-making of which being the new communication technologies (NCTs) for transmitting information and the ultra modern computer systems that process them. Marshall McLuhan's "global village" is no longer a futuristic pipe dream because the world is now tied together by an electronic network that carries vast amounts of information and data across continents almost instantly and makes them available to any part of the world. The fused capabilities of the wired and wireless telephone and networked computers with cable TV virtually conquer the "tyranny of geography," and the resulting digitized traffic gives rise to the electronic Information Superhighway which would link all homes, schools, businesses, and government agencies.

This is a familiar scenario by now, courtesy of Alvin Toffler, and one based on the yet more familiar rhetoric about technological development bringing about progress and of progress being the handmaiden of democracy. By these lights the advances in the technologies of communication herald the information age in which "information becomes equally and plentifully available to all, thereby dissolving forever the source of social inequality" (10, p.8). The third wave society will be one of "decentralized communities" as NCTs make it possible for an increasing number of social activities to be done in the home (Ibid.).

It is this potentially liberating impact of the NCTs as the life channel of the information society that drives nations and governments worldwide to accelerate technological progress at home. Access to information and knowledge via sophisticated communication technologies is viewed as an enabling force that will bring about increased productivity and marketing opportunities, education and training for the acquisition of skills compatible with the requirements of a knowledge-based society, and a democracy revitalized by more rapid access to political processes at the community, national and regional levels. From this
perspective the development of information technology (IT) is thus in part a national response to the domestic need for more efficient and effective governance and to restructure the economy in the hope of achieving global competitiveness.

In an attempt to leapfrog to Philippines 2000, a vision of the Philippines as a newly industrializing economy by the eve of the twenty-first century, Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos declared 1996 as Information Technology Year only last month during the National Technology Summit which was intended to accelerate the development of IT in the country. In his speech during the IT Summit, Mr. Ramos declared that aside from contributing to economic growth, IT also "has had the most profound and often liberative" political, economic and social effects on countries worldwide" (9, p.B8). Noting how the information revolution has fostered the resurgence of democracy by empowering people with the knowledge that there are better options available to them, Mr. Ramos said that his administration "is constantly promoting the principle that information is the principal currency of democracy" (Ibid.).

Then, too, Speaker of the House of Representatives Jose De Venecia, speaking at the Asean Inter-Parliamentary Organization (AIPO) 16th Working Committee and General Assembly in Singapore also last month proposed the establishment of the AIPO Electronic Bulletin Board System for the exclusive use of "lawmakers, parliamentary staff, and policy research bureaus." He exhorted the members of the ASEAN delegations to use the proposed facility for "regular exchanges" in order to "enlarge [their] perspectives and generate consensus on regional and international issues." The establishment of the bulletin board would constitute the organization's "modest contribution to the global information highway" (5, p. B7).

But perhaps more indicative of the seriousness with which the Philippines is preparing itself for the challenges and unlimited opportunities offered by the new information economy is the fact that IT has been identified as an area in which the Philippines can stake a claim. According to Carol E. Carreon of the Information Technology Foundation of the Philippines, the private sector is committed to helping the country become "a leader in the information era" not
only by cashing in on the information industry’s export potential but also by pursuing a human resource development program designed to increase qualified IT professionals both for private business enterprises and the development of IT export products. Already the country has a 40,000-strong highly skilled IT workforce and 300,000 personal commuters in use among Filipinos, which facts make it “possible to engender an IT culture,” claims Ms. Carreon, “where Filipinos can embrace IT as a way of life” (17, p. B8).

Now to get to the heart of the subject of this panel discussion. How do Filipino women stand to benefit from all these? How might the evolution of an IT culture make a difference in their lives, assuming that they are literate in and enjoy access to the use of NCTs to be a part of that culture? In a rather sketchy and general way, let me at this point dwell on the prospective impact of an evolving information society on the quality of life of Filipino women and the prospect of their enhanced participation in the democratic processes and institutions of our country.

The Vision: Potential Impact of NCTs on Women’s Lives

NCTs have tremendous potential to transform the lives of women in a positive way. They can free women from isolation from their communities and the world beyond their homes because of the drudgery of household work. Even for the majority of Filipino women whose only ways to communicate with the outside world are through the telephone, radio, and television (which of course are not considered NCTs, strictly speaking), they can learn time-saving household tips that would give them time for other fruitful activities, for fostering social relationships, even for leisure and sleep, if only for their own well-being and health. They can avail of informal education in the form of acquired vocational and technical skills that can enhance their productivity as workers, mothers, housewives, and citizens. They can therefore have a fairer chance at competition to obtain employment or other income-generating activities even as they may also profit from health and medical advice.

For their counterparts who have access to computers,
facsimile machines, VCRs, cell phones, pagers, bulletin boards, teleconferencing, electronic databases, on-line services, and networked computers, the possibilities for self-determination, self-improvement and active citizenship are legion. For them "electronic democracy" can be real, not just a vision.

With NCTs at hand to do their bidding, they can be liberated from gender division at home, at work, and in the community because the traditional biases valorizing men's greater physical stamina and body structure no longer hold true in the information society where knowledge, not muscle, is the most important commodity and tool for advancement. The use of NCTs is accompanied by an expansion of women's action because virtually unlimited access to information will enable them to exercise personal options more than ever before. The traditional dependence on the wife sacrificing her individual interests to advance those of her husband and children will gradually become a thing of the past. More and more women will venture into non-traditional occupations, activities/disciplines such as engineering, chemistry, entrepreneurship, the military, law, medicine, etc., and employ IT/NCTs as suit their purposes.

As a result women can enjoy unprecedented freedom of choice as they become more mobile, highly individualistic, omnicompetent, and possess highly specialized skills. More important, they can generate their own opinions on critical matters and take part in consultative processes and policymaking at different levels. Moreover, NCTs will allow them to communicate, publish, organize, make changes, and create opportunities to gather--this last being a crucial factor in arriving at democratic consensus-building. The increased opportunity and ability to organize provided by the availability of information includes their greater exercise of the right to unionize to challenge low wages and poor working conditions or benefits. In this respect women can use their skills in the application of NCTs and the knowledge accruing to them as resources to be pooled to empower group efforts in support of political, social, and economic issues relevant to them. Thus exposed to a climate characterized by diversity of opinion and pluralism characteristic of a working democracy, NCTs can be effective
tools in enabling women "to take their fates into their own hands" (2, p.43).

The Reality: NTCs Beyond Filipino Women's Reach

The logic of post-industrial futurology that lies behind this rosy vision of the Filipino woman's world in the age of information will nevertheless fail to impress the greater number of the Filipino female population for whom traveling up and down the information highway via the NCTs will remain a dream for a long while yet. For the reality is that for the majority of citizens of developing countries, but particularly for their women, the promise of "electronic democracy" is virtually inaccessible. Some facts and figures will help to make this plain.

The infrastructure necessary to avail of the opportunities presented by newly developed information and communication technologies is still largely undeveloped in the Philippines. At the barest level, out of about 13,000 households surveyed in 1993, 53.3% rural and 16.1% urban households have no electricity. And among those which enjoy electric power, only 23.8% rural and 61.5% urban households have television. As of August 1995, only 44% of the national population are equipped with telephones.

Radio is practically a universal home appliance as evidenced by a national radio listenership of 83% of the population or roughly 55,000,000 compared to TV viewership of 72% or about 47,000,000.

Although the Philippines can boast of a high literacy rate at 93.5% with women almost at par with men, 15M out of a total population of about 67.3M are functionally illiterate (24, p. 6).

The concentration of Filipino labor is no more encouraging. Out of a total labor force of 24.12M, 46% are in agriculture and only 16% in industry. In addition, only 36.6% of the country's employed population of 24.8M (1993) or 9.08M are women.

Theoretically, mostly women in the information
sector or in information occupations, that is, those jobs that entail creating, processing or distributing information have some degree of access to a varying number of NCTs. For the most part they consist of clerical workers and professionals--teachers, lawyers, computer programmers, systems analysts, doctors, engineers, architects, accountants, librarians, secretaries, newspaper reporters, social workers, nurses, stock brokers, managers, administrators, bankers, bureaucrats, insurance people, etc. As of 1990 (for lack of more recent data), 27.7% of Filipino women were engaged in administrative and managerial work, 63.2% in professional and technical, 62.7% in clerical, and 58% in service occupations. Of these women workers, only those in the upper strata of the administrative and managerial, professional and technical, and entrepreneurial sectors, plus members of affluent households, employed or not, may be assumed to have access to such NCTs as personal computers, pagers, cell phones, fax machines, e-mail, cable TV, electronic databases, and electronic notebooks, etc. These are the women who make use of NCTs not only as a part of their jobs, but more significantly, who are in positions of power.

The liberating effect that takes place is thus as much a result of control as economics. The opportunities opened by new information and communication technologies are exploited by those in a position to do so. They who already wield some power and exercise control are often the most conscious and jealous of their rights and protective of their privileges. And because of their relative visibility at home, in the workplace, and in the community, they are also more outspoken and take the business of active citizenship seriously. In short, only a very small segment of the female population can potentially be empowered by the application of the NCTs available at home, at work, and in the marketplace and reap the benefits of "electronic democracy."

For the average two-income Filipino household, the computer is so expensive, it will take away so much from the family's budget which is often barely enough to take care of basic needs. It is virtually a luxury item for most of these families and access to it is often work-related. Thus majority of women do not have the practical means to participate in socio-economic and political life except through the mass media (radio, TV and print).
Similarly, the telecommunication networks are installed in the metropolitan centers, a fact which practically isolates the majority of the female population of about 15.2M who are in the rural areas (1990 census).

Because of the lack of economic opportunity in a developing country like the Philippines, and their subordinate position in relation to structures of wealth and power, women in the rural areas have developed alternative information networks which allow them a semblance of group interaction and opinion-making process. They perpetuate the efficacy of old wives' tales both for the conduct of their daily practical affairs and the solution of workaday problems. They have established communal laundering activities and weaving circles which enable them to exchange home remedies, recipes, and community news, including gossip, and which keep them informed of the community events, politics, and even household activities in their neighborhood, outside of the radio which links them to the world outside.

Among their counterparts in the urban areas, daily access to television programs that promote economic and educational opportunities for women provide welcome intervention. The most popular and dynamic of these is the TV program "Negosyete" which is sponsored by the Technology Livelihood and Resource Council under the office of the President of the Philippines. Its primary targets are women and provides training and instruction on the air on agribusiness, handicrafts and other livelihood projects. After a two- to four-week course, graduates are referred to companies or individual exporters and financiers who are willing to show them the ropes in setting up their own business.

Another mode of empowerment via television is being attempted by "Damayan," which is basically a reach-out-to-help program and which devotes a segment to the problems of battered women, rape victims, and abused overseas contract workers who are also mostly women. Aside from giving direct assistance, it has a panel of experts who regularly proffer advice and information on women-related problems. A good part of their efforts are meant to raise women's consciousness and to make them vigilant in the exercise of their rights and privileges under the law.
But perhaps the most visibly activist TV program addressing women's concerns is "Teysi ng Tahanan." The main fare consists of veritable expositions by resource persons on crime against women, female health and sexuality, drug addiction and a host of other social issues that impinge on the well-being of Filipino women. A noteworthy attempt to invite women viewers to participate in the discussions is given way through the phone-in and opinion poll sections where the viewing female audience gets a chance to have a say. It makes no effort to play down its ideological stance and is relatively successful in generating female opinion and discussion.

Not to be left out of account are women NGOs which have varying thrusts and programs. The most common of these are livelihood generation, community organizing, maternal and child health/women's reproductive health, prostitution, violence against women, education and skills training, advocacy, research and legal aid. The nature of their work obviously makes them information workers; in fact, nearly all of them have an Information, Education and Communications program. Besides the telephone, radio, and TV, they now have computers for databanking purposes and fax machines to relay and receive information. The use of online services is however rather nil. Most of those with access to e-mail are private companies based in Makati, the center of big-time trade and commerce, and some academic institutions. ISIS, an international NGO "committed to women's empowerment" established a base in Manila and will soon computerize its databank to enable other NGOs with electronic capability to access its library resources. Women members of NGOs and about ten NGOs devoted to women's causes are thus in a better position to take advantage of the enabling capabilities of NCTs in promoting greater democracy for women.

What Is To Be Done

It should be fairly obvious at this point that until the problem of lack of resource capability and infrastructure in the Philippines is addressed at the outset, the promise of strengthened democracy for women through the information revolution will have no meaning.
Like many of their counterparts in Southeast Asia, Filipino women are plagued by economic difficulty which by itself accounts for the very low access to NCTs except among the elite. Hence, the growing reservations about the double-edged character of ITs/NCTs seem to be well-founded. That is to say, while they can indeed promote self-realization and greater participation in democratic processes, in poor economies like the Philippines, these technologies can exclude women's groups and sectors, increase the concentration of power among the women elite in the urban areas, and hasten the further isolation of those in the regions and rural areas. For technology is not neutral; they extend structures of power and capital (15, p.209). In simple, they can widen the gap between the female rich and poor; the information haves can look forward to self-fulfillment and liberation while the information have-nots are consigned to the backwoods of the information society to languish in their helpless double bind.

These misgivings notwithstanding, the women's situation can be mitigated by responsible planning and committed action within the limited capability of the Filipino people to address the problems from which it arises.

The long-term solution indeed calls for the installation of the infrastructure requirements and building resource accessibility in order to realize the goals of third wave democracy. Already the Philippine government has launched a massive campaign to make the telephone available throughout the country, through the "Zero Backlog" program of the Philippine Long Distance Company which is partly government owned. Moreover, the entry of other telecommunications networks are complementing government's efforts to achieve the campaign's objective.

For the medium term, however, distance education offers the best possibility of bridging the gaps in literacy and education between men and women and among women and bodes well for the dissolution of inequalities in economic opportunity and income among them.

The distance education program of the Open
University of the University of the Philippines and its counterpart in the Polytechnic University of the Philippines offer a wide range and variety of degree and non-degree courses, including mathematics, science and technology, and computer programming, which are designed to democratize access to education as well as to extend the range of education to the large clusters of disadvantaged population majority of whom are women. In fact, many of those who have availed of the distance learning opportunities at the University of the Philippines are women.

The empowering potential of distance education which is still largely conducted in the print medium will be enhanced to no small degree by the use of computers to begin with. At the learning centers where the person to person interaction takes place, the presence of a computer can enlarge the students' vision and develop their critical awareness both of which are crucial in forming intelligent and active public opinion.

The immense value of NCTs in providing distance education and extending the reach of democratic institutions has not been lost on the government. A draft memorandum of agreement (MOA) between the University of the Philippines and the Department of Foreign Affairs is now in preparation providing for education/re-training courses by distance mode for overseas contract workers, majority of whom are again women, to prepare them for gainful employment when they return. In addition, while on contract abroad, they will be given an opportunity to participate in the electoral process via long distance voting through the use of computer technology. Meanwhile, the University of the Philippines has signed another MOA with the Civil Service Commission also providing for the training of government employees via distance mode.

Hitherto women have always been regarded merely as "consumers' of technology, as users of typewriters, telephones, fax machines," computers, personal assistants, etc. (15, p. 197). What is needed is an educational agenda that will reform gender-biased educational practices that result in gender inequities in access to technical education and training and in gender-biased segmentation of technical
skills. There is no reason why women can be any less competent than their male counterparts as engineers, systems analysts, technicians, scientists, and so forth.

Equally important is the need for a long-term democratic agenda in which women's right to be informed is not impeded by social, economic and cultural constraints. To do this government must make a determined effort to provide telecommunications infrastructure in the peripheral regions, beginning with a massive electrification program in these areas, in order to "reduce the extent to which they lag behind in terms of economic development." These facilities will "reduce their isolation, will allow them to participate in the [region's] technological breakthrough and will foster job creation" (10, p. 14).

With infrastructure support government can also set up public information services or centers or provide public funding of community information networks in these marginalized areas using basic information/communication technology consisting of the telephone, cable TV, and relatively inexpensive high-speed networks. This enterprise will create awareness of the possibilities of information technologies and provide education on how to use them. Moreover, it will enhance the empowerment of women not simply as consumers but as citizens. The National Information Technology Council should not only see to it that women get equal access to education in IT and NCTs but also that these technologies conform to their needs and aspirations.

Electronic democracy will take long a coming in the Philippines, but NCT's must be recognized for what they are--as new appendages designed to minister to the human's social and economic needs. As such their ultimate value must be carefully studied so that the reverse does not happen, that is, that humanity must adjust to technological imperatives.

Finally, care must be taken that technological progress is not simplistically and unproblematically equated with democracy because there are mediating factors that prevent it from being diffused uniformly and therefore may only perpetuate existing patterns of power and privilege.

References


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