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New Communication Technologies And Women : Media Perspective

By

Raine Wickrematunge
NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND WOMEN: MEDIA PERSPECTIVE

Despite the many beatings it has received from time to time, the media in Sri Lanka today enjoys one of the most active periods in recent history. The press for instance has never before been more prolific than today with four national English language newspapers, four Sinhala and two Tamil national newspapers being currently published. This of course is apart from the tabloids and current affairs magazines, all amounting to something like 40 publications per week.

Radio and television too have seen massive strides with the state monopoly on broadcasting coming to an end in 1993 with the setting up of the first privately owned radio station. Since then, two more independent radio stations have come into existence. In the field of television, we have seen the birth of four stations within the last two years bringing the number of channels available to the viewer to six.

Like in the rest of the world, the changes from the archaic printing and publishing methods beginning with linotype, metal cast pages, ludlow and the hot metal presses to the modern printing systems has been slow and painful. It was in the 1980s that the Times of Ceylon newspaper group first began the change from the old system to lithography, photocomposition and finally, offset printing.

Other newspaper groups followed suit but one which couldn’t quite keep up with the trends, perhaps being unable to afford the massive funds needed for the change, sadly fell by the wayside, what with advertisers and readers preferring the new-look, clearer, cleaner publications with the added attraction of colour.

The younger breed of journalists today have naturally never set eyes on a rotary machine. Not for the modern day sub editor the task of rubbing printing ink off blackened elbows each night having spent his/her day at the stone. Yet, editing, sub-editing and page making methods, though they have certainly advanced with the times, still have a long way to go to be on par with the rest, if not certain parts, of the world. Although computer typesetting is the current method used in all newspapers, computer page making is still in its experimental stages with only The Sunday Leader newspaper employing computers for the purpose of page making, at present. Other newspapers still use the cut and paste method.

Today we have entered a totally wired world as it were, with computers taking over from man, and at this crucial juncture, it is not out of place that women must ask themselves the question how much do modern technological advancements benefit them? Do they get their equal share in the technological pie or as it is in many other cases, are women being left behind, receiving only the crumbs as it were? To answer the question, one must first take a look at female representation in the media. On the technological side, the media in Sri Lanka is currently almost 100 percent male dominated with only males functioning as TV and radio technicians and camera crew. Yet, in the newsroom, the numbers of females, working as editors, reporters, newscasters, presenters etc is satisfactory. As such, any facilities their organisations may offer will be equally enjoyed by both sexes. I feel it is pertinent to mention here that a recent survey found that women in Sri Lanka are among the highest paid in the world, in relation to males. Traditionally too, the Sri Lankan female has enjoyed equal social welfare benefits as well as equal
educational opportunities. It is heartening to note these trends are being taken further to the fields of employment and benefits enjoyed in the workplace.

In the media, the press in particular, it should be noted that women enjoy equal status in the office. One constraint for women however is reporting news in the war torn areas with many editors preferring to send males to cover such high-risk assignments.

Socially, women in Sri Lanka enjoy a more exalted position than most of their counterparts in the region. Being a country which gave the world its first woman prime minister and currently has two women occupying the two top positions - women's rights have naturally been addressed at the highest levels. Of course we have a long way to go yet for women to be totally on par with men in several fields.

Our media, are owned and directed by men; but it is here that the male is vulnerable and it is this field which provides an opportunity for a breakthrough in the emancipation of women. New communication technology is dominated by the computer which will become even more important with the building of a global information highway through the Internet system.

As far as Internet goes, it was only as recently as September 4 of this year that the first and so far only, media institution linked up with the network. Indeed a historical moment in the evolution of communications and media in Sri Lanka was recorded when the English language newspapers The Daily News and The Observer of the Lake House group, the country's premiere publishing house, linked up with Internet giving millions of people the world over instant access to these publications and making it possible for Sri Lanka to project its image into important areas of the global communications web. With this move, the journalists of these newspapers have acquired a global presence and Sri Lanka has truly taken its due place in the contemporary information society.

However it should be mentioned that these two newspapers being government controlled, the news that is thus disseminated would be controlled to a great extent. It will be a happy day for the press in Sri Lanka and the world in general when all other newspapers too would link up with Internet and give the world all viewpoints and uncontrolled news from Sri Lanka.

Joining up with Internet — although still a distant dream for other media institutions — holds a great deal of promise for Sri Lankan mediapersons what with the endless possibilities that Internet offers. Women in particular could benefit through a link up where much of the information needed for their research work could be instantly accessed.

New communication technologies are increasingly permitting women to exchange ideas and to relate to each other enabling them to devise similar methods of solving problems common to all educated womenkind in the world. We do not have adequate information on what irks women elsewhere, but conditions in this country are easily identified.

At the same time, when access to Internet is made available, women journalists in the independent media will be that much more at an advantage to keep in step with any developments of women in the rest of the world and draw from their experiences.

Local, Eastern convention has precluded women from free unaccompanied travel around the world to acquire experience and knowledge, which is available to men, in order to improve their conditions. The new communication system, allows them to roam the developed world, communicate individually with women worldwide to whom they can relate and access libraries and information centres, without actually incurring the expense and inconvenience of physical travel.
This store of knowledge and experience can certainly in the short term be accumulated in much greater measure and faster by women than by men in this country who still have to become accustomed to the "indignity" and concentration of sitting at a keyboard.

Traditionally the use of computer hardware has been almost exclusively a woman's occupation in Sri Lanka. More women than men function as keyboard operators and this is an advantage which women must begin to use.

In Sri Lanka, many women, media professionals included, face huge problems when marriage, and particularly babies, enter the scene. Most, although maternity benefits are provided, give up work altogether once a baby is born due to the complete lack of workplace creches and reliable help. For women whose mobility is thus curtailed, modern communication methods such as those available with the use of a modem connected to a telephone line would be a wonderful opportunity to fulfill their maternal duties, yet be an important part of the office function. At present it is mainly those employed in computer firms who enjoy the modem facility.

At present, media institutions in Sri Lanka, with the exception of Lake House still rely on the wire services they subscribe to, the telephone — which has its limitations with IDD facilities not available in the newsroom — and fax machines.

Our own newspaper has often worked on stories received on Internet — passed on to us by other sources. At a time when Sri Lanka is engaged in a protracted war with the LTTE, the terrorist group fighting for a separate state who have their offices in many western capitals — and they themselves being linked to Internet — it is an invaluable asset for a newspaper to have Internet facilities.

In relation to women, as mentioned earlier — women in Sri Lanka having traditionally enjoyed whatever benefits almost on par with men, any facilities available to their male counterparts in a media organisation will naturally be available to the women as well with no discrimination. The problem at present is that such benefits that can be enjoyed through new communication technologies are as yet unavailable to anyone in Sri Lanka. Of course the country also has to go in for a tremendous amount of infrastructure development before jumping on the bandwagon.

New technologies can make women more aware of the distortions of a society which over the centuries has been evolved in the service of men. Awareness can lead to correction by means of ideas and knowledge acquired through the new global information highway. This knowledge, because it is superior to the conventional ideas of men, is power which can lead to the emancipation of women to a level higher than that of men.

— by Raine Wickrematunge
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