

Gender, Media & New Media: Accounting for Context

I would like to begin by thanking a number of people and institutions who have been instrumental in getting me across to Dubai and this includes the Dubai Tourism Authority, Bradley Freeman, AMIC, Martin Hadlow among others.

There is no questioning the importance of a panel on media and gender at the AMIC conference. It is quite extraordinary that in the 21st century, in spite of all the progress that we have made on other fronts, we still have so much more to do in the area of gender rights. So at the outset let me affirm that the work that UNESCO is doing through projects such as GAMAG (Global Alliance on Media & Gender), the IAMCR's involvement in it, WACC's Global Media Monitoring Project along with many other initiatives are extraordinarily important because these are all attempts to set right a historical wrong against women in the media, on the media, access to the media and their use of it. **(2)** There is of course the perennial issue of representation which has received a lot of academic attention although there are also many other issues – the working condition of women journalists, of women workers in the media and allied industries, pay parity, progress in career development, among other concerns that are yet to be fully explored. A lot has been written in some of these areas – for example the social construction of gender roles, and rather than reinvent the wheel, I would like to deal with some of the missing dimensions of this debate – not in any great detail but merely to highlight the complexity of gender and media debates that are sometimes elided over. **(3)** I think that in the context of donor driven strategies, we tend to operationalize gender in terms of silos, gender separate from all the other issues that give meaning to gender and make it what it is today and I think that this way of operationalizing gender does it a great disservice. Why do I say this? Because context defines the structuring of women and media issues. And one cannot ignore context in both addressing women and media issues and exploring solutions to it. An institutional framework defines the working conditions of women journalists at the Times of India just as caste as primary consciousness and class can and does play determining roles in how women journalists in rural areas access people and stories, even how they write their stories. **(4)** The British academic Nick Couldry (2010) in his book *Why Voice Matters* provides an impassioned plea for the validation of Voice, the right to give 'an account of oneself' within a critique of neo-liberalism's routine, under-valuations of Voice and the market's role in determining which Voices are heard and which are marginalised. In this context Couldry's (2010:2) definition of voice as value and process goes beyond the traditional understanding of voice as simply the right to speak. " .. voice as a value....refer(s) to the act of valuing, and choosing to value, those frameworks for organising human life and resources that *themselves* value voice (as a process).... Valuing voice then involves particular attention to the conditions under which voice as a process is effective" – in other words, Couldry argues that in order

for Voices to be heard, for empowered voices – there simply has to be enabling environments that are supportive of voice and voice making. Arguably, the very same analogy can be used to understand women and media issues – for you do need to factor in context and enabling environments to ensure that empowerment becomes a reality. Let me reiterate the first point that I have made. Gender and media issues are not cut from the same cloth. Just as AfroAmerican women have argued that you simply have to factor in race and class in the understanding of gender representations of women of colour, so in the case of a country like India, the social construction of gender is bound to be conditioned by the exigencies of context, class, caste. In other words, in my way of thinking, empowering women in the media is not simply a case of ensuring their right to speak. More importantly it is about ensuring that there are sustainable and supportive environments that value this right, and that provide the framework for creating counter public spheres.

Dalits and the Media in India

Just as oppression is not cut from the same cloth, so women's relationship with the media is bound to be conditioned by their class and caste positions. There are issues with essentialising identities such as gender. Just as not all women are oppressed not all men are oppressors. To reinforce this point, empowerment for a women journalist working at a fashion magazine is very different from the empowerment of a Dalit woman journalist in India. **(5)** For a Dalit woman journalist empowerment is about the right to report on issues of concern and that results in the establishment of Dalitness and Dalit identities. Empowerment is about Dalit journalists creating, celebrating Dalit consciousness and Dalit rights through a type of niche reporting that acknowledges all news that affects this community. When a rape is acknowledged, routine humiliations exposed and the identity of murderers unmasked, Dalit self-belief and dignity is strengthened and their collective consciousness enhanced. Prof. Cees Hamelink (2011) in his book *Media & Conflict: Escalating Evil* refers to the many acts of humiliation characterised by de-individualising, discriminating against, disempowering and degrading people (4-5) in our contemporary world today. When an entire group of people have from time immemorial been humiliated as a matter of course ritually, socially and culturally – humiliation is not an episodic instance of 'evil' such as the treatment of inmates at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay - but an experience that is constant, cumulative in its impact and that accompanies entire communities from birth until death. The Dalits are discriminated against even in death. There is need to not just factor in patriarchy but patriarchy within a specific context characterised by humiliation. Surveys in newsrooms in India on the caste composition of journalists have consistently found that the lower castes are disproportionately represented in news rooms and that Dalits journalists are a rarity.

Mobile Phones and Women in India

I would like to now move on to deal with the specific issues related to gender and new media that I was asked to speak on. Here again my remarks are going to be general in nature and will be based largely on a chapter on the women and media movement in India that is part of my second book *Negotiating Communication Rights* in a trilogy on the media in India that I had written between 2009 and 2012. I think there is ample evidence that suggests that more and more women across the spectrum in Asia are becoming digital literates. While the example of Grameen Telecommunications in Bangladesh has often been cited as one of the first examples of large-scale new technology-based women's empowerment in Asia, it is clear that women's access to mobile phones in Asia today is growing and is for many, their first experience of the digital. However here again the relationship between women and new media in Asia differs according to status and location. The use of social networking is bound to a significant aspect of new media use by women in middle and upper classes while it may be restricted in the case of women from the lower classes for whom access is conditioned by cost. While cost remains a factor, there are studies that suggest that even in poor families, the need to maintain a mobile phone has become a necessity. However, while the necessity of a mobile phone has become apparent, there is also growing evidence that tradition and context have begun to shape the boundaries and possibilities for the use of mobile phones especially by young, married women in India. Assa Doran's (2012:422-423) social anthropological study of mobile phone use among boatmen and their communities in Benares highlights the role played by context in the structuring of mobile phone access for women and their terms of use

"....the household mobile phone, unlike the ones belonging to the male members of a family (which are personal handsets), is not considered a 'private' possession for the female members. Conversations are not conducted privately, but rather under the gaze and authority of family elders, and can be easily heard in the very small houses..... the household mobile was used to maintain a certain social order and the mobile conversations themselves formed part of a chain of interactions that ultimately reinforced social roles and gender ideology For men, the mobile phone was a tool for work, communication with friends and relatives, and for entertainment, while for the women the mobile was viewed as a tool for 'basic conversations' (*sirf baatchiit karne ke liye*). The woman's phone should be used only to communicate with her natal kin and husband".

There are also studies that show that caste relationships in India are being reinforced through the invocation of traditional caste norms. Just because a Dalit labourer has access to the phone does not mean that he/she can ring his/her landlord. Caste etiquette even covers the use of mobile phones by the lower castes.

Blank Noise: An Online Success Story

One of the most visible online sites that deals with a critical issue in India – sexual harassment is Blank Noise. While the site was set up in 2002 by young women linked to the Shrishti School of Design in Bangalore, the genesis of this community-public art site is linked to a blog started by one of its founder members, Jasmeen Patheja. In a personal interview with her on the 26th of January, 2010 she described its beginnings as follows. “ It started off from a blog that I started in which I had placed photographs of those who had sexually harassed me. This led to a blogathon and to a massive response from women who had faced sexual harassment from years ago”. There are many features of Blank Noise that make it a unique women’s project. 1) It is the first project that has systematically created awareness of the many pernicious forms of sexual harassment extant in India and that women face on a day to day basis. By doing so, they have changed the terms of a debate that, for too long, has revolved around the quaint and rather innocuous term ‘eve teasing’, a throwback from a colonial era that suggested that sexual harassment was little more than teasing. Instead, as it is highlighted on the Blank Noise site, eve teasing includes close to 29 meanings from staring at breasts, to masturbation, stalking, brushing. These meanings are curated online – and as a result the website offers a rich, evocative and textured account of the nature of sexual harassment. 2) The site deliberately reaches out to and engages with a politics of practice that younger generations are conversant with. In doing so, they have also connected with men who form close to 50 percent of their volunteers. This again is a significant departure from the norm related to women and media projects that tend to be focussed on women only. 3) One of the significant aspects of Blank Noise is that the objective is not only to create awareness and fight back but also to reclaim the space for women in the commons – the streets, shops, pubs, parks during day time and at night. The reason that women have to get back before its dark is because it is not safe. How to make the commons safe for all is a key concern for Blank Noise. They do this through silent street protests – as for instance on busy Brigade Road in Bangalore. As Jasmeen Patheja described it “We are keen on reclaiming the street. When was the last time that women were relaxed on the street without being harassed and stared at”. 4) Blank Noise is also committed to ensuring that women remain who they are without being beholden to sexist societal norms that are often anti-citizen. **(6)** One of the interesting projects that they are currently working on is on countering the male gaze – the fact that clothes that women wear and ‘provocative dressing’ are often blamed for rape and other types of

sexual harassment. This project – I Never Asked For it The stared at clothes that women wear – a 1000 pieces in all will become part of a street exhibition, a public art project that will call to attention issues with urban sexual harassment. The section on the Blank Noise website ‘Interventions & Techniques’ includes a description of this project “Blank Noise wants you to discard the clothes worn at the time you were sexually harassed on the streets. This collective building of an installation of clothes seeks, primarily, to erase the assumption that you 'asked for it' because of what you were wearing. The popular assumption is that the girl is to blame because she was 'provocatively dressed', implying that 'immodest' women are eve-teased.5) Blank Noise’s off line and online activisms are connected to the creating of agency and people are encouraged to create awareness of gender issues and sexual harassment at school, at home, among domestic workers. Their use of Facebook and Twitter has strengthened their mobilisation efforts. The web site includes a number of projects that strengthen agency. Reporting to Remember is on an online project expressly deals with harassment that women have begun to face in the context of the moral policing by right wing Hindu and other groups. Women and men for example are invited to become ‘Action heroes’ and counter sexual harassment, write of their experiences, go out for Night Walks.

(7) One of the more interesting exhibitions online is their Museum of Street Weapons featuring everyday objects that women use to ward off their attackers (Available at: <http://blog.blanknoise.org/2008/11/towards-museum-of-street-weapons.html?showComment=1230013980000#c5489401624273554624>).

Blank Noise reflects in some ways a newer form of feminist action in India. While the critique that ‘online’ is primarily for an English speaking audience needs to be acknowledged, the fact that they have reached out to a younger audience for whom ‘feminism’ is often removed from their reality is a significant achievement. However and in spite of their online presence, whether or not this is a case of ‘episodic feminism’ by a generation who are not generally inclined to commit themselves to a singular ‘ism’ is yet to be explored.

(8) So in conclusion I would like to end with an issue that I raised at the beginning of this presentation – and that is the need for gender and media explorations to factor in context. The mere presence and availability of new technologies does not guarantee that women will be empowered by using these technologies. As someone who prefers analyzing media within the critical political economy tradition, I am a firm believer that in order to understand media & gender issues, you really need to de-centre it, and foreground the many factors including tradition, and other social, economic, cultural and political factors that give meaning to media & gender at any given time. Vincent Mosco (1996: 71-72) observed in his classic text *The Political Economy of Communication*,

that in order to study the media, one needs to decentre it and study it within the large social totality. “Decentring the media means viewing systems of communication as integral to fundamental economic, political, social and cultural processes in society....the point is that the political economy approach to communication places the subject within a wider social totality....Both political economy and communication are mutually constituted out of social and cultural practices. Both refer to processes of exchange which differ but which are also multiply determined by shared social and cultural practices”. Likewise, the wider social totality that gives meaning to and that structures gender and media issues simply has to be foregrounded.

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