Choices We (Must) Make For Ourselves: Women and Transnational Media

By Lynne Muthoni Wanyeki

This paper was presented at the side panel on globalised media and ICT systems and structures and their interrelationship with fundamentalism and militarism organised by Isis International-Manila during the WSIS in Geneva, Switzerland in December 2003.

At the annual session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) in March 2003, one of the themes under discussion was women, the media and ICTs. The conclusions arising from these discussions were to be fed into the process leading up to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS).

All the major transnational media companies had mobile units parked outside. The lines to get into the UN building were inordinately long. Never before had I seen the corridors of the UN filled with that many journalists. But they were not present to hear what governments and member states thought about media's representation of women, or the position of women within the media, or whether these have changed with the advent of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). No. Dr. Hans Blix had just presented his mission's report to the UN Security Council concluding that evidence of the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was insufficient to justify multilateral intervention. The UN was under siege by the media because the Security Council was about to decide whether or not to accept the report's conclusion—and thus, whether or not to go to war with Iraq.

American television made a mockery of the process of international decision-making as the Security Council resolution was negotiated. Non-permanent council members, whose diplomats were under pressure to support the American position, were vilified. One report flashed a senior American politician bemoaning the fact that an African state he could not locate on a map was in a position to determine what his government should or should not do.

Deception by Omission

It became clear that American TV was prepared to go with whatever the Bush administration decided, regardless of the outcome of the Security Council's resolution. And, more importantly, regardless of the sentiments of American citizens. For the UN was, at that time, also the site of daily demonstrations protesting the proposed offensive. Because demonstrators are not allowed to stand outside the UN building, the demonstrators adopted innovative methods, including the rental of bicycles upon which they mounted anti-war banners and posters and rode around and around the UN headquarters. None of these American demonstrations made it onto TV news except, on rare occasions, fleetingly, without analysis or commentary. Yet these anti-war demonstrations, the media would eventually admit, were the largest since the Vietnam War.

American television channels—particularly the Cable News Network—are beamed by satellite across the world. Thus, by their news coverage, the impression transmitted to the rest of the world was that American citizens were solidly behind the decision of the Bush administration to ignore the Security Council's resolution and pursue the military offensive against Iraq. By failing to note that this decision was against international law, the impression also given was that the Bush administration was acting legally. There was also insufficient attention paid to the so-called intelligence reports that the Bush and Blair administrations used to justify the offensive.

At the end of this shameful year for multilateralism, history does not seem to be on the side of George Bush Junior and Tony Blair. No weapons of mass destruction have been found. The intelligence reports that claimed there would be are the subject of inquiries in both the United States and the United Kingdom. It is now clear

> The use of participatory communication to advance the concerns and solutions of women is necessary because participatory communication is grounded in the belief that we can generate our own interpretations and solutions for development and peace. Participatory communication allows for two-way dialogues between civil society and the women in the communities for effective interventions in national, regional and international decision making.

that the Bush and Blair administrations knowingly and deliberately exaggerated the claims of these reports. Osama Bin Laden, the target of the illegal military offensive, remains missing. And the Iraqi people, far from being grateful for their 'liberation,' are mounting daily (deadly) attacks against those they see as illegal occupants of their state. The transnational media companies seem unable to admit and interrogate this possibility, ascribing the attacks to members of Hussein's Baath party or to the influx of non-Iraqi Islamists into Iraq or both.

Meanwhile, many of the women present at the UN CSW in New York moved to Geneva for the WSIS, hoping that the Declaration and Programme of Action to emerge from this conference would reflect the concerns raised

earlier this year. But, as a woman put it during one of the Gender Caucus' critical dialogues: "Should we mainstream gender into a flawed information society or should we create a new information society?"

Placing Women in the Frame

I was in Beirut in November 2002 for an experts' group meeting to put together a report, complete with recommendations, to inform that UNCSW session eclipsed by the Security Council resolution on Iraq (that would also be ignored anyway by the real arbiters of war and peace today: the Bush-Blair tandem). During the meeting's formal opening, the Lebanese Minister of Information spoke on the Palestinian cause and the media's coverage of terrorism. Referring to Israeli terrorism against the Palestinian people, he noted the common media representation of a Palestinian mother now—that of a woman who orders her sons on suicide bombing missions. He called attention to the widespread, unquestioning acceptance of this image and wondered why media could be so uncritical when this image is so different from the usual portrayal of mothers' relationships to their children. Why have media not attempted to analyse or contextualise this profound departure from the typical portrayal of mothers as women who love their children and wish for their long lives, he asked. His thesis was that, post-September 11, the women's cause has been used to undermine the legitimate concerns of the Arab world— for who in the world, besides women, cared about women's treatment by the Taliban in Afghanistan until it was convenient and strategic to do so?

The minister's argument is an old and tired one. Yes, the representation of Arab and Muslim women by transnational media companies is stereotypical. Yes, the transnational media companies have failed to present Arab and Muslim women as anything more than shrouded victims. Yes, such representation, of course, concurs with American interests at this time.

This also applies to Arab or Muslim-owned transnational media companies because satellite TV is to the Magreb and Mashreq what radio is in sub-Saharan Africa—the major source of information. And Arab and Muslim feminists have for long decried the contradictions in the portrayal on Arab or Muslim-owned satellite

television channels of women—as being either sexualised or maternal and pious.

But all other societies under pressure, not only Arab and Muslim societies, must take responsibility for the situation. The supposed choices presented to women in such situations are false. There should be no contradiction, no schizophrenia about choosing to be both feminist and nationalist (for lack of better words). Arab and Muslim women who speak up for their interests and rights as women within the Arab and Muslim world should not be made to feel that they are undermining the collective Arab and Muslim cause. In any case, that cause—the cause of Palestine and the anti-war cause—is universal and should be the cause of anyone with a conscience. The idea that we must choose is ridiculous, regardless of how often we are accused of dancing to the tune of those ubiquitous 'foreign masters.' We do what we have to at home, and we do what we have to outside. These false choices do no one any good, succeeding only in limiting the depth and quality of the compromises that we all must make to move toward our common goals.

A New Information Society

If the transnational media companies cannot reflect and interpret the feelings of ordinary citizens accurately, who can?

Many examples exist. For example, in collaboration with women's community based organisations, community radio stations in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo are documenting the human rights violations against Congolese women. One case involved the cutting off of a woman's breasts for her to eat. When she refused, her genitals were cut off. When she again refused to eat them, her abdomen was slit open and she was left to die. She did not. Her story, needless to say, did not make it to the transnational media channels. Neither did the documentation of stories such as hers in preparation for a post-conflict truth and justice process.

The need for timely strategic information to enhance women's development, equality and human rights is critical. This is because information plays an important role in building on the successes and failures of women seeking to involve ourselves in development and peace processes across the world.

Yet, even within organised civil society, women still lack the means to share strategic information on the various initiatives they have taken. For example, women are working on conflict from the Horn, to the Great Lakes, to the Mano River in Africa, yet the exchange of lessons learned in the course—from the community to the diplomatic level—is seldom. Similarly, the flow of strategic information between communities and civil society on the one hand, and the state and intergovernmental organisations on the other, is needed.

The provision of content—from communities up to the diplomatic level, and capacity-building in this are also necessary. Where information on women's development, equality and human rights is available, inadequate distribution limits reception. And, most important, the ability to produce such content in a decentralised manner is still weak. The net result of these problems is the limited potential for collective action by and among development and peace workers, policy makers and programme developers and implementers.

For a variety of reasons, women within civil society have yet to fully incorporate communication into our work. A key challenge is how to enable the production and dissemination of strategic information on women's development, equality and human rights. The use of participatory communication to advance the concerns and solutions of women is necessary because participatory communication is grounded in the belief that we can generate our own interpretations and solutions for development and peace. Participatory communication allows for two-way dialogues between civil society and the women in the communities for effective interventions in national, regional and international decision making. A combination of traditional and new ICTs is critical to this process.

Knowing we are either excluded from, or distorted within the frame of globalised media and ICTs, and realising that the only effect of such exclusion is narrowed identity and political choices, we need a new information society.⟩

Lynne Muthoni Wanyeki is the Executive Director of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET).