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Beyond Contents: Proposals From A Gender Perspective
For Intervention In The Media

Teresa Uca Silva[*]

This presentation is framed within the objectives of the Expert Group Meeting on "Participation and access of women to the media and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as instruments for the advancement of empowerment of women", held in Beirut, Lebanon, from 12 to 15 November 2002.

We consider that this title encompasses the main contents that gather us: establishing a reflection and proposals around women's possibilities of access to and incidence upon the current media scenes, specifically in relation to the contents and representation of women in the media.

These are the dimensions that guide this work. In the first part, it takes the opportunity to establish an evaluation of the present media scene in relation to the articulation between gender interests and the media in our region[1], and then moves on to examine the possibilities arising for the future.

1.   A revision of the road traversed

In the past decades there has been a communicational explosion that has generated new ways of operating and interacting in society. The technological development of the media and the message industry has become one of the most significant phenomena in the field of social relations, accelerating and rapidly changing the collective and individual ways of getting information, communicating and living. One of the most significant impacts of this new social scene has been the primacy acquired by the media as public referents in the face of other social actors, installing themselves as the "spaces of collective conversation" and "spaces of mediation of reality." Thus they have become the main emitters and channels of public messages, not only accounting for what happens in society but also constructing a virtual representation of reality and organizing the construction of values, significations and meaning. Numerous studies have focused on the observation and analysis of the impact this phenomenon is having in our ways of organizing and interrelating, concluding, for the most part, that we live a new mediatized world. Additionally, it is also acknowledged that a neoliberal model has become dominant, with the market defining and leading the communicational logic, at the same time diminishing the participation of other actors, such as the State and civil society.

First women's communicational moment

The women's movement can be recognized as a paradigmatic example of what the relationship of civil society to the media has been like. If we observe the trajectory of women's groups, we will see that it has been a pioneering sector in the incorporation of the communicational dimension to their activity. They have been one of the first social organizations to see the importance of the media through two tendencies: seeing the media as producers of models and images in the representation of women, and, later, perceiving the communicational as an essential tool that reinforced and incremented the political activity of the movement. The relation of women to the media is generated from these two axes.

The first communicational actions of organized women focused on denouncement and critique of media messages and contents. Women have never abandoned the demand of

responsibility from the media. In this sense, it has been the most visionary, consequent and active social movement in this field. These actions have positioned the issue of the treatment of women in different communicational genres in the social and political agendas, especially in relation to violence and the use of the feminine in television advertising.

From the critique of contents, women's groups broadened and modified their strategy, creating and maintaining a parallel media circuit. From simple alternative products such as brochures, and evolving towards the creation of media such as international publishing, radio stations, newspapers and magazines, these groups actively contributed to the installation and consolidation of alternative communications in Latin America (Silva, 2000).

It is around these two thematic axes that signs of transformation and achievement in relation to the representation of women in the media are to be found. However, it is also important to acknowledge that these achievements have been insufficient to have a complacent attitude towards what Latin American media continue to represent in general. In a regional monitoring of the Southern Cone conducted in 2001, we observed that in a Santiago radio station, out of a total 158 minutes of interviews, only one woman was interviewed for 13 seconds.[2] Experiences such as this, allow us to properly affirm that women not only continue to be omitted, but also that the media have not modified the focus and contents of their messages, and that there is, therefore, a long road still to traverse before we can speak of equality or a good representation of women in the media.

Approximately two decades ago, this was the most energetic and radical way of confronting the powerful dominant communicational systems: generating a critique of their contents and creating potent discursive spaces where organized women invented and circulated counter-discourses. However, face to the enormous communicational development of recent years, women's organizations realized that both strategies were insufficient to confront the productive potency of the media.

Beijing: identifying a change in communications proposals

In this context, women participating in the IV World Women's Conference (Beijing, 1995) became sensitive to the new conditions and took on the responsibility, once again, of responding to the new roles of communications, specifically of the media. The J section of the action platform (Women and the media) was established at that meeting, recommending a series of actions specifically directed towards the media. Although this section has limitations, it also reflects the transcendence of reifying the communicational dimension and bringing new air to women's thought. This was accepted as an invitation to complexify the analysis, revising the categories in use until then and generating new proposals. This permeability of women's groups was decisive in the adoption of different approaches to the comprehension of communications which, to a certain extent, have allowed for a recognition of the new actors in this dimension and a re-thinking of the media with a new gaze.

Different experiences

Beijing can be recognized as a landmark in the establishment of new wills and intentions in approaching communicational development, specifically in regards to the contents representations of women in the media. Women's strategies changed. While not abandoning their pioneering place, insofar as they continue to face the changes in the world scene, it is this openness and flexibility of women's groups that allows them to renew their fields of incidence.

Notable in this context is the proposal of monitoring, which extends to the construction of permanent and systematic observatories of media production. Following and analyzing the "what and how" of women the media represent, offers one of the most consistent methods in the generation of a new knowledge about their contents in relation to women. This approach has also produced new ways of working collectively among women's groups, expanding the field of alliances to conjunct work on a regional as well as a global level.[3] Monitoring has been a work method that has consolidated the collective experiences at the birth of a globalized movement.

The promotion of awards for the changes in the representation of women, particularly in advertising, has been another form of incidence directed to the modification of contents that has consolidated in recent years in the Latin American region. These awards, aside from promoting a positive gaze in relation to the acknowledgement of changes, contain a very valid educational dimension. One of the more recent experiences in Chile involved the participation of the citizens in the selection of the advertisements and media products to be awarded.[4]

Advocacy has been another strategy developed towards the media. Women's organizations have created systems to promote certain events or actions of women and position them in media agendas, thus competing with other social issues and groups.

Through this whole process, we can recognize a highly positive qualitative change, resulting in a maturity of the movement in this area. As a whole, these bids account for a significant change in the transformation of the approach of women's groups, all of which attempt to integrate themselves to the media. This intention of integration has implied a recognition of the need for three major changes: first, abandoning the isolation generated by the production of alternative communications; second, transforming the relationship of mistrust and hostility towards the media; and, finally, the development of a professional work at the level demanded by the mass media.

Returning to the foundations

Women's groups have, then, integrated changes in their strategies to be inside of and have incidence upon the media. They have also broadened their spectrum of communicational work and modified some of their intervention policies towards the media, flexibilizing and transforming them. However, we must also unfortunately admit that despite all this development, these new forms of intervention have been insufficient and unable to disentangle themselves from three fundamental characteristics of the old communicational strategies. The first is transforming the climate of resistances and mistrust surrounding the relations between the media and women's organizations. Second is the maintenance of an isolated work, with little impact in

the public realm. And, finally, the little degree of collective intervention, meaning the participation of women outside the organizations, that these projects posses.

2.   Forwarding a proposal. Shifting the place from where questions are asked

The new communicational contexts demand a renewal of our comprehension and approach to the representation of the feminine in the media. In this perspective, we forward a proposal centered on the concept of *mediation*, which we consider useful for the development of a different approach to present day communicational processes and their possibilities for social practice.

Mediation is an old concept, traditionally identified with a function of communicational systems in relation to social reality, understood as the capacity of the media to conform an appreciation of social facts and to give their contents a certain orientation. The contribution of Jesus Martin Barbero, which we are adopting, is shifting the place of the mediation process, decentering it from the media to place it prioritarily in the culture. This means localizing the analysis and questioning of the communicational in a process recognizable beyond the media, inserting it in a complex system of social relations (Orozco, 1998). Thus, instead of beginning a research with an analysis of the logics of production and reception, to then search for its relations of imbrication or confrontation, we propose to start from mediations: "the places from which the constrictions that delimit and configure the social materiality and the cultural expressivity of television come from" (Barbero, 1990).

This proposal integrates a new conception of (communicational) "reading", developed in Latin America, especially in the work of Beatriz Sarlo, that questions the centrality attributed to the text and the message, understood as the sites of the "truth" circulating in communications (Sarlo, 1998) . It puts this focalization of the message and the text in crisis, admitting the asymmetries of demands and the diversity of contests found and negotiated from the text. Thus, Jesus Martin Barbero points out that in this complex communicational system, the text loses its centrality and its modifications have to do with the articulation of relations outside of it, in a series of social processes and actors.

Adopting this viewpoint would imply shifting the place from where questions are asked. In other words, it would mean to displace the critique, concern and proposals away from the text towards the mediation sustained and reproduced by the media. If we move towards mediations, we can broaden our field of incidence beyond texts, and beyond the media, to insert ourselves in social contexts where the areas of action and intervention that will finally have an impact on the media are to be found. This approach allows us to assign responsibility for the contents not only to the media, but to other social actors and organizations as well.

With the adoption of this focus that transcends contents, we develop the strategic proposal of this document in three different spaces that recover social practice: the protagonism of women; the abandonment of exclusivities and isolations; and the acknowledgement of the possibilities of participation in the nucleus of information and communications.

First proposal: integration

The first proposal to promote a social practice, differentiated in terms of gender, in the field of media, refers to the need to integrate (and integrate with) a vast gamut of social actors in their diverse expressions, both in the creation of new forms of intervention as well as in the construction of knowledge.

In practice, this means that women's groups must share responsibilities with other social actors in regards to the task of intervening in the present communicational processes of the media. Confronting the potency of the media in relation to gender must be understood as a task for everyone, especially the organizations of the civil society and the generators of knowledge, such as academic and research centers. These sectors, in their struggle for changes and transformations, especially in Latin America, have not incorporated the demands around gender inequalities and have a pending debt with women organizations.

Civil society organizations (not specialized in gender), account for the great limitations in relation to the issues gathering us at this meeting, in the field of the communicational as well as in integrating gender problematics into their work. Our Latin American struggle companions have been quite indifferent, to use a mild word, towards gender inequality. On one hand, they have not been able to articulate and understand that inequality between men and women also includes them, and they have, therefore, something to do there. On the other, it remains a permanent indicator of the presence of discrimination, absence of modernization and lack of democracy.

The way in which the work between organizations that promote the overcoming of other conflicts and women's organizations has been conducted until now, has produced the isolation of women within gender issues, which is another cause for the low impact of our agreements and decisions. Another product of this separation has been the absence of dialogue with other sectors, and therefore a lack of feedback regarding our proposals. Unfortunately, many moments of articulation happen because of the pressure of donors that include the measurement or evaluation of the possible gender impact of the projects presented to them in their requirements for support to institutions. If it was not for this factor, the isolation of the gender issue in our region would be even more dramatic.

In this context, incorporating the treatment of men in the studies of gender representation in the media, is a proposal that advances in this area and allows a visualization of the configuration of this problem in an integral way. This proposal has not been carried out in Latin America. Thus, the phrase "gender is not a women's issue"[5] more than a confirmation becomes a demand in the face of an historical debt of our closest allies.

The generation of knowledge: Latin American researchers and academic and research centers

In the same scope, we see that the new media scene has revived communicational studies with an intensity comparable to that of the 70s. The volume of research on media, their transformations and impacts, increases on a daily basis. However, from the perspective of gender

and women's studies, most of these advancements and thought are only partially useful, as the long standing error of most studies persists: omitting a gender perspective from their frame of thought. Traditional language, the non-incorporation of new movements and the non-generation of a knowledge that integrates the impact of media transformations from the perspective of gender, are some of the problems present in most research.

The donors. As already stated, a third component that plays an important role in the dynamics of positioning and promotion of this issue is the economic support that donors can offer. In Latin America, this support makes the difference between being able to develop a subject or not, making a work area more dynamic or not. The changes proposed in communicational intervention belong to cultural transformations, new forms of comprehension and meaning. These transformations are slow and difficult to evaluate, which generates a resistance in the donors. It is important to establish in the international community a more exact understanding of the characteristics and needs of these communicational projects. Concrete exercises can be made, such as incorporating an item dedicated to communications in any project on gender.

Second proposal: placing the citizenship, and specifically women, at the center of our strategies

This means re-positioning women in the central place they should have, as far as knowing how they are relating to the media, what their processes of production of meaning are and, most importantly, recovering their place as subjects of intervention and therefore of participation.

It has not been evident that women have been assigned these roles in the generation of communicational strategies. We have generally focused our studies on texts and, at the same time, a group of women have assumed a representation of the taste and link of all women to the media.

What do women want? How do they handle communications? What do they think, desire, criticize? These are questions that could generate new bodies of knowledge channeling towards communicational strategies. In this way, proposals can be built from the experiences assessed by women, while the task of the experts would be to integrate and channel this information. This would enrich work towards the media and would allow a greater understanding of the issue. In Latin America there is very little information on the perception of women as an audience and the evaluation they themselves make of their representation.

Information is a living matter. Through people, it palpitates and mutates its meanings permanently. As some scholars point out, interpretation processes are not finite and they are permanently being renewed through the decoding audiences make and their exemplifying uses, becoming, in turn, referents and contents in spaces other and unrelated to those where they originated.

Media transformations have submerged us in a field of new social signifiers, constructing a virtual reality that fills the daily lives of men and women with a world that contains entertainment, emotion and information. Permanently directed towards our subjectivities, these

messages recognize and interpellate us, transmitting an illusion of integration and belonging to a collective construction of a world that doesn't manifest itself in any other space. In this manner, they simplify our relations to our environment and our participation needs, and therefore the representation of the different sectors that conform society. Today, it is the media that ensure us that feeling of social integration we need and desire, at the same time they keep us socially excluded from the processes of production of meaning. This is one of the main paradoxes women's organizations must face in wanting to penetrate the media's production of contents. It is this situation of contradiction between media production and the daily lives of men and women which diminishes allies and critique.

The role of the media is today highly functional to the hegemonic model in our society. The tendency towards individuality and personal projects, the departure of collective meanings, together with high levels of production demands, long working hours, individual resolution of problems, are all resolved in the media, mainly television. Through its messages, television shows us that we are not alone. It places us within the social tissue on a daily basis, showing us models we can identify to, presenting standards of behavior and suggesting that there are others with problems similar to our own.

We must, then, ask ourselves how to critique a media system that produces so many satisfactions and presents itself as a useful tool in our most immediate life, giving us constant signals to interpret our environment. A system that, in spite of all our insecurities, tells us that there is a society advancing and that we are integrated to it. That rewards our daily efforts while, unconditionally, providing constant signals to interpret the demanding environment we function in. In this context, the critical activity of women's groups is left floating, loose, without supports to build meanings as potent as those offered by the media.

Understanding this landscape allows us to develop a non-destructive critical perspective. One that does not confront us with *the whole* of the communicational system but allows us, instead, to recognize and identify those *instants* or *moments* subject to modification. In this sense, monitoring can be upheld as a valid tool for opportunely spotting the need for intervention, but it could, at the same time, be complemented with the integration of the vision and opinion of women as an audience.

Third proposal: promotion of a communicational awareness and the right to communication

An insertion in the rich and complex communicational system of today, allows us to reformulate and renew this dimension, seeking its possibilities in the creation of a new form of relation between the citizenship and the media. Maintaining the proposal central to this document –i.e. locating the questions outside of the places where we have asked them until now- in relation to this specific point, would mean the promotion of an activity capable of accounting for and underlining the communicational.

It is, thus, central to this document to establish that a communicational strategy today, should be designed to provide the citizenship with the elements it needs to attain an exact understanding of the possibilities of empowerment offered by access to and appropriation of

information and communications. With such an understanding and knowledge, the process of reception of information would also imply a participation of the citizenship, in this case of women.

For this reason, in terms of the need to intervene in the media, in this case in the contents of the media, this proposal hinges upon the need to generate strategies to develop a communicational awareness in the citizenship. This means acknowledging the relevance of the communicational dimension for social organizations today, recognizing that it has become an element constitutive of power and decision, organizing and producing meaning in the spaces where the public and the private are defined.

The degree of communicational awareness becomes a tool to transform the intervention capabilities of the citizenship in a way better suited to present day social configurations in general, because of the primacy of the media, as well as the actual need to install and develop information and communication technologies where their absence opens a new area of inequality.

Through the generation of a communicational awareness beyond the specific contents of the media, it is possible to create a political proposal that centers its main activity on the link between the citizens and information and communications, in order to impact the media from there. Thus, there is a supra-communicational element allowing an empowerment of the citizens, and making available an element to generate a dialogue with the media.

This communicational awareness can be made operative mainly through the promotion of the right to communication. This encompasses an active and passive right: to inform and to be informed (Servaas, 1998). The right to communication is broader than the right to information and includes it. It is an essential right of the citizens offering the conditions to adopt new forms of integration and participation. It is through the mutually reinforcing elements of access to information, its acknowledgement as a public good, the appropriation of information by women, that the citizens can attain aperture and diversity in the understanding of information and communications.

In this context, the task of social organizations becomes placing the promotion of the right to communication at the center of their action, acknowledging it as an essential element in the consolidation of democracy. Including, that is, the communicational dimension in their work proposals and projects as an indispensable element for new forms of citizen participation.

It is possible to affirm today, that civil society organizations have stayed behind in the adoption of strategies facing the development of communication and information systems. Three phenomena can be identified as producing this retreat: the penchant for work in the margins; the devalorization of media products and the instrumental relation of certain groups to this field (Martin Barbero, 1998). This establishes the inability of social organizations to perceive and acknowledge that a new area of power has consolidated, making it imperative for these organizations to engage a new task. It is imperative not only for their institutional activity –i.e. wanting to be in the media, as they have done until now- but as an integral part of their field work directed to the bases and object of their mobilizations.

We can include women's organizations in this critique. The field of media has been the object of specific communicational projects, carried out by defined groups in this area. Women's groups in general have developed this work instrumentally, without promoting the communicational element as a component and indicator of inequality.

Finally, if social organizations acknowledge the importance of communications and information, if they promote a communicational awareness, if they are able to transmit just how crucial communications are today, it is possible that other sectors of the citizenship will come to identify the political action taking place through communicational processes. An awareness of the importance of the processes of production and reception of information can generate possibilities of appropriation and decision of the citizens upon communications. It is this knowledge that values this dimension as a right. An instrument, that is, relevant to the tasks of democratization and citizen participation. Thus, information and communications adopted as a universal human right, could allow men and women to decide, reject, change attitudes, support one another, demand and/or accept, in short, to participate in what is happening in the social scene.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In many cases, the Chilean situation is used as the main reference

[2] El lado oscuro de los medios. Ibis Internacional 2000, Santiago, Chile.

[3] An example of this are the regional project in the Latin American Southern Cone or the global monitoring project directed by the WACC.

[4] *Choose Award*, coordinated by La Morada, with the placement of voting bills and reception boxes in public places such as cinemas and schools.

[5] M. Gallagher; 2001 pg. 191. Taken from Women's Media Watch, South Africa, 1998.