Making Choices

Through the years, women have used various communication forms for various purposes. As the book *Women's Experiences in Media* (published by Isis International-Manila and the World Association for Christian Communication in 1996) chronicles, women have used the whole range of communication forms—from the Internet and the fax, to radio and television, videos and movies, as well as the theater and the circus. They have used these to mobilise and generate support for campaigns, to monitor and influence media's portrayal of women, to educate, to lobby, to share information, to stimulate discourse and even to overcome emotional trauma.

Evidently, there has been a tremendous increase in women's communication activities that has resulted in greater visibility for women's issues and concerns across the world. Whether this greater visibility has led to positive changes for women is another matter for discussion and debate.

While there is clearly a consensus that technology-based communication means have helped women advance their advocacies, one question begins to nag us all: until when can women's information and communication survive the competition from "man-stream" or the more dominant media, fueled even more now by globalisation?

These very same communication means that have enabled women to intervene in the public sphere and create parallel events without the limits of time and space are now threatened by the commercialisation and globalisation of communication technologies. The information and communication domain is largely controlled by powerful interests that regard the provision of information as a commodity with an ever increasing price tag. The traditional and previously independent mass media are being taken over by powerful business conglomerates that continue to be created everyday. They are becoming so interlinked with big business whose interests they now primarily serve. This is where the creative use of the Internet by women to communicate, network and organise contributes in preventing the balance from completely tilting over to the side of the resource-rich. Communicating through the Internet does not need to be expensive or technology-driven. But women need to take hold of this technology and wield it for their purposes and benefit.

This brings us to another point, where we need to examine certain attitudes that can keep us from breaking through. We in the NGOs can become very cynical sometimes that we find no use in engaging what we call the mainstream. Some of us even look at working in the margins as a source of pride and honour. While we all begin there, that should not be the ultimate place for us and our messages. Unless, of course, that staying in the margins is our own survival mechanism. But this, to me, is courting the danger of our extinction. Unless we heed the wake up call, the giants will swallow us one day and we won't even notice it.

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And finally, audiences and readers need to start asserting their right to receive relevant, accurate and reliable information. We should exercise our right to demand quality communication and information. Corollary to this is to demand accountability from media producers and information providers. The minimum demand should be user-friendly and affordable information that is, at the same time, reliable and pluralist.

But how do we go about this? We can start with the basics and one of these is media literacy. Where else is it best to begin than in our own communities, our workplace, our circle of friends. Our main agenda is to build a critical understanding of the ethics of communication, including equitable and effective access with the end view of developing critical media and information users among us. Media and information provision and use should be viewed as a social and political exercise that entails making a choice and assuming responsibility for these choices.