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Skyways, Highways & Corridors

Paper Presented By
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Women in the Information Society: Empowerment or Enmeshment?

"...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)

Introduction

Many popular commentators tell us that information technology is set to change our world. Our work patterns, family life, leisure and entertainment will inevitably change to benefit our society. Images of remote cashless shopping, direct television broadcast via satellite, homeworking, automated office, etc have been conjured up to prove this point. Back in the 1970's Bell (1974:114) even predicted that new information technologies would raise standards of living and reduce inequalities across the globe. This view so far has remained utopian, as we see that informational inequities that cut across class, ethnicity, gender and region are even more pronounced today (see Golding and Murdock 1986; Hepworth and Robins 1988).

Indeed the optimistic assumption of a 'new kind of society' brought about information technology need to be critically analysed lest it distracts us from asking crucial questions about the way it is developed and introduced and its real impact on society. Hence this paper will explore the impact of information technology on society within the structure of power relations.

In assesing the role that the information industry can and must play in the transformation of society in general and women in particular, it is necessary to work on the premise that technology is not neutral but made up of ideas and values of those who own and controls the technology. It is asserted by many feminists critics that men control the use of technological resources and hence women will have differential access to technology. This differential access will be further exacerbated with privatisation where communication services will invariably be produced like commodities sold in the market for profit and not produced as public utilities (see Zmroczek et al 1987:121; Frissen 1992:331-334). In the area of broadcasting, Golding and Murdock (1991:20) warns 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 Malaysia, this is explicitly pronounced 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 minority groups in society,
such as women would further be marginalised in terms of representation in the media. It is therefore imperative that we survey the impact of new communication technology on women, by first looking at how women are being represented in the media and how this may connect to the whole notion of access and participation for women stepping into this so-called information age, and critically explore where the advent of new communication technology empowers or enmeshes women.

**Representation of Women in the Information Industry**

Recently, an academic in Malaysia reported in his study that the media now portrays women in more positive roles (see The Star, 5 October, 1995). This optimistic view is the outcome of a merely quantitative study which counts the number of times women are being portrayed taking on the modern role, (as opposed to the traditional role of mother, wife, etc.) Such a study and statements actually divert us from asking crucial questions about the ways these images are developed and distributed. Ideas can be developed from the kind of sexist ideologies that the society holds. For instance, a male advertiser in a multinational advertising agency said:

"Men like cars, men like women; cars and women together is just a way of putting subjects that work well together. Ad sells lifestyle. If I am talking to a group of men who like to drink and chat up women just to boost their silly egos, than using a woman would give them inspirations". (Tan 1991:3)

Gramsci argued in his *Prison Notebook*, that acceptance of the common sense view of the subordination of women is dangerous as it does not allow for the construction of an oppositional or alternative view. For example, some cookery programmes are hosted by men and women are invited to demonstrate their culinary skills. Indeed superficial "new image" of a man in the kitchen first appeared to suggest a man's presence in the "rightful" of women; but most discerning women can probably read this as mere tokenism. In other words, a serious analysis of portrayal of women in the media need to take on a qualitative approach to look at the language, symbol, meanings and discourses used rather than to assume that all that can be counted and quantified is meaningful. It is also imperative that the researcher must have a gender perspective and a commitment to addressing the problems.

A vast amount of research on the portrayal of women has been conducted by feminist concerned with the impact of these images and how these may influence the values, ideas and actions in society with regard to women. By and large, these research show there is very little coverage in the media of women's work, achievements or needs. If women are shown in the non-traditional roles, they are invariably distorted or ridiculed. Advertisements still tend to stereotype women, the language used to portray women is still sexist and the images degrade women.

For example, in India, the Joshi Committee report noted in 1984 that female the form is exploited to the hilt in films and many of the images in the film trivialize and debase the image of womanhood. After more than a decade, nothing much has changed and films from India continue in its socially insensitive approach in portraying women. The situation is no different in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh where, invariably, the coverage of women by the media do not reflect women's role and contribution to society (see Sharma et al 1987; Krishnan et al 1986)
In the Korean and Japanese society, where the media is male dominated, women are either ignored or are covered not because of their abilities but just because they are women (see Hatano 1987:239; Park Yong San 1987:229). There are apparent similarities of such portrayals in the ASEAN region as well as in Hong Kong (see Wang Lay Kim 1994; Hermano 1990).

The representation of women in the media is made even clearer through a global media monitoring project which was mooted by MediaWatch, Canada, with the aim of establishing the basic facts about women's representation in the world's news. The project conducted on 18 January, 1995, by hundreds of women and some men in 71 countries provided women with a tool to scrutinise their media in a systematic way, and a means of documenting the bias and exclusion that exists in news content worldwide. The results were published by World Association for Christian Communication under the title *Women's Participation in the News*.

The data from the global media monitoring project confirmed that men were mostly shown in high status occupations such as politicians, professionals, government spokespersons, etc., (see Figure 1). This may be mere reflection of the gender division of labour in our society as a whole; nevertheless it begs the interpretation that women are underrepresented in high status occupation.

![Figure 1: News actors in three occupational groups](image)

*Source: Women's Participation in the News: Asia (p.14)*

The MediaWatch report also showed that women are more than males to have no stated or specified occupation the report explains that may be related to the high incidence of females being portrayed as victims in news stories. The occupation of a accident or crime victim may be considered irrelevant to the news story and hence not mentioned. What is clear here is that women in the Asian news media are portrayed as victims very much more often than men. Another explanation may be reflected in the different roles played by women and men. It is a truism to say that women are rarely called upon to give expert opinion, this seems to be a male prerogative. As a result, occupations are more frequently specified for men.
is again not surprising that women is in the majority for the category 'homemaker' and if they appear in the news appear as ordinary people with low status occupation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Distribution of female and male news actors across occupations  
*Source: Women's Participation in the News: Asia (p.15)*

It is also noteworthy that the report confirmed that less than 7% of the Asian news stories covered issues of special concern to women, like changing roles of women, violence against women, portrayal of women in the media, etc. The report summarised by saying that the news agenda was so heavily dominated by dominant issues that it is unlikely that women's issues will be given full priority (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage of Stories covering issues of special concern to women  
*Source: Women's Participation in the News: Asia (p.24)*
Given the kind of representation that is seen in the media, it is worth considering the IT related developments and understand the economic, political and ideological forces at work at the local and international levels that oppress and marginalize women. Television broadcasting in the Asian region has rapidly changed in the last couple of years. It is now possible to get numerous channels of programmes including National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Cable News Network (CNN), thanks to Satellite Television Asian Region (STAR) TV, which media magnate Rupert Murdoch acquired from Li Ka-Shing's Hutchinson Whampoa in 1993. STAR TV is also moving towards a more specialised coverage to cater to individual markets. This move will inevitably block access for minority groups such as women to voice their concern, since this is not deemed profitable.

What is also very disturbing is that Balakrishnann (1994:56) reports that advertisers are already using STAR TV to evade stringent broadcast norms and to gain simultaneous access to buyers in thirty-seven Asian countries. The awesome capacity of the new technology has prompted governments in developing countries to voice their concern. Malaysia's Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir has consistently expressed dismay over Rupert Murdoch's ownership and control of STAR TV. Perhaps, partly as a counter measure, Malaysia launched its own satellite. But what is less clear is whether this new communication technology will be used to re-address problems of inequities that women face. In view of the capacities of these new technologies and the dominant market ideology in Malaysia, these questions will remain rhetorical.

Apart from the broadcast media, telecommunication advancement has enabled the use of Internet. Through the internet, users are able to enter into the virtual world of cyberspace to send and receive information through pictures and sound. The so called exciting world of cyberspace is also another arena where sexually explicit materials and pornography can be perpetuated. While many countries have taken measures to regulate the Internet, the actual execution of law can be very difficult if not impossible in that it is seamlessly global and anarchic (see Low:1996:5). This then may spell further disempowerment of women.

Indeed in order for women not to be enmeshed in this information cage, we may begin by taking to heart the warning of Gallagher (1989: 32):

"It is very important that women grasp the implications of the new communication technologies and anticipate its impact nationally, by locating the trends within a framework that acknowledges the increasing global, economic and political interests operating".

Women's access and participation in the information industry

While a vast amount of research has been carried out on the portrayal of women in the mass media, relatively little is known about the extent and nature of women's participation in the information industry. There has been some data collected, however, they are both rather fragmented and provide very little statistical facts. Nonetheless, the sporadic data gives us a clue to the situation of women working in the media. Indeed the media industry is male dominated both in terms of overall numbers as well as in terms of distribution across and within specific occupations. There is a relatively small number of women in the media
profession occupying top policy and management levels. Table 1 shows the percentage of women in top management positions.

### Table 1

Women in the Media Profession at the Policy and Management Levels

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
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Source: *New Straits Times*, 5 August 1989

For the small number of women who make it to the top managerial positions, there are other obstacles in advocating women's agenda. Very often male colleagues sidestep women's issues or women's perspectives (see Wang L.K. 194:222)

In terms of specific occupation, the Global Media Monitoring project once again revealed that women appeared as news readers (63%) more than as news reporters (20%). This distinction is important because news presenters have little or no influence on the content of the media or the script that they read. The report also revealed that women are more likely to cover subject areas like arts and entertainment, presumably a 'feminised' activity. Once again the participation of women in the media industry is limited.

In the information industry, studies have shown that women's 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 the financial and data base institutions they work as tellers and data input persons; in the service industry they are front desk receptionists; and in the telecommunications industry they are mostly telephone receptionists.

In order for women to be empowered in this information age, fundamental changes must be made to remove obstacles that hinder women's access and participation.

### Creating Critical Awareness

We can hope for these fundamental changes to occur through education. Paulo Freire, states that true education begins with the questioning and testing of established knowledge, norms, values, ideas and practices that define our reality and shape our consciousness; to see if they are necessarily true or otherwise in one's own social, historical and ideological reality (see Zaharom 1995/1996:125). Zaharom asserts that this critical approach to media education offers us the opportunity to penetrate the media and understand the fundamental links between numerous realms - social, cultural, political and economic - in society. Hence for
him, students of the media will then be able to learn not only to construct media artefacts but to deconstruct media messages and understand and recognise the underlying institutional and organisational power relations as well. While Zaharom focusses on the need for media education for university media students, such a kind of education introduced at various levels of society would indeed be liberating for both men and women alike. Curriculum in schools should take in consideration gender conscientization and the Ministry of Education and the Curriculum Development Centre can start by reviewing books that are currently used in schools that are offensive and present women negatively. At the Univeristy level, particularly those that offer communication programmes, should consider seriously about providing gender perspectives This, however has to be done out of a commitment to re-address the problem of gender inequality rather than just jumping on the gender bandwagon.

In the final analysis it is this kind of education that will empower women and men alike in this so called information age.
Bibliography


THE NEW COMMUNICATION CORNUCOPIA:
IS MORE BETTER?

Mark Trasenster
James Bentley
Hidetoshi Kato
TOPIC: The New Communication Cornucopia: Is More Better?

* Implications of information overload: more hardware or more softskills

* Asian audience preparedness in a multimedia environment

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