

# Media Matters

by Luz Maria Martinez

Seeing the WAR ON television—live, with on-the-spot coverage—does not a well-INFORMED citizen make.

**M**exico and China are believed to share history dating back 40 thousand years ago. Some archaeologists believe that during the Ice Age, nomads from China made their way to the Americas through the Bering Strait and settled throughout the continent, giving rise to the many indigenous peoples in North and South America. The descendants of these nomads established well-developed civilizations, some of which are the Aztecs of Mexico, the Incas of Peru and the Inuit of Alaska.

In 1995, these two countries shared something else: conferences where the issue of media, women and human dignity were discussed. In September, Beijing hosted the Fourth World Conference on Women. The following month, the 1995 Congress of the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) was held in Puebla, Mexico's third largest city. In Beijing, many of the discussions were on the issue of media and the impact it has on women and other marginalized societies. In Puebla, the main focus was media and human dignity.

**M**edia has been playing major roles in our daily lives. In its

"Ours is indeed the age of communication. But more access to information has not made us more just, concerned or more creative. In this global village, we are much more selfish, self-centered, brutal and patriarchal than are most villagers."

## MAKING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY WORK FOR US

- Be aware of** new technologies' potentials and pitfalls.
- Pressure governments to** treat new communication technologies as a public utility that should be made available and affordable to the general public.
- Infrastructures required by** new communication technologies must be environment-friendly and sustainable.
- Demand software manufacturers** to develop user-friendly programs written in local languages.
- Study the impact and** potential of new communication technologies in particular countries.
- Formulate an Information Charter** that will safeguard individual and national privacy.
- Counteract programs that** depict women in stereotypical roles
- Women's stories need** to be told without sensationalization and with dignity.
- Women's knowledge and** perspectives should be taken seriously in all arenas of debate.

various forms, the media informs us, educates us, seduces us, confuses us and programs everything from what we should think, feel, smell, see, taste and hear.

According to Eduardo Galeano, Latin-American writer, social analyst and keynote speaker at the WACC conference, "the media is imposing a way of life that believes the exemplary citizen to be the docile consumer and the passive spectator."

Mainstream media, controlled by only a handful of white men, more and more Western in its perspective and increasingly merging with corporate interests, presents to the world many contradictions. While graphically depicting the economic sufferings of people, it bombards audiences with pure consumerist ideas and attitudes.

Women and progressive men from around the world are attempting to expose the truth behind what we have been receiving from the mainstream media. They are trying to shake us awake from the dream that we are better informed simply because we can see "the actual shooting—live— with on-the-spot coverage."

### **Media and Globalization**

Globalization, in its positive sense, means that we are all part of one global village where we can share our diversities and see and care for each other as global brothers and sisters. The mass media, because it connects people across continents plays a crucial, if not primary role, in globalization. "Globalization was introduced as a modernization that will enable Third World countries to join the First World and enjoy the offerings of developed nations," says Carlos A. Valle, Secretary General of WACC. But what is actually happening is quite different. "Globalization has brought with it disorder and a paralysis."

A vivid example of this disorder and paralysis is Rwanda. Why were we not in Rwanda to stop one of the worst carnage of this century?

According to Frances D' Souza, director of Article 19, a London-based media

research organization, the media purposefully did not use the word "genocide" in its reporting of the Rwanda killings even when, by all standards of definition, it was genocide that took place. The term was blacked-out because it would have forced powerful signatories to the United Nations Conventions who vowed that the world would not tolerate another ethnic cleansing to intervene.

In fact, says Galeano, the global media networks made no mention of how Germany, Belgium and France played major roles in breeding disharmony between the Hutus and Tutsis. Neither did any media network try to identify who was supplying arms to the Hutus. Media simply explained the war in Rwanda as another "tribal" war.

Kamla Bhasin, coordinator of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organizations's (FAO) NGO South Asian Programme, board member of Isis International-Manila and noted Indian feminist says that "ours is indeed the age of communication. But more access to information has not made us more just, concerned or more creative. In this 'global village,' we are much more selfish, self-centered, brutal and patriarchal than are most villagers." Globalization, she adds, also meant patriarchy becoming more powerful and entrenched.

### **Media and Patriarchy**

"The media is an industry and its serving its corporate interest just fine" says Judy Rebick, a panelist at the plenary session on Media, Culture and Communication in Beijing. "Media companies are no longer businesses in your neighborhood vying with one another for your support. They are major political players in the national and international scene."

Media's natural tendency is therefore to pander to bankers, politicians and men in "gray suits" who are able to represent themselves leisurely on television news and economic and political talk shows. Meanwhile, people from popular move-



Congress participants in Mexico approve resolutions on media and human dignity.

ments are merely photo shots shouting slogans and carrying placards. Anchors call these people “marginalized.”

In Beijing, while television reporters abounded and journalists swarmed the premises, the items of interest that seemed to capture their attention were the celebrities who attended the conference and women’s personal stories. But media disappeared as soon as women began discussing economics and politics—the kind of hard news that media ought to report on. And it does. On television and cable, these are the same issues that take up long hours of airtime. Only here, men are the ones doing the explaining.

Yayori Matsui, a journalist, feminist and director of the Asian Women’s Association, discussed her experience as a woman in a male-dominated media world in Asia. She recounted how, with much resistance from her publishers and editors, she covered issues that affected women.

While a reporter in Vietnam, Yayori witnessed how mainstream media reported only on the deaths of U.S. servicemen but left out on the atrocities that Vietnamese women were suffering at the hands of the U.S. soldiers. It did not see the deformed children being born to so many Vietnamese women because of “agent orange,” a poisonous chemical deployed by the U.S. onto Vietnamese soil.

In Cambodia, media failed to report the stories of widows and their children caught in the middle of war. These stories, Yayori says, were usually ignored particularly by the mainstream and Western media.

Yayori reported on all these but her male editors were disinterested, despite support from women readers. Yayori's other stories brought scorn from her male colleagues, such as her report on Japanese men going to the Philippines and Thailand for sex tours. Western media, that presently dominates the world, has contributed to this objectifying and commodifying of Asian women by stereotyping them as "charming Oriental beauties and sexy girls."

### **Media and Conservatism**

Fundamentalists and extreme right wing conservatives found an excuse in media and globalization to control people's—particularly women's—freedoms.

One of the core arguments in the propaganda used by fundamentalists to gain support underscores media's guilt in the breaking down of tradition. The call for people to oppose the promoters of ideas that erode these long-standing traditions is a logical conclusion. Consequently, feminist are the first targets of such reactionary movements.

Television's concept of a liberated woman is limited to attributing to her sexual freedoms that only benefit male fantasies. Apart from commodifying women, this concept provides fundamentalists with a lot of reasons to strengthen patriarchy in the name of preserving family tradition and God's laws.

### **The Alternative Media**

Yayori emphasizes that women need to fight for access and control of media. Access to media need not necessarily be limited to the mainstream. The alternative media is where the future lies.

But in using and developing alternative media, Kamla Bhasin stresses that it

is important to remember that the alternative should be decentralized, democratic, low-cost and low in technology. Content and form should encourage dialogue and debate and treat women and people as subjects rather than objects or targets of communication. The alternative communication media should project reality from the perspective of people's wisdom and knowledge.

### **Technology: Alternative or Apartheid?**

In Mexico and in Beijing, the importance of new information technologies was a subject for debate.

New information technologies, according to Robin Abarms is an alternative to mainstream media. "We have seen the rapid expansion of the Internet and [how] it is [aiding] worldwide global reporting. This gives women immediate access to communication and avenues of expression while, at the same time, allows them to participate and discuss issues in a manner that will influence policy in a tangible way." Robin challenged conference participants to "leapfrog" by comprehending and using new information technologies. Unless women do that, the proponents of information technology say, they will forever be left behind, retained in a reactive position instead of setting the terms.

The other side of the debate accuses information technologies with widening the gap between those who have access to it and those who do not. Many women argue that in many rural areas in developing countries, telephones—perhaps the most basic modern day communication tool—do not even exist. Contrary to being accessible and creating links between rural places and urban centers, the information highway naturally tends to head straight for richer and larger cities because the tools for navigating it are found only there, serving primarily the interests of businesses and corporations.

The result is what some women call "technology apartheid" where computer

technology has widened the gap among the social classes.

New information technologies, its oppositors say, are also culturally alienating. Most computer softwares are written only in English and in such a user-hostile manner.

Women are also concerned about the way these technologies are being developed and what role women are playing in its evolution. As people already know, men have made use of this technology to disseminate and create pornography and have even developed ways of sexually harassing women on the Internet.

A paper presented at the WACC Congress by Dr. Ubonrat Siriyuvasak, professor of communications at Chulalongakorn University in Thailand, asks: "Those who develop the technology, are they corporate voices with an intent to commercialize our lives? Will these voices create more understanding and caring between individuals and peoples? Or will they further reinforce racial prejudices, gender stereotypes and class biases, authoritarian regimes and consumerism?"

In the face of the continuing debate, women's groups can only continue to raise people's awareness of the potentials and pitfalls of new communication technologies.

**C**ommunication and information are women's basic tools. The strength of the women's movements worldwide has always been its ability to disseminate the kind of information that raises women's consciousness about their rights, that stirs in them questions and urges them to demand for what is rightfully theirs. These are information that stimulate and encourage creativity. Because women have been informed, they have learned to protect themselves and each other.

Women use various media to accomplish this: from print to broadcast, to community theater, music, poetry, dance, arts and crafts. The number of women in the field of mass communication is steadily and continuously increasing, a development that is both encouraging and deceiving. The mere increase in the number of women in media is not enough to change the image of women. What is important is for women media workers to have a political, if not feminist, perspective on issues. Women media workers who lack a clear feminist standpoint communicate the role model of a lone woman scrambling to climb the existing structure and not of a woman struggling to change that structure.

And, in this age of the cyberspace, women are learning to wield the power of high technology even as they continue to affirm the effectiveness of low-tech, non-electronic channels. In using these new communication technologies, women realize that these should promote women's access to them and allow women to maximize their potential. New technologies should complement other media and, together, must effectively communicate messages that deconstruct gender stereotypes.

But ultimately, neither new communication technologies nor access to information would be enough to bring about substantive change in the status of women. What needs to happen is for women to take the information and act on it, first of all by using any and all available forms of communication to disseminate the information in ever widening circles. Women need to keep in their minds the vital role that information plays in the movement: To strengthen the links of women all around the world. ♪