GENDER, MEDIA, ICTs AND JOURNALISM: 20 YEARS AFTER THE BPfA FORUM

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Gender and Media: A critical analysis after 20 years of the BPfA

Margaret Gallagher
It is particularly inspiring that this Forum should be taking place in Mexico and in this region, which has such a strong record in networking and collective action on issues of media, gender and freedom of expression. It was here, in Mexico City, that the first United Nations Conference on Women took place – almost exactly 40 years ago, in June 1975. 1975 had been proclaimed International Women’s Year by the United Nations. It was followed by the International Women’s Decade – 1976 to 1985. The planning for International Women’s Year, the Conference and the Decade was led by the UN’s first female Assistant Secretary General - Helvi Sipila from Finland. She described it as ‘the beginning of a new era, when all of humanity, not half of it, will participate in the efforts to solve the problems facing the world today’. So the vision – expressed all those years ago - was a holistic one. Eliminating discrimination against women, and achieving gender equality, was to be a means of giving women a voice – the opportunity to participate, to influence decisions, and to help shape the world we live in.

Needless to say, the world in 1975 was not ready for such a radical idea. And neither were the mass media. Media coverage of the Mexico City Conference was frequently negative, sensationalist and sexist. One particular image – of two women struggling to take control of a microphone – was flashed around the world’s media. The struggle was real. It was rooted in politics. But its media representation was completely depoliticised and un-contextualised. The media turned it into ‘a fight between women’. The context was the geo-political North-South divide that polarised positions at the 1975 Conference, and produced numerous disagreements. At the official Conference, attended by government delegates, these disagreements were generally resolved through negotiation. But the non-governmental Tribune (or Forum), attended by NGOs and activists, was a livelier event. That first world gathering of women attracted 6000 participants who had widely different priorities and expectations, many of which could not be met. After almost two weeks of discussion, frustration spilled over. The microphone – the means of communication – became the site of struggle, the struggle to be heard. It was a very brief incident, lasting only a few seconds. A Mexican participant called for calm. She warned: ‘this is just what the press wants to show about women’. But it was too late. A photographer from the Associated Press news agency caught the picture. Next day the newspaper headlines told their own story. In Australia the Sydney Morning Herald (30 June) wrote ‘Feminists scream insults at meeting’. In Ecuador El
Comercio’s headline (29 June) was ‘Women’s meeting - a tower of Babel’. In Malaysia the New Straits Times (30 June) wrote ‘Battle of the mike puts feminists in disarray’. In England the headline in The Times (30 June) was ‘Screaming women fight to be heard at meeting’. That Associated Press picture was the most widely published photograph from the Mexico City conference.

And so began the relationship between the media and the United Nations conferences on women – from Mexico City in 1975 to Beijing in 1995. I studied the media coverage of all four of these conferences in 12 countries around the world, covering 79 publications altogether (Gallagher, 2000). The Beijing conference received more coverage than all of the three previous conferences put together. It attracted over 3200 journalists, compared with a few hundred in 1975. Why was there so much media interest? Was it because, since International Women’s Year in 1975 the issues debated at the UN’s women’s conferences had moved to the centre of the world’s attention? Certainly there had been a shift in those two decades – but not on a scale that could explain such an intense media focus. In fact the main reason for the huge media presence in Beijing was the news value of the Conference - which was enormous. Its location in China, China’s human rights record, the Chinese government’s decision to separate the potentially troublesome non-governmental Forum 35 miles away from Beijing in the small town of Huairou, issues of security and policing – all these offered a media agenda of politics, conflict and controversy: in other words ‘good stories’. And predictably, it was on these matters that most coverage focused.

With few exceptions, the media did a rather poor job of informing the public about Beijing’s substantive agenda and its significance for women. Reflecting on the North American coverage, columnist Ellen Goodman wrote: ‘For weeks, you might have assumed the entire conference hinged on one woman’s travel plans. The itinerary of Hillary Clinton - would she or wouldn’t she go to Beijing? You might have thought the only real issue was the relationship between China and the United States’. Wherever one looked, the coverage was inadequate. In India, according to feminist writer Ritu Menon, readers would have got the impression that the conference was about the agendas of a small group of political personalities. They would not have known, she said, that it ‘analysed and demonstrated the negative impact on women – North and South - of economic reform packages, the collapse
of social systems and the rolling back of the welfare state; or that the over-riding concerns of the 30,000 women who gathered in Beijing included the rise of conservative forces, violence against women, the feminisation of poverty, and growing militarism’. Basically, in most media coverage of the Beijing Conference the relationship between the world and its women was little more than a political footnote.

But despite the limitations of the media coverage, Beijing was a thrilling success for the international women’s movement. At the end of the Conference, an editorial in the Washington Post described the growth of the women’s movement as ‘one of the striking social developments of recent decades. It has given voice and a measure of coherence to a previously neglected set of global policy and cultural concerns’. And indeed, women had learned a lot about how to influence UN agreements, and how to develop lobbying strategies. By 1995 women had also realised the importance of pushing for the inclusion of non-governmental representatives (NGOs) in government delegations. These techniques paid off at the Beijing conference, and the high percentage of NGOs in the official delegations undoubtedly had an impact on the final content of the Platform for Action.

The irony - and the crushing disappointment - is that the Beijing Conference was the last major opportunity at the international level for feminist activists to come together with governments to push forward a global agenda for women’s equality. In the past 20 years, despite regular rumours that a fifth World Conference on Women would take place, it has not yet happened. In 2012 the UN briefly debated a proposal for a Fifth World Conference on Women to be held in 2015. But there was strong – indeed implacable – opposition from the European Union and the United States, and the proposal was not accepted. Instead, in March this year at the United Nations in New York, we had yet another review of the Beijing commitments – known as Beijing +20. Unfortunately, these regular five-yearly reviews have become rather timid and unproductive. Most worrying is that the space for intervention by civil society has gradually reduced. The reviews have taken place against a background of increasing anxiety that too much discussion might result in a rolling back or even a curtailment of some of the rights inscribed in the Beijing Platform for Action. So the Beijing +20 review resulted in a Political Declaration – negotiated and agreed in advance by governments. It reaffirmed the commitments made at Beijing, but did not build on or
extend them. The general consensus among activists was that the Declaration failed to confront the challenges that women and girls around the world face today – 20 years after Beijing. Hundreds of civil society groups signed a joint declaration to protest at the uninspiring content of the Declaration, and at the exclusion of women’s rights activists from the working groups and process that produced the Declaration (see for example Shameem, 2015).

So that is where we are now, in 2015 – in a period of backlash and backpedalling by governments on women’s human rights. And of course those fundamental issues that, as Ritu Menon said, preoccupied us in Beijing - the rise of conservative forces, increasing violence against women, the feminisation of poverty, and growing militarism – have become intensely more acute in our world: a world in which our public spaces are increasingly faced by the threat of privatisation. A world of shocking and increasing inequality, in which according to Oxfam the richest 1% of people now own almost half of all global wealth, and in which the wealth of the poorest half of the world has been decreasing since 2010 (Hardoon, 2015). Media empires are among the most lucrative global businesses. For example in 2014 the most highly-paid person in the United Kingdom was Sir Martin Sorrell, Chief Executive Officer of WPP - one of the world’s leading communication services and advertising companies. In that single year he earned £43 million (US $66 million)¹. At the same time we are said to be in the grip of a global economic recession, when – according to the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) - national austerity policies are starving resources to feminists’ and women’s rights organisations (Arutyunova & Clark, 2013). This is not an easy time to be an advocate for women’s human rights – or for women’s rights in and through the media.

But let’s return to Beijing for a moment. There we were, surrounded by more than 3000 journalists, most of whom were supplying daily evidence of why we needed Section J – the chapter of the Platform for Action that defined the media and communication as one of the twelve ‘critical areas of concern’ in the struggle for women’s equality. And now we had Section J with its two overall strategic objectives: (a) to ‘increase the participation and

¹ http://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/apr/30/wpp-boss-martin-sorrell-paid-43m-last-year-britains-best-paid-ceo
access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication; and (b) to ‘promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media’. To achieve these objectives, the Beijing Platform for Action specified a far-reaching series of actions to be taken by governments, national and international media systems, advertising organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and media professional associations. It was a historic breakthrough. After years of lobbying, the existence of Section J seemed at last to give us an internationally agreed blueprint for action. But when we look at the implementation of Section J, the past 20 years have not lived up to our expectations.

Of course much has been done. Countless individual projects and initiatives have been carried out. Many of them are extremely exciting and successful. Most of this work has been initiated by feminist activists and scholars, rather than by institutional actors such as media organisations, regulatory bodies or government structures. As a result, there are enormous gaps in implementation – particularly at the level of policy-making, which has turned out to be one of the areas most resistant to feminist or civil society intervention. And yet, in some ways, it is the most important area of all. For instance, we can campaign about an offensive advertisement and possibly have it removed. But – without an overall policy that sets gender-sensitive standards for the advertising industry – next week there will be another advertisement, probably even more offensive than the first one. We can work within media organisations and with individual journalists or media producers to build awareness of how their professional routines and practices tend to present a gender-biased view of the world. But media organisations are constantly changing, and many jobs are short-term. Again – without a fully entrenched gender-sensitive organisational policy – our work will soon be forgotten and we will have to start all over again with a new intake of media professionals. There are many reasons for the resistance of media policy-makers to the adoption of principles, guidelines and indicators that could help us to monitor the various dimensions of gender equality in the media. One of the most important is the complicated issue of freedom of expression, whose definition is constantly debated and contested. But the fact remains that, unless our various media projects and advocacy efforts are properly embedded in policy frameworks and agreements, their effects are likely to be scattered and their impact will be weakened.
So although an enormous amount of work has been done, the results of that work are not always obvious in terms of lasting change. In fact two hugely important international research initiatives – the Global Media Monitoring Project and the Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media – have clearly documented how far we are from achieving the strategic objectives of Section J. Just to mention two well-known headline statistics. At the most recent count, women are only 24% of the people we see and hear in the news around the world, and only 27% of top decision-making jobs in the media are held by women (GMMP 2010; IWMF/Byerly 2011).

Another problem, of course, is that the objectives which were adopted in Beijing now seem completely inadequate, given the changes that have happened in the media and communication landscape since 1995. Immense technological transformation in the form of digitalisation and the Internet – new information and communication technologies that were barely discussed at the time of Beijing - have opened up new and urgent questions about ICT access, infrastructure and content production, as well as the role of ICTs in the development of culture, and the impact of all these for women’s rights and gender equality. At the time of Beijing we could not even have imagined the advent of the so-called social media – Facebook, Twitter, You Tube, and so on – that within the past decade have begun to re-shape the way we live our lives. We could not have predicted the extent to which media content now penetrates our everyday needs and practices.

Nor could we have imagined the impact of these new media on the traditional media – radio, television, print – which were our main concern at the time of Beijing. For instance, in May 2015 Facebook launched its long-awaited project to directly host news articles from nine major media organizations in the USA and Europe – including NBC, The New York Times, and the BBC. Over time, these companies risk losing control of the distribution of their own material. But such is the power of Facebook – with 1.4 billion active users worldwide – that media companies say they have little choice but to cooperate, if they want access to the huge audiences that Facebook can provide. Needless to say, these changes in the media landscape mean that the so-called social media, despite their claims to be

\[\text{http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/13/technology/facebook-media-venture-to-include-nbc-buzzfeed-and-new-york-times.html?_r=0}\]
platforms for user-centred participation and collaboration, are also, and perhaps more importantly, the site of profound struggles about new forms of profit-making and new definitions of economic value based on data – data that we ourselves generate as we act online, with every Google search, every Amazon purchase, every Facebook like or share that we perform. This is all part of the new media world we live in – a world inconceivable at the time of Beijing.

These changes over the past two decades mean that media and communication have become ever more deeply entrenched in the processes through which power is negotiated between different groups in society. The digital divide is an increasingly important measure of economic and social inequality within and between countries, and between regions of the world. Connectivity or ‘being connected’ has become an essential key to new information, ideas, relationships, and success. But two-thirds of the planet’s population still do not have regular access to the Internet, and a greater proportion of these unconnected citizens are women. In 2013 the ITU estimated that some 200 million fewer women are online, compared with men. Women are coming online later, and more slowly, than men (ITU/UNESCO, 2013). And while many women have never been online, some of the most recent research suggests that other women - who initially embraced new communication technologies - are now abandoning online communication sites – driven away by the astonishing outpouring of misogynistic vitriol – rape threats, death threats, harassment, crude insults of all kinds - that greets women who dare to voice their opinions. So the very technologies that seemed to offer women the possibility to participate in public debate, in a way that the traditional media rarely did, actually risk silencing women through fear and intimidation (see for example, Mitchell 2015). Of course the new media have brought very positive advances too. We are certainly more connected than we were 20 years ago, and we have seen the growth of a completely new kind of feminist activism using social media.

Nevertheless, technology-related violence against women has become one of the most pressing issues we face in the post-Beijing era. It is a potentially serious problem for all

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3 For example the journal Feminist Media Studies recently devoted three of its Commentary and Criticism sections to the use of feminist hashtags to promote causes and campaigns in a range of countries. See Feminist Media Studies Vol. 14, No. 6, 2014; and Vol. 15, Nos 1 & 2, 2015.
women who go online – from women in the general public who post comments or tweets, to prominent feminist campaigners, academics and journalists – particularly those who write about women’s rights. For decades, women journalists have been subject to sexual harassment and sexualised threats. Now online forums can be a huge multiplier of this kind of intimidation. Here in Mexico the case of Lydia Cacho, whose work in uncovering prostitution and child pornography networks led to death threats, forcing her to leave the country temporarily in 2012, is well known internationally. In the United Kingdom high-profile journalists like Linda Grant and Natasha Walter have spoken publicly about how the torrent of misogynistic hate-speech directed at their work has discouraged them from writing online for national newspapers.\(^4\) There are undoubtedly examples to be found right around the world.

This is an area where we need much more research and action. Much of what we do know about it comes from the tremendous work done by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), in particular its visionary Take Back the Tech! project, launched in 2006. Gender equality arguments based on notions of fairness, justice or ethics that have sometimes worked with traditional media – particularly those with public service obligations – carry no weight in this new, fully profit-driven media environment. Research for APC in 2014 found that the major internet intermediaries – Facebook, Twitter and You Tube – will not get involved in discussions about online violence until it becomes a public relations issue – that is, when their business is threatened. And this seems to have been the motivation behind Twitter’s partnership with the advocacy group Women, Action and the Media in November 2014 to track and address cases of abuse. In April 2015 Twitter announced two changes to its policy.\(^5\) One of these broadens the type of content that Twitter now defines as threatening and abusive. The other is the introduction of new enforcement tools to tackle violations.

It remains to be seen how these measures are applied, and how effective they are. Their announcement inevitably provoked a debate: was freedom of speech being censored by the

\(^4\) http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/05/women-bloggers-hateful-trolling

new filters, or was it being fostered if it meant that users could speak out with less fear of abuse? Perhaps even more fundamentally, will the anonymity of social media continue to flourish in, and to support, the deeply misogynist culture it has revealed, where people – both male and female – voice threats they would perhaps never express in real life? In England, in January 2014 two people were sent to prison for subjecting a well-known feminist campaigner to horrific abuse on Twitter. One of these people was a 23-year-old woman. We have hardly begun to understand the impact of these developments on issues of gender identity, on information flows, on the autonomy of female citizens and journalists, and on women’s human and communication rights.

So here we are – 20 years after Beijing – certainly with some progress to be celebrated, but with many old problems still unresolved, and with a transformed media, information and communication environment that could not have been imagined in 1995. It would be logical to suppose that this transformation would be reflected in a more intense international focus on the relationship between gender equality and media and communication in the post-Beijing era. But it has not turned out that way. Twenty years ago we thought that the Beijing Platform for Action was a watershed. We believed that the issues included in Section J had at last been recognised as central to the fulfilment of women’s rights and gender equality. How wrong we were! Astonishingly, media-related issues have hardly been visible in the regular five-yearly reviews that monitor implementation of the Platform for Action. Gradually since 1995 the whole area of media and communication seems to have disappeared from the international agenda. Section J has been almost entirely overlooked by the UN agencies involved in the five-yearly reviews, as well as by most governments and even by important sections of civil society. The reality is that, despite Section J, media and communications issues still exist on the margins of the international women’s agenda – just as they did in the years leading up to Beijing.

This accumulated neglect is almost incomprehensible. One of the most recent cases is the United Nations 2015 Review and Appraisal Report of the Secretary-General on the Beijing Platform for Action. The report has an important final section called ‘Lessons learned and

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priorities for accelerating the implementation of the BPfA’. It says that one of the five priority actions to accelerate implementation of the Platform for Action is to ‘transform discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes’. But the only mention of media and communication in relation to this is to suggest ‘public and media campaigns, to mobilize communities to reject violence against women’ (United Nations 2015: para. 393). How is it possible to imagine the transformation of social norms and gender stereotypes without considering the central role of media and communication technologies? What has happened to the conceptualisation of the media and communication as a ‘critical area of concern’ for women?

There are countless other examples of this blindness. Although every international analysis of obstacles to the achievement of women’s rights acknowledges the importance of attitude change, awareness-raising and the transformation of stereotypes, it seems that the role of the media and communication technologies can no longer be mentioned. We may talk about the need for change through culture, or through education. But apparently we may not talk about the need for change in media and communication systems. What is going on here? Why has this happened? Let me suggest two possible reasons.

One important factor is the invisible but extremely powerful part played by the vested interests of giant media corporations, which are increasingly intertwined with business and finance, and with governments. For instance, in Europe the media and advertising industries have established one of the most powerful lobbies in Brussels – the decision-making centre of the European Union. The European Commission, which is responsible for policy development, has set up an internal Media Task Force to scrutinize all proposed measures – across every area, included gender equality - in terms of how they affect media policy. When the European Commission’s Equality Plan for 2006 to 2010, which contained a section on the elimination of gender stereotypes in the media, came before the Task Force, its judgement was that it presented a ‘tension with freedom of expression’ (Gallagher, 2011). In fact the actions proposed in the Plan were extremely modest. They were simply calling for awareness-raising and dialogue with the media industry. But that was the last Equality Plan to contain any reference to the media. In the current Plan - for 2010 to 2015 - the topic of gender stereotypes in the media has vanished completely. We still have little idea how
vested interests and lobbying directly affect media policy-making at national and international levels, and how this affects women’s rights. It is certainly an area in need of future research.

The second reason why media and communication issues tend to be ignored is that many activists have an extremely limited, instrumental view of the role of media in the context of a women’s rights agenda. Large sections of the global women’s movement still fail to recognize that the control of information, media and communication is a ‘gender issue’. When it is considered at all, it is often in terms of what the media can ‘do’ - to promote an idea, or spread information and so on. This kind of thinking seems to view the media as being ‘out there’ – in a space quite separate from unequal gender relations, rather than being ‘inside’ the space in which gender inequality is actually created. The result of this, is a failure to consider media and communication as an issue in itself, and a sometimes naïve vision of the media as instruments for women’s empowerment. For instance, we frequently hear calls for media campaigns to inform women about their rights. But relatively few activists seem to see media and communication as a women’s human right – in the sense of an entitlement to speak and to be heard, to have equal access to the means of communication and to the production of media content.

And this is a gap for which we – feminist media advocates and scholars – must accept some responsibility. We have not done enough to demonstrate how media, information and communication are central to all the other critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action. We have certainly not done enough to bring issues of media and communication to the heart of feminist strategising. These are difficult tasks. But we need to start thinking and planning now on how to bring media and communication to the core of international debate on women’s rights and gender equality, within a time-scale of the next 5 years. To do this we need to intensify our efforts to break through the conceptual barriers that separate ‘gender concerns’ and ‘wider concerns’ in the policy-making arena. This means demonstrating the legitimacy – indeed the centrality – of a gender perspective in broader debates about development, media structures and information systems. Naturally, that is much easier said than done – as we know from the experience of the World Summit on the Information Society, to mention just one example (Gallagher, 2014). We are currently
struggling to introduce gender and media-related targets and indicators into the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, with very little prospect of success – at least so far.

But we now have a new, potentially powerful vehicle for international action, which could make a huge impact. The effort to get gender and media onto the post-2015 agenda has been spearheaded by the Global Alliance on Media and Gender (GAMAG), which was launched under the auspices of UNESCO in 2013. It is a virtual association of activists, scholars, and media practitioners. The potential of GAMAG is enormous. It opens up tremendous opportunities for collective action on issues related to gender, media and communication, for a scaling up of successful initiatives and projects, and for research and information-sharing. It is still very much in its infancy and there are crucial matters that need to be resolved – for instance in relation to its structures of decision-making, communication and coordination, and also in relation to funding. Like almost all of the entities established nowadays by the UN agencies, it is a multi-stakeholder network. So we have to accept that not all of the organisations involved in GAMAG are in the forefront of progressive gender and media politics, and therefore we need to be vigilant. But its potential is huge, and do we need to try to make it work. The power of women’s networking was evident at the Beijing conference. But the technology to join those networks into a truly global movement was not available in 1995. Now it is. And we must use it.

Over the past 20 years many targets and goals have been set, aimed at achieving full gender equality and women’s rights. Sadly, most of them have not been met. But goals and targets are important in focusing our attention, even if sometimes they seem unreachable. For instance, the ITU/UNESCO Broadband Commission for Digital Development has set a goal of achieving gender equality in access to internet broadband by 2020 – five years from now. UN Women has called for the dismantling of patriarchy and the removal of all barriers to women’s empowerment and gender equality by 2030 – fifteen years from now. These are ambitious targets, to say the least. Patriarchy is flourishing in 2015. We don’t need anything as dramatic as the international trade in sex trafficking, or the Islamic State slave markets in

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Iraq to remind ourselves of that fact. Much more mundane examples are all around us, all the time. Two examples, from May 2015, can illustrate the point.

On May 7 2015 there were national elections in the United Kingdom. The leaders of three small political parties are women. In the early stages of the campaign these women were generally ignored in media coverage. But when it became clear that one of them – the leader of the Scottish National Party – was performing extremely well in the electoral debates, and that her party was getting a lot of support from the public, she became the target of an avalanche of hostile and sexist abuse in the media. Reports described her as ‘the most dangerous wee [little] woman in the world’\(^8\). Her face was superimposed on a picture of the singer Miley Cyrus, dressed in a tartan bikini, headlined ‘Tartan Barmy’\(^9\). And so on. This is how some of the media continue to portray female politicians in 2015.

The second example is about the working conditions of women journalists. On May 5 2015 forty French political journalists – all women – wrote an open letter, published by one of the country’s main national newspapers. They spoke in detail about the fact that they are routinely subjected to crass and outrageous sexism from the politicians and officials whom they have to meet and interview in the course of their work. Some of the signatories to the letter decided to remain anonymous, out of fear of losing their jobs\(^10\). These are the conditions in which some women journalists continue to work in 2015. The women said that ten years ago they would not have dared to speak out about this problem. So perhaps their statement can be seen as a sign of progress. But predictably, their letter provoked a storm of misogynistic reaction from online commentators. One step forward, one step back.

We may never achieve some of our goals and targets. Media sexism and male-dominated power structures are continually shifting, and finding new forms of representation and practice. So our critique can never be static or one-dimensional. But we must act collectively – that is one of the most important lessons of Beijing and of the past 20 years. We must

\(^9\) http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/fury-sexist-sun-depict-first-5314278
work together, across disciplines and sectors, and across countries and regions. We need to keep strong, and not be disheartened by the slow pace of change. We can do this, because we must. And we will.
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