

The following sections—Women and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Women and Media—are regular features of Women in Action. As these are Isis International-Manila's key advocacy areas, we keep track of the discourse on these issues and share them with our readers. Ed.

Whose Global Knowledge? Women Navigating the Net

By Leslie Regan Shade

In this article, edited for brevity, Leslie Regan Shade examines the tension between the feminization of the Internet and the use of the Internet for feminism. Although women are using the Internet for their empowerment, she warns, the right to communicate could be overshadowed by the commercialization of the Internet.

Introduction

The tension between the creation of women's space for activism and electronic democracy on the Internet, and the creation of women's communities by corporate and media behemoths concerned only with exploiting the commercial potential of women as an audience is evident. This tension can also be seen in the other types of Internet users that have emerged as the Net becomes more and more privatised and commercialised and the logic of neoliberalism pervades both the discourse and the development of this communication tool (Schiller, 1999).

This tension can be characterised as the dichotomy between the feminisation of the Internet versus feminist use of the Internet. Feminisation of the Internet refers to the creation of popular content where women's consumption is privileged and encouraged, rather than production or critical analysis.

This dichotomy is not new. From the analyses of a variety of feminist scholars that have examined the gendering of other communication technologies (such as the telephone, radio and television), one sees how women have been repeat-

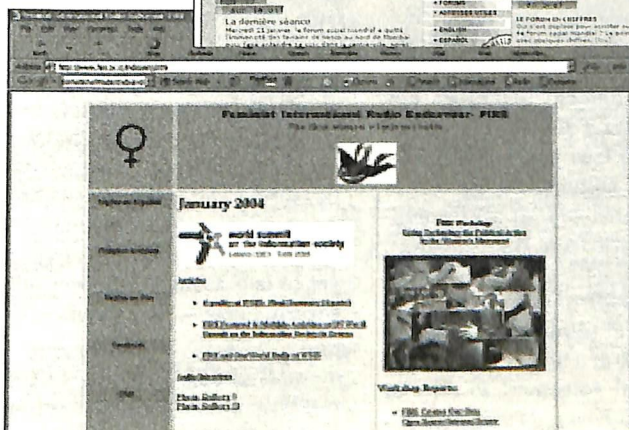
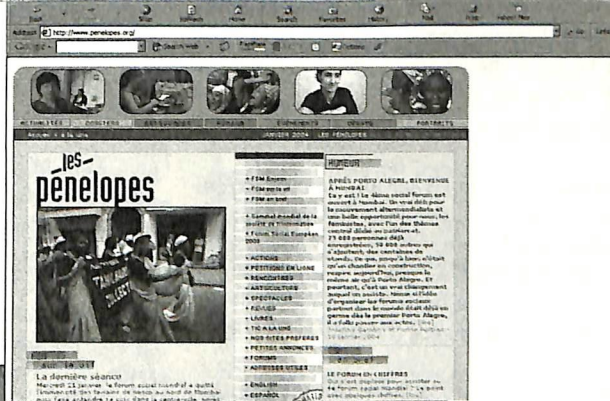
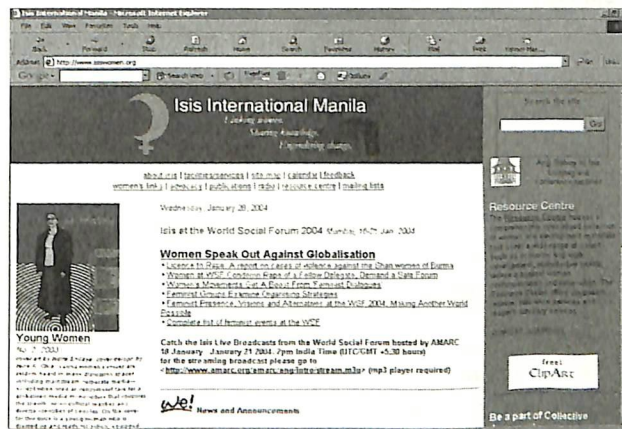
edly gendered through the social practices promoted by industry, as well as through various uses adopted by women and their communities.

Women have been active agents in the construction of

the Internet. Diverse women's communities, in both developed and developing countries, have been using the Internet for feminism, activism and democracy. It is important to remember that the Internet is one tool among many to link the international women's movement. There are still barriers brought about by technical and social infrastructure to break down for many, and traditional forms of networking are still vital (Kramer and Kramarae, 2000). Examples are the press network of Fempress in Latin America; in radio, the Feminist International Radio Endeavor (FIRE) and the

Women's International News Gathering Service (WINGS) in Canada and Isis International, with offices in the Philippines, Chile and Uganda utilises the e-mail, internet, the postal system, telephone and fax.

Les Penelopes in France and Amazon City Radio also show innovative uses of the Internet. Les Penelopes has a weekly interac-



tive television programme called “Cyberfemmes,” with on-line discussions and background texts to elaborate on the content of their episodes. The programme’s primary goal is to relay the reflections, actions and struggles of women around the world. Recent topics have included the status of women in media, trans-sexuality, global prostitution, globalisation, educator Maria Montessori, and women in sports <www.penelopes.org>. Amazon City Radio, “the voice of women on the Internet,” is a Web-based radio station for women that uses the RealPlayer. It archives the reports of WINGS, which provides news about women around the world <www.radio.amazoncity.com>.

But however much we applaud feminist activity on the Internet, the feminisation of the Internet continues unabated. Such activity should not be surprising; research indicates that with the emergence of every new communications technology, women have been targeted as a specific demographic by advertisers and the media themselves. It is important to consider then the wider issues of political economy if the existing patterns of ownership, control, representation and creation of women’s content on the Internet are to be understood and challenged. As WomenAction’s *Alternative Assessment* reports:

ICTs are double-edged swords: [they are] so often owned by multinational corporations and/or outside of our own control [that] we cannot adequately know what is going on at all times. There continues to be a deeper exclusion for those who do not have access, and the digital divide has gone from being a theoretical talking point to a reality since Beijing, while we have seen few programmes aimed at reducing the gap for women. (WomenAction, 2000)

What are the concerns about privacy and women’s freedom of expression and right to pluralistic information in our hyper-competitive media environment? Margaret Gallagher rightly comments that a view of competition is radical when its starting point is human and cultural diversity rather than financial markets (Gallagher, 1996).

We must constantly be aware of how the idea of the technological fix as panacea pervades not just the discourse, but also the actions surrounding technology in society. For instance, Canadian Finance Minister Paul Martin’s 1999 budget called for US\$1.8 billion over four years to promote the “creation, dissemination, and commercialization of knowledge.” That spending would ensure that all Canadians have a chance “to learn and profit from the Internet.” It includes money earmarked for smart community initiatives. As Reuters reported: “One government official said that the experimental projects would allow police departments to electronically notify parents of a missing child...or enable social workers to use digital voicemail to stay in touch with homeless clients” (*Wired News*, 1999). The ab-

surdity of these purported applications defies explanation. Something is truly out of sync in our values when we consider digital devices more important than shelter.

A critical stance is necessary when looking at the role of the Internet in our daily lives. How are we talked about in information society discourses? Are people addressed as citizens or consumers? Vincent Mosco contends that we need to critique debates about citizenship as they are inserted into the discourses of the information society and knowledge-based economy. Which citizenship are we talking about? There is citizenship “as a bundle of legal rights derived from the sovereign state and citizenship as democratic participation in a community” (Mosco, 2000:44).

Although positive and glowing descriptions of the possibilities and outcomes of the Internet in order to stimulate and promote the activities of women are important, it is also important to keep in mind that constructive and socially redeeming policies are needed. Policy-making should work toward ameliorating the current gender disparity in access (technological and social) to the Internet, and toward providing practical solutions regarding issues surrounding work and employment, and privacy and security. Given the fast pace of the implementation of a global information infrastructure, the voice of women in developing countries in the development, dissemination and deployment of the technology is urgent, as is the assistance from women in developed countries in such endeavours. Policies must promote women’s participation in political debate and government decision-making.

The Right to Communicate

One of the ways to institute policy is through various “right-to-communicate” measures. The right to communicate has received increasing focus with the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Many of these principles first received attention in the 1970s with the New World Communication and Information Order (NWICO). With the development of a global information infrastructure, the right to communicate in a ‘network society’ (Castells, 1997) has become even more challenging in light of swiftly developing technologies, a deregulated telecommunications environment, neo-liberal economic and social policies, and a diverse civil society. Moreover, the increase in the number of non-governmental organisations using information and communication technologies has added to the urgency of establishing global recognition of the right to communicate. Although a universal right to communicate has yet to become part of accepted international law, there are several initiatives promoting this discussion at a global level.

The right to communicate is recognised by many governments as a fundamental human right, and includes notions of freedom of opinion, freedom of expression, freedom

of information, and freedom of the press. The right to communicate has also been expanded to include the notion of universal access to information and communication technologies, with access seen as both a technical and social infrastructure (Clement and Shade, 2000); the right to public access; and public participation in both the means of communication and policy-making. Linguistic rights are also a feature of the right to communicate, as well as the sustenance of indigenous languages and culture.

Media concentration and globalisation are some of the factors inhibiting the right to communicate. Of particular concern are issues of the global commercial media market, and corporate concentration of media industries, which are primarily American in culture and ownership, and the dominance of global capitalism, exemplified by institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), World Bank and International Monetary Fund. It is important to examine the commercialisation of information, particularly tax-supported government information, and intellectual property balances between creators, publishers and public interest. Corporate accountability and public participation in consultations surrounding policy formulation at local, national and international levels are also prerequisites to ensure that all the diverse parts of civil society can fully exercise the right to communicate.

Future Research

Despite frenzied moves to attract and keep women on the Internet in commercial-driven branded environments, many individual adult and young women and women's groups have been creating energetic and vibrant Web content. Net-based communication has facilitated the design, development and diffusion of feminist content—whether this is political, informative, creative or humorous. In fact, many of the strategies and styles originally developed by early Net feminists have been appropriated by commercial entities, whether this is a funky graphics style, feisty attitude of can-do, or linking content with chatrooms and conferencing.

But, despite the synergistic mergers of television broadcasters and telecommunication giants, as well as the rapid development of broadband applications (and the increased availability of high-speed modems even in homes), feminist communication and the use of the Internet by a diverse range of civil society will be sustained. This does not mean that we should sit by as AOL creates yet another cyber-mall, or as public policy continues to emulate the liberal ethos of so much of Internet culture. As digital capitalism creeps its way into our daily lives, we need to be more conscious than ever of preserving public interest.

The public interest spirit that has guided the communications sphere has historically included the mandate toward universal service to telephone services and the crea-

tion of non-commercial public affairs, arts and cultural programming in radio and television broadcasting. With the advent and proliferation of new communications technologies, public interest media attributes have become more elusive and complex. The era of telecommunications deregulation has brought about an ambiguous relationship between public and private interests: privatised and commercial interests versus governmental regulation and control. Moreover, networked technologies are constantly evolving and being deployed in new social arenas, which transcend constrained geographic boundaries.

As an area of academic study, the Internet is in its nascent phase. Much research has been conducted on the interstices of gender and the Internet. More needs to be done. The following are some suggestions, ideally to be theorised from a critical feminist perspective.

Governance: Issues of governance of the Internet need to be analysed and studied. How will the Internet be run? Currently the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), a non-profit corporation, is acting as the Internet's central coordinating body. The 19-member Board of Directors provides decisions regarding domain name registries and disputes. Controversies have arisen over the composition of ICANN, mostly in terms of ensuring both global and non-profit representation. Not as well discussed have been issues of gender representation. I suspect that this will become a pressing issue in the next few years.

Labour: How are women participating in Internet industries, whether in the mainstream industry organisations, via new start-ups, or in entrepreneurship ventures? How is gender linked with the trans-nationalisation of corporate media and telecom industries in terms of the international division of labour? An example is the flow of offshore production of computer hardware and software, such as computer chips, into developing countries (notably India, Malaysia, and the *maquilladeros* of Mexico) where women comprise the majority of wage labourers (Sassen, 1998).

Women in technopoles: New digital broadband districts, often referred to as "smart communities," are found in major urban centres. How are women participating and engaging in technopoles? Who is excluded from these high-tech communities? How is citizenship conceptualised in technopoles?

Qualitative studies: Studies of the use and impact of the Internet in the domestic context, and its negotiation within diverse families, will be fascinating (Lohan, 2000). How do industry stakeholders influence consumption and use? How are the public and private spheres shaped by ICT's (Frissen, 2000)? How are Internet technologies taking shape in households?

Civil discourse: How is the Internet utilised by women and women's groups for civic activities? How are non-expert groups and citizens influencing the technological trajectory of society? How can technological culture be democratised (Bijker and Bijsterveld, 2000)?

Design: How might the Information Society be affected if more women participate as experts and designers (Fountain, 2000)? Do women tech designers have a unique perspective? Would they, for instance, develop more social uses for applications, or engage technology users in the initial design more than their male counterparts? It is also important to look at how young girls use the Internet, since many of them are intrepid Internet denizens.

Representation: How has media addressed women as consumers and workers within the new economy of technological convergence through advertisements and specialised programming?

Toward WSIS

Cyberspace provides women with a new terrain from which to wage old struggles (Gallagher, 1996). The 2003 World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) should provide an opportunity for diverse women's voices to be heard with respect to their active participation in the ongoing design, development, and diffusion of the Internet. Several exciting initiatives include the campaign called "Communication Rights for the Information Society" <<http://www.comunica.org/cris/index.htm>> and the Global Community Networking's theme on women and the Internet <<http://www.globalcn.org/en/accueil.ntd?sort=1.8>>. There, women and women's groups have been articulating the incorporation of a gender perspective into the WSIS.

Social engagement needs to occur at the collective level. Although we can use the Internet to debate, inform, organise and mobilise, at the end of the day, when we finally turn off the computer and peel our eyes from the monitor, we are still left with the everyday messiness of our lives. We still have bodies that need more than virtual connections, real children who need to eat real food and be reminded to do their homework, real dogs that need their daily park jaunts, and real partners and friends that need conversation. No matter how much the tentacles of new media spread in their adulterous couplings, we are all, at the end of the day, citizens. Not citizens.com.

Note: This article is excerpted and slightly expanded from the author's *Gender and Community in the Social Construction of the Internet*, New York: Peter Lang, 2002.

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