

Recalling the Past, Looking to the Future

By Marilee Karl

What were some of the analyses, positions and strategies of feminists in the early years of the women's movement as we faced the challenges of transnational media and emerging information and communication technologies (ICTs)? Are these of any relevance to feminists today, given that 1) the world of corporatised media and ICTs has developed so rapidly and is much more sophisticated and complex than it was just a few years ago; and 2) the feminist movement has grown rapidly as well, especially in the Global South, and has developed a more far-reaching and profound analysis of these phenomena? Is there anything to be learned from the strategies and struggles of the feminist movement around media and technology in the early years of the international women's movement?

This article attempts to answer this question by taking a quick look at some of the early publications of *Isis*. At the very least, this can help us recall some of the foundations of today's feminist movement, and give us a glimpse of how far we have moved forward in our analyses and strategies around the media and ICTs. Possibly, it might remind us of questions still to be delved into, of strategies that remain useful; or even perhaps, of issues needing further analysis and even issues we left behind and ought to take up again.

Underlying early feminist strategies vis-à-vis the media was the view that "the mass media has become one of the most powerful instruments for the transmission of culture. Its role is crucial in the development of attitudes and values, and in the perpetuation of social aspirations.... It is not an exaggeration to say that there is no neutral media. Most of the news and information in the world is owned and controlled by the western transnational news agencies." *Isis Bulletin* (the precursor to *Women in Action*) no. 18, on *Women and the Media*, 1981.

A major impetus for the foundation of *Isis*—and of many other feminist and alternative women's media, resource centres and groups—was our need to create our own channels of communication, our own media.

This major strategy in the women's movement in the 1970s and the 1980s was articulated eloquently by Kamla Bhasin in the *Isis* International publication *Women and Media: Analysis, Alternatives and Action*, which focused on Asia and was published in 1984 with the Pacific and Asian Women's Forum and Kali for Women (India):

"It is important that we recognise the manipulative role and the class and gender bias of media and that we challenge it. Instead of remaining a tool in the hands of men and the elite, media should be increasingly controlled by those who challenge and change the present system. We women must create alternatives in different media and use them to inform and empower women, to get women out of their isolation. We must make ourselves more visible and audible so that our concerns do not remain unarticulated and unattended. Not only must we create alternative messages but also evolve alternative methods of working together; methods which are more democratic and participatory and which break the divide between 'media makers' and 'media takers'. It is heartening to see many women making feminist films, publishing magazines, writing plays, songs, children's poems, to express themselves and to initiate a dialogue with other women, to challenge stereotypes and myths."

Other early strategies to challenge corporatised media included: Monitoring the portrayal of women and the anti-women bias in the media, and taking actions to change these; protesting stereotypes, and the commodification and exploitation of women in the media, particularly in advertising; organising, lobbying, and mobilising to increase the numbers of women working and the positive coverage of women in the mainstream media; research and monitoring of transnational media corporations and their impact on national and local media; and building awareness of all of the above.

All of these strategies have built up a wealth of information, research, experiences and increasing numbers of women with media skills. They remain valid paths to pursue in challenging corporatised media and ICTs today.

The Biases and Structures Then

However, these strategies cannot be seen or used in isolation from a larger analysis of the media and its impact on other marginalised groups in society. Early on, feminist

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analysis of media recognised that the media has a class bias as well as a gender bias. We recognised how issues of gender, class, caste, race, ethnicity, disabilities, religion, sexual orientation were woven together—and the resulting marginalisation and biases of the media along these lines. Today academics have come up with the term “intersectionality,” but the concept of the interweaving of these into the social, economic, political and cultural fabric of our lives and societies still speaks more meaningfully to many women. It is also a powerful reminder that strategies for challenging the media require that we work together with other social movements.

The tensions and search for balance when we work with other social movements has always been there, in our experiences of the marginalisation of women in many movements. That this does not happen as often today as it did in the 1970s and 1980s is an achievement of the feminist movement.

We faced these tensions in the 1970s and 1980s in a challenge to the dominant transnational media that grew out of the UN and progressive media circles and envisioned the creation of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO).

In an article in the *Isis Bulletin on Women and Media* (1982), I wrote: “To break the domination [of transnational news agencies based in the North] and to transform the present information structures was the first challenge taken up by the proponents of the New International Information Order. Their first and most essential task was seen as that of giving Third World countries the possibility of building up their own news agencies and communication channels, thus breaking their dependence on the news and structures of the industrialised countries. Efforts were made, first, to

establish and strengthen national news agencies and communications systems and, second, to increase the flow of information from South to North, from the Third World to industrialised countries... However, the problem is one not only of establishing a balanced flow of information among the various parts of the world, but among social groups and classes as well. In both North and South there are classes and social groups that have been excluded from decision-making, or even participation in the media systems which wield so much influence over their lives... News agencies and communications systems controlled by ruling and economic elites [in whatever part of the world] do not serve the interests of people or of true development.”

The proponents of a new world information and communication order identified the need to transform structures that are vertical (information flows from above to the mass below), profit-oriented, controlled by transnational and other commercial interests, non-participatory and bureaucratic. They advocated a horizontal process of information sharing that leads to self-education, consciousness-raising and, ultimately, participation in decision-making, power, and self-determination. The one characteristic of information structures that they failed to identify is the patriarchal nature and male-domination of the media. The Final Report of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems mentions women and media once, in recommendation no. 60: “Attention should be paid to the communication needs of women. They should be assured adequate access to communications means and that images of them and their activities are not distorted by the media or in advertising.”

My reflection then was: “That women are even mentioned in the report is due largely to the efforts made by women around the world to organise themselves into a force capable of making an impact on male dominated structures. However, token mention of women is useless if women continue to be excluded from power and participation in the task of transformation at hand.”

The Biases and Structures Now

Twenty-two years later, this may sound somewhat familiar to those who have been trying to bring women’s voices to the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)—although certainly the women’s movement is much stronger and better organised today, and Isis and other feminist organisations have been able to make an impact on WSIS.

One issue that seems to have dropped off the feminist agenda today is a critique of the portrayal and marginalisation of women in development communication media produced by the United Nations and development

agencies. Isis brought a critical analysis to this media in the 1970s and 1980s. And together with Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) and other feminist organisations, we critiqued the whole male-dominated development system and rejected “integrating women” into a development model that needed to be transformed. Why the low priority given to these issues today? Is it because women’s efforts to change development media have been successful? Hardly a document emanates from the UN or development agencies today that does not mention women or use gender-sensitive language. The feminist movement can claim much credit for this. But we must remain vigilant. The culture of development agencies is still largely male-dominated and patriarchal, and we can see creeping cooptation and distortion taking place—in the way development agencies use the term “empowerment” and the “mainstreaming of gender,” for instance, in what is still a male stream of mal-development.

Since the early 1980s, Isis has been on the cutting edge of using ICTs and looking at its effects on women’s lives. It has been less than 20 years since personal computers began to be widely available and scarcely more than 10 years since the Internet and e-mail have been in use. Nevertheless, in the 1982 *Isis Bulletin on Women and New Technology*, we wrote:

“When we look at the impact of new technology on women, one thing stands out clearly. The new technology is not neutral. It is very much a political issue which we must face and grapple with....Power and Control. This is the crux of the matter. New technology has a great deal to do with questions of power and control over our lives. It is not just a question of control in the sense of being able to use the [technology], but a question of who is controlling the decisions about what kind of technology to develop in the first place, what kind of programmes to develop, for what purposes, who will have access to the technology, who will profit from it.”

Potential and Problems of ICTs

Early on, we could distinguish different reactions to ICTs:

“Often this new technology has simply stepped into our lives without our really noticing it. We have become passive accepters and victims of it. Because of this, some people are now crying out about the dehumanisation of life through new technology, about the massive unemployment to come, about the need to resist these negative effects.

“At the same time, others are predicting a bright new future with new technology liberating us from routine work, freeing us to be creative. They sing the praises of technology which will have a democratising effect, giving everyone access to information at the touch of a button in our own

homes, registering our opinions, communicating our views with another touch of a button. Yet again others feel that new technology is here to stay and will increasingly enter into all our lives whether in industrialised countries or the Third World. Good or bad, we have to accept it, learn to live with it, and, if possible, make it work for us.” (source: *Isis Bulletin on Women and New Technology*, 1982.)

The women’s movement developed several strategies around ICTs in those early years. The strategy of taking hold of ICTs, learning to use them and sharing our skills with other women and women’s groups has been carried on with great success. Our early recognition that issues of power and control are at the crux of ICTs has been carried forward in feminist analysis of these technologies, of the digital divide between North and South, and of the gender divide—the disparities between women and men’s access to and control over ICTs.

One issue that seems to have fallen by the wayside is the relationship of appropriate technology to new technology. Even in the 1980s, there was little discussion between those advocating the use of low-cost, simple, low-energy technologies and those who felt that the future lay in a micro-electronic revolution. Perhaps this question is no longer considered relevant?

Building Strong Linkages

One powerful element of feminist strategies, as we faced the nascent challenges of ICTs in the 1980s, was to build strong linkages across the sectors of work, health and environment. Concretely this meant mobilisation of information about the effects of new technologies on women workers in the electronics industries, on the outsourcing of work, and on the health and environmental hazards of the technologies. It meant support and solidarity and participation in the struggles of women workers and with women’s and other social movements working on health, environment and economic justice.

Over the years, as the feminist movement has grown, our organisations have become increasingly specialised. One positive result of this has been our capacity to carry out more in-depth analyses and well-developed strategies in different areas. On the negative side, we have become more fragmented in the process. In today’s context of globalisation, we need once again to build strong linkages within the feminist movement and with other social movements as we face the challenge of corporatised media and ICTs. ♪

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