

Globalisation and Media: Making Feminist Sense

By Susanna George

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I have been asked to examine Globalisation and Media in ways that will help us make connections between these two phenomena and how these affect women's lives. I am glad that this conversation is happening in the context of the World Social Forum, because I strongly believe in this confluence of ideas and ideals, and see it as one of the best spaces for looking at the convergence of issues that appear at first glance disconnected.

I am even gladder that we are a gathering of feminists and activist women, since women are some of the best at finding connections between seemingly disparate issues. We do this out of necessity and for our physical and emotional survival, because for all of us in our different spheres of life, we often have to point out to those around us the insidious and entrenched nature of patriarchy in every institution and facet of our societies and lives.

The same is true of work in media, information and communications. Feminists working in this field have long had to point out sexist, racist, elitist and homophobic manifestations within news and reportage that are purportedly balanced and neutral. As media and communications structures and systems become increasingly corporatised and globalised, we take on the challenge of scrutinising their inter-linkages, and trying to show up, in sharp relief, the face of our common enemies—patriarchy, corporate hegemonies, ascendant rightwing ideological regimes, and the U.S. empire in its fullest meaning.

In order to do this, we need to do the following:

Firstly, we need to explore new frontiers in Media that take into account its rapidly evolving state. When we speak of Media, we can no longer speak of newspapers, television and radio alone. The links between media cor-

porations and new technologies such as the Internet and the IT industry need to be fully understood. We also need to see the connection in the ways that corporate media works hand in glove with the state, and corporate and military regimes, not just to provide the infrastructure for normalising and rationalising these powers, but also, in so doing, strengthening its own power.

Secondly, we need to look for the Devil in the Details. Today, if we want to find out what is really happening in the world, we have to look in every page of a newspaper. The connections are in the business pages, the special pages on the IT industry, in the advertisements, in the sports and health pages, and perhaps most pertinently, in the culture and lifestyle supplements. We need to read into the meaning behind the messages because otherwise, we will miss the inter-linkages that are both potent and dangerous.

Globalised Media as a Weapon of Mass Deception

We all place high value on truth-telling in our societies yet today, we have some of the most profound forms of lying taking place through the mouths of our governments, through the astigmatic minds of our politicians and religious leaders, through almost all corporately owned newspapers, television and radio stations, through advertising, through the fashion and cosmetic industries.

Some people will readily acknowledge that they are being lied to, and that they are being told, whether subtly or crudely, to uphold certain viewpoints of the state of the world, specific consumption patterns, and certain lifestyles and beliefs about ourselves and others. Even so, the resistance to such lying and manipulation of facts is shockingly low, given the most dramatic impact that it has on all other aspects of our anti-globalisation and anti-imperialist struggles.

Advertisers spend billions of dollars in research to examine the subtleties of human consumption patterns, while sexist imagery and cultural symbols are a goldmine

of copy for advertisers. Women, teenagers, gays and lesbians, and even pre-adolescent have been turned into markets for “niche advertising.” The heightening of a sense of inadequacy, fear and want in post-colonial societies is a vital part of creating markets for a wide range of products. Even the so-called natural health food and herbal products industries get a tremendous boost from the paranoia and complete confusion created by the health columns of newspapers and magazines. So also with the cosmetics, slimming and beauty industries that thrive on the aggravation of the sense of sexual and physical inadequacy in both women and men. There are countless examples, sadly, of how we appear to have little resistance to the forces that seek to turn us into mindless consumers. Women in particular, but not exclusively, have subjected themselves to the most gruesome and painful forms of beautifying, evidence of the extent of our falling for their lies.

The horrors of last year’s war in Iraq were delivered to our homes in video-game-style detail. “Embedded Journalism” reached new heights as cameras were placed on the noses of fighter planes, and we could follow the path of the bomb as it careened toward the hideous maiming, burning and death it would inflict. The media coverage was a crucial part of the “Shock and Awe” campaign of Bush in Iraq. It is no wonder that the three major global media channels that covered the war, CNN, BBC and the Fox Network, were owned by transnational media corporations representing the interests of the Allied forces.

Today, Globalised Media is turning into a Weapon of Mass Deception—an instrument to deceive and lie to hundreds of millions in one go.

As media institutions are merged into transnational media and IT industry players, megalomaniacal corporations are created, their sole interest being to amass the greatest number of consumers at the lowest cost, thereby



Maria Ana Manalo Santiago/Isis International-Manila

Isis International-Manila Executive Director Susanna George during her presentation at the World Social Forum last January 2004 in Mumbai, India

posting the largest profit. A one-size-fits-all formula has become the trend in the creation of cultural content in the so-called “entertainment” industry.

Perhaps the most insidious of deceptions is the overwhelming sense of “choice” and “freedom” that people experience today in the age of 100-channel cable TV stations and the multifarious possibilities and options on the Internet. When scrutinised for content in terms of diversity of opinion, ideals, values, cultures, and the voices of those at the margins of society, one will soon realise that it is one of limited choice. A pre-selection has already taken place to meet the expectations of advertisers, the state, global markets and the status quo.

In this age of the Empire, those of us who stand in opposition to Empire building and all forms of fascist and fundamentalist expansion need to understand the intricate relationship of globalised media and information and communications structures and systems to the state, the military and to projects of global hegemony and fascism by both state and non-state actors. For these reasons, we need to stay vigilant of the trends of large media and IT corporations such as AOL Time Warner, Microsoft, Viacom/

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CBS/MTV, and reckon with them into our struggle against giant corporations.

As I have said in the previous World Social Forum, global media is to corporate capitalism what missionaries were to the colonial enterprise—it creates the sensibility, cultural posturing and values base necessary for a full-scale expansion and capture of markets. We fight against giant pharmaceutical, biochemical and agricultural companies for poisoning our water and air, for homogenising order, and for turning our ways of life into one big marketplace. Is not the slow poisoning and homogenisation of our thoughts, desires and values through media and the attendant creation of consumerist desires not something we should wage a similar war against?

The Devil in the Details

The reminder of the well-known poet Rimbaud that the devil is in the details has always helped me when trying to understand the ways in which various forces, global and local, interact with each other. Political mongering takes place where we cannot see all of the actors, nor all of the stakes, but we need to stay cognisant of the fact that behind every event and story are multiple and complex actors, stakes and possible results.

In the same way, if we start looking for where these colossal media and IT corporations are today, we will find

them in places that would not have occurred to us to search. In the United Nations, for example. When Ted Turner, once owner of CNN, made a pledge of US\$1 billion over ten years to the United Nations, he won untold favours in the eyes of the Clinton administration and the UN.

IT corporations such as Cisco Systems, through their foundations, have made inroads within the UN, appropriating language of gender empowerment. In partnership with the United Nations Women's Development Fund (UNIFEM), Cisco Systems and Cisco Foundation have been working on women's training programmes for job creation in the IT sector, allegedly to promote gender equality. But on closer examination, one sees that these women are trained in the use of specific patented products, essentially meaning that the women are being primed to become technicians of Cisco products, and not necessarily as workers with broader-based skills and knowledge that can be applied outside Cisco Systems.

While glancing through a report that will be launched during this World Social Forum entitled "Threatened Existence: A Feminist Analysis of the Genocide in Gujarat," I was amazed to note in one of the annexes the large contributions of U.S.-based IT corporations such as Cisco, Sun, Oracle, HP and AOL Time Warner to a U.S.-based organisation called the Indian Development and Relief Fund (IDRF), widely believed to be linked to the Hindutva forces in India. The book refers to IDRF as one of the top five grantees of Cisco Foundation in 1999, having received US\$70,000, ostensibly for its development and relief activities. While the authors did note that these U.S. foundations have been "unsuspecting" in their gift giving, one need only speculate on the returns in favour that such a gift in the name of "corporate social responsibility" would accrue in terms of political leverage.

New digital and satellite-based technologies play a critical role in the expansion of financial, trade and market regimes, providing the technology, infrastructure and sheer speed of operation. They have also changed the face of warfare dramatically, making computer and IT savvy a part of every soldier's training. The precision digital technology that was used in the Iraq war made the American GI a communications specialist more than a machine-gun or hand-grenade wielder. Today, there is an eerie quality in the surveillance measures that are using devices that we know to be communication tools such as the Internet, hand phone and other such devices that support "connectivity."

We need to stay alert to the multiplicity of sites of resistance in relation to the struggle against corporate globalisation. Even as we look for the devil in the details, however, it is vital that we do not slip into a binary understanding of the world. Everything cannot be simplified or essentialised as Good or Evil. There are many nuances in every situation, and we need to be able to respond to new situations with all of our feminist courage, wisdom and heart.

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Mounting a Broad-based Resistance

I made a list last year of things that we need to do in order to strengthen a broad, non-sectarian resistance that can draw in more people into the struggle against an unjust, violent and oppressive system. I present the list again as it remains relevant today:

1. We need to keep our minds open to being challenged, and to be willing to give up our familiar analytical lenses and known platforms for advocacy and action. This is the challenge of *Porte Alegre*, and now *Mumbai*, to feminists around the world—the demand that we stay aware of the multiplicity of the platforms of struggle for change. We can no longer speak of sexist portrayal in the media without taking on the ways in which media misrepresents the most dispossessed and marginalised in society to maintain the moral, social and cultural authority of dominant classes. All of us from various social movements need to be aware of the struggles of other social movements, their analyses and sites of resistance, and be willing to give support to struggles that have not been our traditional spaces.

2. Communication activists have long struggled to make visible the ways in which neo-liberal globalisation is built on the backbone of globalised and corporatised media, information and communications systems. Working shoulder to shoulder are community radio and other community-based media and communications activists that seek to preserve, if not expand, what little space exists for non-commercial and community based alternatives. It is time that the different social movements recognise the importance of these different sites of struggle and support these efforts.

3. While the onslaught of global commercialised media systems has been reshaping the landscape of national, local and alternative media, this is by no means a finished project. There are many groups, including feminist and cultural activist groups using various media and communication tools to create, revitalise, energise and renew cultural expression and folk communication without recreating the ‘noble savage’ nor romanticising the tribal nor essentialising the past.

4. We need to recognise to the important demands made by indigenous peoples and marginalised communities for greater cultural diversity, autonomy and access and control over cultural resources. More often than not, poor, marginalised and indigenous communities are absent in programming equations since they do not form a powerful consumer bloc and have little purchasing power. Observe the trend of television programming and how it is geared toward audiences that have the greatest consumptive power (including children of the middle and upper middle classes for whom the cartoons are created).

5. There is a need for a more vocal and visible force monitoring the movements of large multinational media conglomerates such as AOL Time Warner, Disney, Sony and NewsCorp that already command vast shares of the media and communications market. We should also be alert to their impact on smaller regional, national and local media. We need to update our critique and resistance to media monopolies since they are antithetical to democratic discourse. Resistance needs to come from strengthening the minds of our young and old alike so that they can discern through various levels of media savvy.

6. A reality that feminists have had to contend with around the question of sexually exploitative imagery of women in the media is that sometimes, those who protest the impact of globalised media systems and the overwhelming influx of cultural content from the West tend to be the most rabid nationalistic, jingoistic or religious fundamentalists. We need to resist knee-jerk reactions and most of all, resist at all levels any unholy alliance with right-wing forces that take up positions that seem progressive on some issues, but are completely conservative around others, including women’s reproductive rights and the rights of sexual minorities. Our responses to globalised media and communications need to be far more nuanced and deliberate. ♪

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