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<th>Using new communication technologies to improve the status of women: reality or illusion?</th>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Siew, Susan; Wang, Lay Kim</td>
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Using New Communication Technologies
To Improve The Status Of Women : Reality Or Illusion?

By

Susan Siew
&
Wang Lay Kim
Using New Communication Technologies to Improve the Status of Women: Reality or Illusion?

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1995

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Using New Communication Technologies to Improve the Status of Women:
Reality or Illusion?

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"...people often speak of a new world, a new society, a new phase of history, being created... by this or that new technology... Most of us know what is generally implied when such things are said. But this may be the central difficulty: that we have got so used to statements of this general kind, in our most ordinary discussions, that we can fail to realize their specific meanings." (Raymond Williams 1990: 9)

"...the important issues posed by the new communications technologies are best addressed by revisiting the basic questions about social inequality and patterns of social access and exclusion..." (Golding & Murdock 1986: 83).

Back in the 1970s, Bell (1974: 114) predicted that the new information technologies would raise standards of living and reduce inequalities across the globe. And it is argued that in this day and age, if we do not cable up, digitalise or launch our own satellite as soon as possible, our society will be left behind. The new communication technology seems to possess such great powers to determine the fate of societies and it appears that the only way forward to greater prosperity in the future and a qualitatively different way of life is to adopt this new communication technology lest we perish.

Such kind of statements are really not very useful in understanding the implications of the new communication technologies and the reality of the situation. Some critical scholars have expressed their concerns that the new communication technologies are indeed creating a new kind of social class - the information rich and the information poor. These informational inequities are expected to cut across class, ethnicity, gender and region (see Golding and Murdock 1986; Hepworth and Robins 1988). Hence any analysis on the new communication technology which tends to be overly deterministic, (that is one which look at the technical possibilities of these technologies alone and speculate on the possible impact on society) can only be simplistic and naive.

Our analysis steers away from the simplistic notion of how the adoption of new communication technology can be waved like a magic wand to change and alleviate the low and poor status of
Cinderella. Rather this paper explores the impact of technology on society within the context of structure of power relations. In assessing the role that the information industry can and must play in the transformation of society in general and women in particular, we work on the premise that technology is not neutral but made up of ideas and values of those who owns and controls the technology. Many feminists critics assert that because men control the use of technological resources, it is inevitable that it is imbued with male centred values and women do not have the same access to technology as men because technology is socially and culturally constructed as a male practice carried out in male dominated institutions (see Zmroczek et al 1987:121; Frissen 1992:331-334). Coupled with recent moves in the direction of privatisation, communication services will invariably become commodities and not public utilities and in such an instance profitability will inevitably take precedence over accessibility for numerous minority groups such as women to voice their perspectives. In the area of broadcasting, Golding and Murdock (1991:20) aptly points out that

"The economics of commercial broadcasting revolves around the exchange of audiences for advertising revenue. The price that corporations pay for advertising spots on particular programmes is determined by the size and social composition of the audience it attracts. And in prime-time, the premium prices are commanded by shows that can attract and hold the greatest number of viewers and provide a symbolic environment in tune with consumption. These needs inevitably tilt programming towards familiar and well-tested formulae and formats and away from risk and innovation, and anchor it in common-sense rather than alternative viewpoints."

In the context of Malaysia, where the links between the State and the communication industry (see Sally Cheong, 1993; Gomez, 1990, 1993, 1994) is obvious, there will be a movement away from the protection of public interest and towards a promotion of corporate interest. This is explicitly pronounce by the RTM Director-General himself who declared that we cannot afford to screen ineffective programmes anymore with RTM on the road to corporatisation (see Zaharom 1994). This would mean that some groups in society such as women would be marginalised in terms of representation in the media.

It is within this framework that we will explore the the impact of this new communication technology on Malaysian women, by first surveying the representation of women in the print and broadcast media and how this may connect with the whole notion of access and participation for women stepping into this so called information age and offer some suggestions for change.
Representation of women in the Malaysian media

Despite very optimistic remarks by an academic recently in his study of how the media now portrays women in a more positive role (see The Star, 5 October, 1995), by and large women displayed and projected in the media still pushes them back in their so called "rightful place". Indeed the media now attempts to show women not only in their traditonal role as wife and mother but as working women so as to "reflect reality".

However, this reality is not so much one that is reflected but constructed and imbued with ideology. A quantitative study such as the one mentioned above, which fastidiously counts and measures the number of times that a woman appears as a working women, cannot in anyway conclude that the status of woman is alleviated because it misses the underlying ideology and in this case a sexist ideology. In a qualitative analysis of an advertisement - L'oreal Plenitude - a woman is shown trying to keep up with her busy schedule in a harsh professional world - and indeed a men's world - but she attributed her success not to her own abilities but to her good looks and well groomed apearance. Here men are portrayed as people who have made it in the world through sheer ingenuity and brains but women can only do so through good looks. (Wang, L. K. 1994: 213-225). The point to make here is that while quantitative studies can be useful, a qualitative analysis is also needed to debunk some of the myths and sexist ideologies that are perpetuated in media text. And a research that has no strong and clear theoretical framework can only be shallow and would not address the problem.

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) (1982: 74-76) carried out a study on the abuse of women in the media some 13 years ago and had the following conclusion:

"The image of women displayed and projected by the media has led to the moulding of attitudes and perceptions both in men and women, which are at variance with positive values in our culture. Women are stereotyped as housewife, mother, and the consumer of goods. They are always packaged as attractive, demure, passive and submissive as either mothers or sex-crazed women, whereas the qualities of dominance, power, intelligence and double standards of morality are emphasised in men. Women are made to consume fashion, cosmetics, household good, western tastes and values in the consumer society, with the help of magazines, radio and TV, women's pages, novels and films."

An analysis of recent advertisements in the media shows that nothing much has changed in the last thirteen years. CAP's study highlighted an advertisement on National washing machine with the caption "This lady is busy washing clothes". But she is seen leisurely applying cutex to her toe nails so as to give an impression that housework is fun, easy and even glamorous. In a recent issue of The Star (25 September, 1995) a similar advertisement can be seen but this time selling Moulinex blenders. Again, the caption reads "The Moulinette must be the only chopper blender that makes you look more
beautiful”. This product also comes with a free beauty pack. Indeed these advertisements show that the advertisers are falling back on well tested formulaes and formats rather than giving an alternative of how men and women can be otherwise portrayed in the media.

Advertisements on mobile phone also gender stereotype the users. Earlier on when advertisers were targeting mobile phones only to the male consumer market, it showed a macho and tough image of a male user juxtaposed against a background of heavy machines and critical conditions. Today, as more women join the work force as well as the rank of mobile phone users, women are portrayed in mobile phone ads. Invariably, a Nokia advertisement (The Star, 3 October, 1995) showed a woman in a seductive pose using a mobile phone and with the caption "Nokia mobile phones are designed to make you attractive".

Another series of advertisments by IBM promoting computer products also depicts women users of technology as dumb, incapable of holding her cool when faced with a sophisticated electronic state of the art device. A similar advertisement was carried in the Newsweek (24 July, 1995) which feature both men and women making very logical demands of the product and without sexist innuendoes. This perhaps points to us that there are ads that are acceptable and there are those that are not and advertisers do work with well tested formulaes but only within an environment that accepts it. The subtle messages of IBM ads in the local media insult the intelligence and undermines the capabilities of women in this part of the world, and it only shows that there is a need for greater monitoring of the media.

To be sure, monitoring of the media is being carried out and The All Womens Action Movement (AWAM) does a good job by highlighting offensive and sexist ads (see AWAM’s WAVES Newsletter, Issue No12/13 Mar/Aug 1993; Dec1993 - Feb,1994; Mar/May 1994; June/Aug, 1995) Some examples are as follows:

- Today you can get a thousand women free for ten cents (The Star, 1 April, 1993)
- Guiness Black Magic (the message implies that women have black magic ...a notion of women as witches (Guiness Anchor Marketing Sdn. Bhd., 13 June, 1994)
- Women claws her way into boss' good books (Nestle Maggi Instant Noodles, 28 October, 1993)
- We support women - a misleading and inaccurate ad on bras by Marks and Spencer (5 March, 1995)

Three of the four ads were removed, however the Nestle ad chose to ignore its role as a responsible corporate citizen. AWAM also participated in the Global Media Monitoring Project looking at women’s participation in the news (AWAM's Press Release, 6 September, 1995). Findings of the
project showed that women's image in the media has not improved despite more women work in the newspapers, radio, and television. Highlights of some the the findings are:

- Although women and men journalists participate to almost the same extent in reporting local, national and international news only 17% of the stories were about women and women appeared more often in local stories. 95% of men appeared in stories on politics and government as compared to 11% of women. 20% of women appeared in stories on disasters/accidents and 17% on crime compared to 14% and 12% respectively for men.
- Only 11% of the news stories presented women's issues such as changing roles of women, violence against women, harassment, portrayal of women in the media, women's wage and working conditions.
- Occupations such as office workers and retired people have larger proportions of women, while occupations such as politician and police/military have larger proportions of men. Occupations traditionally associated with higher power and influence are politicians, government and spokespeople, whilst less power and influence are office workers and homemakers. Occupation of people in the news stories were:
  - Politician and government spokespersons 19% women and 51% men
  - Homemaker 97% women and 3% men
  - Police/military 6% women and 94% men
  - Politician 7% women and 93% men.

Women's access and participation in the Malaysian media

It is obvious the representation of women has not changed very much over the last 15 years. Pertinent issues on women as well as women's perspectives on issues are under-represented in the content of media. In Malaysia, The National Council of Women's Organisation (NCWO), reports that the local media is controlled and staffed by males, with less than 15 percent participation at policy and management level. This is hardly on par with other developing and developed countries. Apart from that, there is also discriminatory practices in job distribution, salary and opportunity for advancement for women in the media profession. Very often important and big assignments are given to male colleagues who may not be as competent (see Wang, L.K. 1993:25-26).

Nonetheless, there are still some women who have made it to top management post, however, there are other obstacles in advocating women's agenda. Firstly, for those who are conscious of gender issues, find it a long and lonely struggle to get things changed. Very often male colleagues sidestep women's issues or women's perspectives (Wang, L.K. 1994: 222). On the other hand there are those who
succumb to the logic of profitability by adhering to well tested formulae which inevitably marginalises alternative viewpoints.

In the advent of new communication technology, there is an even greater need to prevent space in the media from being further eroded for disempowered social groups such as women. Over the last few years, the hype has been that new communication technologies are going to change our lives. From satellite television to faxnets, CD-ROMs to Internet and World Wide Web and into the virtual world of cyberspace - these modern wonders promise more information, more music, more voices, more colours, more interaction and more participation. To be sure such technology can open many windows to the world particularly for those who work from the home, the disabled and the not so mobile people. Indeed this could be very empowering for groups such as these. However, it also raises the question of how many people can afford to own such a technology.

In Malaysia, the enormous costs of developing this new communication technology have been borne by the government and the business sector. Consequently, access and participation have been limited to people who are associated with or work in these sectors. Since women's status and roles are still restricted to a stereotypical conservative mould of being housewives and technology-illiterates, women's participation and access will be limited to the lowest rung of the technology ladder.

Studies have shown that despite technological advances, women continue to be marginalised and exploited. Their participation has been limited to jobs that are routine, repetitive and monotonous. In the Free Trade Zones (FTZ), women workers are abound in production lines in electronic factories; in financial and data base institutions they work as tellers and data input persons; in the service industry they are front desk receptionists and public relations officers; and in the telecommunications industry they are mostly telephone receptionists or in the department of bills and customer service.

While information and technology can help empower women, our society must recognise and address the barriers and obstacles which hinder women's access and participation. It must have the political will to restructure the system and make fundamental changes to remove these barriers and obstacles.

STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

Education at all levels

Noeleen Heyser (1994:14) cautioned that "not all women see the world differently from men. Most women and men share common cultural perspectives, having been socialised through the same mechanisms and institutions. So, the challenge within media organisations, is not simply to bring more
women into media employment, and especially into key decision-making positions. It is also to change perceptions of both male and female staff about what and who is important, and to revalue women and women's concerns".

One strategy to transform the attitudes of society towards women would, nonetheless, be through education whether formally or informally. Women's issues and concerns should be integrated into all disciplines and at all levels. The language and images used in all media should be gender sensitive.

In Malaysia, apart from a burgeoning number of private institutions that offer mainly skill oriented training in communication, three other universities - Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia - and the Institute of Technology MARA (ITM) also offer communication courses. However, none of the institutes of higher has deem it fit to offer a course in gender and communication. Curriculum in schools should also take in consideration gender conscientizing right from to secondary level. The Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Centre must make every effort to review the present books used in all schools to replace offensive and negative representation of women.

Providing media space and development of policies

To prevent the further erosion of media space for the minority groups, there is indeed an urgent need to provide a public service system so that such groups can speak for themselves and express their needs and responses. Zaharom (New Straits Times, 14 October, 1995) stressed that such a system would have to be socially responsive, politically accountable and relatively independent and both the government who wish to develop democracy further and the industry who desires to serve the people must indeed put society before self. To implement such a public service system to meet the needs of the people, it would indeed need "substantial political courage and will on the part of the (Malaysian) government, more so given the existing system of patronage between much of the media and dominant political parties." The government cannot provide only lip-service without developing broader and more pertinent policies to upgrade the status of women.

Providing a model code of conduct

Over the years we have seen how industry has bend rules and find loopholes in the legislation to bypass regulations. One such instance is the Advertising Code. The Code prohibits women portrayed in denigrating and nude poses. The reality is that there are still many such portrayal in the media. If women's groups cannot use the existing Code as a campaign tool because of its inherent weaknesses, they could perhaps create a "model code of conduct" for the advertising industry. Such a code could be
developed with like-minded socially conscious groups such as human rights groups, environmental groups, labour groups, etc., to provide tools to assist the public in critical analyses of advertisements or programmes that do not keep to the guidelines. Measurable commitments and timeframes should be set for industry to make improvements, and consequences for non-compliance. Most advertising agencies and their clients want a good public image, and as the markets get more competitive, businesses are more sensitive to public opinion. Boycott is a powerful tool but should be used with caution and careful planning. One of the most successful stories of consumer boycott has been the Nestle Boycott organised on a worldwide scale by NGOs in protest of Nestle's aggressive marketing of infant formula in the Third World. The campaign resulted in the development of the WHO/UNICEF Code on the Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes. Although the Code is not legally binding, it gives NGOs and concerned governments a tool to keep industry in line. Constant vigil and public pressure are required as industry often reverts to unacceptable practices.

**Networking and People's Media**

The gap between the information rich and the information poor is deteriorating exponentially as more and more resources are being controlled by a few global corporations. It is therefore imperative that women's groups network to support and learn from each other's experiences. Even among NGOs, there are those that are information rich and have access to the latest state of the art technology such as Internet and those who are still using a manual typewriter to disseminate information to the grassroots. A greater co-operation and networking among NGO's could help to realise the goal of conscientising societies in gender and other related issues. To do so, there is a need for communities to develop a media that is inclusive, sensitive and accessible to the people who need it.

For a more equitable society to come about where alternative viewpoints such as that of women's issues and perspective, there is a great need for groups from all levels to be conscious of the urgent need to prevent erosion of media space with the advent of new communication technology and work at strategies that advocate for positive changes for societies.
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PRESS RELEASE

"GLOBAL MEDIA MONITORING PROJECT- WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE NEWS"

Introduction

In February 1994, the idea of an International Day of monitoring of women in the world's news media was initiated at the "Women Empowering Communication Conference" in Bangkok, Thailand. Mediawatch, an organisation from Canada took on the task to organise this project entitled "Global Media Monitoring Project - Women's Participation in the News" (GMMP). Erin Research Inc., Canada was contracted to design the research, prepare the News Monitoring Guide and research instructions, data analysing and writing the research report. AWAM was appointed to be the country coordinator for Malaysia because of her activities in the area of Media and Women.

Purpose of Global Media Monitoring Project

It is apparent to any observer that the news media portray women and men differently. It is also apparent that the situation is changing. The Global Media Monitoring Project documents the situation at one point in time, January 18 1995. In so doing it provides quantitative definition to the role and image of women in the world's radio, television and newspapers. It purpose is threefold:

- Create a database on the participation and portrayal of women in the world's news media: newspapers, radio and television
- Provide women and others around the world with a tested and refined research instrument which they can apply to their own context in the future
- Establish a benchmark which different regions of the world can use to see themselves in a global context and which will serve as a standard for measuring future change

Participation in the Project

71 countries from 10 regions around the world (see appendix A) participated in this Global Media Monitoring Project. In Malaysia, AWAM together with other NGOs (see appendix B) acting as Regional Teams participated in this Global Media Monitoring Project by monitoring the newspapers, radio and television news programme (see appendix C).
Release of the Project's Result

The report of the Global Media Monitoring Project was first released at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, People's Republic of China, in September 1995. Around the world most of the participating countries will be releasing the GMMP Report on 6th September 1995 in their respective countries. This date is chosen because it is the INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ACTION FOR WOMEN. In Malaysia, AWAM together with the Regional Teams are also releasing the results of this project countrywide on 6th September 1995 in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Sabah and Sarawak respectively.

Findings of the Project

Women's image in the media has not improved despite the fact that more women work in the newspapers, radios and televisions. The findings are classified into eight (8) headings:

1. The presence of women in news
2. Scope of story
3. Issues of concern to women
4. Victims
5. Praise and accusations
6. Occupation
7. Age
8. Age, gender and influence

Highlights of some of the findings are as follows:

- Presence of Women in News - Although 43 percent of journalists were women, only 17 percent of stories were about women.

- Scope of Story - Women and men journalists participate to almost the same extent in reporting local, national and international news. Women appear more often in local news. 29 percent of men appear in stories on politics and government as compared to 11 percent on women. 20 percent of women appear in stories on disasters/accidents and 17 percent on crime compared to 14 percent and 12 percent for men.
Ten issues of interest and concern to women were defined, e.g. changing roles of women, violence against women, harassment, portrayal of women in the media, women's wages, working conditions etc. Only 11 percent of the news stories present women's issues.

Occupation - The occupations of women and men in the news differ in two very interesting ways. Politician and government spokespersons account for 19% of women and 31% of men. People whose occupation is unspecified account for 28% of women and 9% of men. Female and male interviewees in different occupation groups are: Homemaker - 97% women, 3% men; Police/military - 6% women, 94% men; politician - 7% women, 93% men.

Age, gender and influence - Occupations such as office workers and retired people have larger proportions of women, while occupations such as politician and police/military have large proportions of men. Occupation traditionally associated with higher power and influence are: politicians, government spokesperson, etc. whilst occupation traditionally associated with less power and influence are: office workers, athletes, homemakers, etc. Older interviewees, those above 35 years of age, tend to be found in positions of high power and influence more frequently than younger people.

Future Directions

This project hopes to achieve a more equitable balance of portrayal of women in the world's news media. It is evident that gender differences are linked to power and influence. To achieve equality in the news media, the following approaches must be addressed:

1. Shift media emphasis

The news media can shift their attention to cover areas in which women participate more fully rather than on the traditional events of politics, government and business. A shift of this nature does not mean abandon of interest in power and influence but rather the broadening of their search and achieving greater inclusiveness and diversity.

2. Increase access to power and decision-making

Women can be given the opportunity to participate more fully in traditionally male-dominated areas of society such as in politics, business, the economy, national development, etc.
3. **Address policies and regulations**

Regulations and guidelines can encourage or direct media (radio, television, newspapers) to achieve an equitable gender balance in their programming, hiring practices or both.

4. **Conduct ongoing analysis**

Countries individually and collectively can continue to analyze the portrayal of gender in their media in order to pinpoint areas requiring change, to assess the effectiveness of strategies, and to develop an empirical, scientific basis for increasing the participation of women in the mass media.

**Conclusion**

The Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Malaysia have in the past concentrated much effort in the work of portrayal of women in the advertising media. The GMMP has given those involved a valuable experience in the analysis of the images of women in the news media locally. Though women have been a focal point in the advertising media, (most of the time not favorably portrayed), the GMMP has given not only the Malaysian counterpart but also the media workers a widening insight of women portrayal in the news media of which the findings are certainly thought provoking. We hope that this project will echo more work of this sort locally and globally.

Ho Yock Lin  
Country Coordinator - Malaysia  
Global Media Monitoring Project
## APPENDIX A

### PARTICIPATION BY REGIONS

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APPENDIX B

REGIONAL COORDINATORS

REGION 1
WOMEN'S CRISIS CENTRE, PENANG

REGION 2
ALL WOMEN'S ACTION SOCIETY (AWAM)
PEOPLE'S SERVICE ORGANISATION, SELANGOR
PERSATUAN SAHABAT WANITA, SELANGOR

REGION 3
PARTNERS OF COMMUNITY ORGANISATION, SABAH
SABAH WOMEN ACTION RESOURCE GROUP, SABAH

REGION 4
SARAWAK WOMEN FOR WOMEN SOCIETY, SARAWAK
APPENDIX C

LIST OF MEDIA MONITORED

1. NEWSPAPER

1.1 ENGLISH

NEW STRAITS TIMES
MALAY MAIL
THE STAR
THE SUN
BORNEO POST
SARAWAK TRIBUNE

1.2 MALAY

HARIAN METRO
UTUSAN MALAYSIA
BERITA HARIAN
WATAN
UTUSAN UTARA

1.3 CHINESE

NANYANG
SIN CHEW JIT POH
SIN MIN
CHINA PRESS
ASIA TIMES
KWONG WAH
GUANG MING DAILY

1.4 TAMIL

UYARUOM

2. TELEVISION

TV1, TV2 & TV3

3. RADIO

RADIO 2, 3, 4 & 5