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Communication: Policy, Power, and Participation

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The path to communication equity for women is long and worn, with many detours. And yet, Latin Americans may envision better than others of the Americas, the winding path to the 21st century covered with footsteps from the past (El Siglo Veintiuno y Las Huellas del Pasado, Shields, 1992). Latin Americans sense time differently from most North Americans. Its passage is multilevel, with the past blending into the future, with each footstep along the way connected to relationships. Its verities are multiple with more shades than those of the binary, right or wrong approach to truth. The novels of Isabel Allende and Carlos Fuentes, the poetry of Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda give us a complex world filled with imagery.

For most North Americans, time is more likely to be perceived as discrete units marching along in sequential, linear fashion. And for women of both cultures, the connection to the future tends to be through the past and present. Hall (1976) has described these two characteristics of cultures as being polychronic (multi-levels) and monochronic (linear) . Women of both Latin America and North America are probably more polychronic than the men, because women are used to carrying on multiple activities. They have multi-tasked since childhood.

This different sense of time and relationships gives women a unique perspective, an invaluable one for planning of communication and information policies. Unfortunately, these special insights have been neither sought nor valued by policy planners at any level, be it institutional, regional, national, or international. Thus, the "razon y palabra" of women echoes in neither the "real world" nor in Cyberspace. Those who cannot speak for themselves will find themselves defined by others, whether it is the portrayal of nations who have less access to the "global media" infrastructure and the "Information Society" it supports, or of women.

Cyberspace still closely reflects the real world. Until women leave the protected spaces they had to build for themselves on the Internet, and become the owners, directors, and technology developers of media, they will continue to find their identities shaped by others. They must become the computer scientists, the owners and directors of technology firms. It has been said that we shape our tools so that we can shape our world. Having shaped them, they shape us.

Heather Kelly forewarns us that the sounds and rhythms of Cyberspace will not be determined by gender usage ratios:

the ratios are getting better every day. But as usual, there is still a gap where its effects are the worst: on the creation side. If someday 99.9% of web surfers are women, but men still build the browsers, design the hardware, create the applets, and collect the credit card numbers, (or worst of all, are the only ones who dream up the technical changes that have yet to come to be) what ground has been gained (Kelly, 1996).

Last year, a celebration was held for ENIAC (Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer), a thirty ton, black steel, vacuum tubed, wired, monster that debuted on St. Valentine's Day at the University of Pennsylvania over fifty years ago. It could not quite equal the power of today's pocket calculator costing less than forty dollars. It was developed in a rush, because the Army needed it to calculate complex artillery trajectory tables needed to shoot down new fast-moving warplanes during WW II. The ENIAC team of developers achieved a computer miracle in a three-year crash project. Its first programs were written by a woman, Adele Goldstine, but her name was absent from all of the media reports celebrating ENIAC's fiftieth birthday. US Army General Gladeon Barnes who pushed the button launching the computer era, Herman Goldstine, who served as liaison between the Army and ENIAC teams, and John Mauchly, one of the two "masterminds behind ENIAC all figured prominently (Raphael, M. 1996).

The cloaked history of women in computing neither began, nor ended with Adele Goldstine. Charles Babbage's famous computing machine of the 1880's would never have carried out a single calculation without the instructions written by Ada Lovelace. Grace Hopper was the central figure in developing COBOL in the 1950's. It was she who called the nettlesome malfunctions in programs, "bugs". Early pioneers, who were women, have disappeared as role models, clearing the way for the semantics, analogies, and metaphors of the Internet to be dominated by a male culture. It is a communal loss. Is it possible that the number of women entering Computer Science in the United States would not be declining if we knew our histories?

The nascent myths and metaphors of Cyberspace are emanating from male voices. It was also they who chanted the stories, wrote histories, and described the "real world" from time immemorial. Our myths are our realities. They belong to us as we belong to them, forming our identities and relationships, giving us permission to speak with certitude, to speak softly and inoffensively, or remain silent. They are the greatest barrier to equity in access to global communication and the Information Society. Until our myths are recreated and retold, the barrier cannot be moved, shifted, or blown-up. It is only through reshaping our myths by recreating our metaphors, analogies, and symbols, it is only then that our realities will be transformed and our more complex identities emerge.

As the Cyberspace Myth grows, it is dangerous place, filled with:

"cyberporn", stalkers, "road warriors," "flame wars,". ….

Cyberspace is another uncharted territory of danger, violence, lurkers, tremendous "autobahn" speeds, a frontier waiting to be conquered. (Shields & Stewart in press).

It is "edgy". Even the word, "lurker" to describe a person who observes, rather than contributes on a listserv, carries the connotation of the trench-coated figure concealed in the bushes, waiting to leap out and flash an unsuspecting woman. Perhaps the continued use of the term, e.g. "I've been lurking, but would like to put my 2 cents in…." by women will give it new meaning. Words do change meaning over time. But why was "lurking" with its illusion of danger used to describe the wise activity of "observing" or perhaps even "thinking" or "reflecting" or "listening" before speaking? These are all honourable activities.

Mostly untold is the power of women who are reaching out to each other across continents and islands, in a way, heretofore, impossible. They are using the Net, in growing numbers, building homes and communities in Cyberspace. But use will not be the final determinant of "a woman's place" there. It is the myths we take with us, and the myths that are already shaping this amorphous, international, communication linking the corners of the world that will shape our voices, that will decide who tells our stories, and who creates the new myths about us. This is true of all of the people of developing countries as well as all women.

Cyberspace is a placeless place, of transformational power, waiting to be defined by women as well as men, by developing nations as well as the United States and other industrialized countries. There is another reality, a counter myth to be created that will transform the Internet to a place where women meet across space and time to share knowledge, humor, stories, and create movements that will not be stopped.

The Internet is Potential. It is a Promise. It is a meeting place, of people and information and merchandise. It is a bazaar. [Es nuestro mercado libre. Es nuestra plaza]. It is a library, where we prowl the stacks, and create our own knowledge. It is an international resource, with all members of all societies having a stake in its outcome, but very few having an equity interest in it.

It is a convergence of telecommunication/information technological infrastructures and networks that web the world, allowing us to communicate and exchange information in spaces we build ourselves, and it is in the building of these spaces that we recreate the Internet anew…..The Internet asks not to be aggrandized, for it connects us. This is its power. (Shields & Stewart, in press).

As the "Web" grows, strewn with cookies to monitor our tastes and behaviours, and as innumerable surveys examine its inhabitants, the old myths dominate. Women are the "shoppers" and men are the "explorers". While it is true that women make most of the household purchases (most men have not yet volunteered to take over the task), they are also the hunters and explorers.

A recent survey by NetSmart claims that the "average woman online is middle-aged and upper middle-class. At 41, she spends six hours a week online at home and has a household income of $63K. She likes the Web because it is: Convenient…., empowering. Instead of going store to the store, women can research purchases by going site to site. Fun. Women enjoy checking out new cosmetics and clothing trends on the Web." This conflicts with the October Issue of Internet Magazine ranking women's preferences as: "news, travel, hobbies, health/medicine, entertainment/movies, government/community. But it was the "shop till she drops" that got AnchorDesk (Hamilton, 1997) headlines.

Other surveys show men are the Cyberspace shoppers, earning more and spending more. On May 9, Binary Compass Enterprise, announced "the results of the first comprehensive point-of-purchase Internet shopper study. 79% of online retail shoppers are male, 74 % are Caucasian, the average individual income of the Internet shopper is about $75,000" (Nua Surveys, October).

On July 10, 1997, results for "hunting" were in from the "first Internet aptitude test, which required surfers to use a variety of Web search sites to find answers to five questions covering pop culture, science, history and the arts. Of the initial 650,000 respondents, only 17,000 (2.6 percent) finished the test……more men participated, 68 percent, but women proved to be slightly better at surfing with an average score of 79.91 vs. 78.29 for men. Trivia perhaps, but myths based on slimmer "truths" have dominated for millenia. The shopping myth precedes women into Cyberspace, catching the headlines, with an almost anonymous survey. On messaging NetSmart (using the address given in the report) for details on the methodology used in arriving at the results, NetSmart's email reply was, "What survey are you refering (sic)to?? I'm very interested to know what you are talking about!!". After sending another message describing the AnchorDesk Report to NetSmart, the next reply was, "Try www.netsmart.com". While both replies were almost immediate, they threw no light on the methodology or analysis used. It was impossible to get any information from www.netsmart.com. Another Myth about women was perpetuated, apparently without foundation since other surveys showed women behaving very differently on the Web.

It is argued that the Internet will lead to greater equity in participation, greater democracy for those who have technical access. However, participatory equity has been notable for its absence on academic listservs, serving student populations, and those for faculty. The same has been found to be true in online chats.

Several studies confirmed that male participation far outweighs that of women. One listserv study (Stewart & Shields, 1996) showed that men speak more frequently than women, send longer messages, employ more user ids, and use more aggressive language. The listserv was set up for two undergraduate classes, having a total of 175 members. Less than one-third of those participated. Of the 56 who participated, more than half were men (37). The ratio of messages sent by men to that of women was almost four to one, with men sending 438 messages to only 123 by women. Moreover, the total volume of messages sent by men was 314,300 bytes while women totaled only 51,499. Men sent more than six times the message volume of women. Men also more frequently chose multiple user ids, frequently connoting power or aggressiveness , e.g. gd (god), the Movie Maniac, Newt Gingriche's Bitch, etc. Females who chose user ids other than their own names or variations of their real names, were more soothing in their selections, e.g. me, poohbear, Cheshire Cat. The disappearance rate of women was so appalling, that only one woman remained as a participant by the end of the course.

Gender differences in communication practices and discourse, probably resulting from viewing the world through a different lens of experience than men, rather poignantly explain the low participation or disappearance of women from listserv and chat groups. Fundamental differences in discourse patterns are well documented by researchers (Lakoff, 1973; Rakow, 1986; Spender, 1985; Stewart & TingToomey, 1987; Tannen, 1990). Frequently, power is related to the different experiences men and women live, giving them

different frameworks for viewing the world. Rakow (1986) stated that we need to move beyond gender as an individual attribute, and examine the relationship of the structures of gender relations and power relations. Our perceptions of participation are so skewed that Spender (1989) has theorized that:

…men perceive women as dominating a discussion when they contribute as little as 30% of the talk, a finding supported by other research (Herring, Johnson & DiBenedetto, 1992). Spender explains this finding by observing that since it is the "natural order of things" for women to contribute significantly less to a group discussion than their male counterparts, women are then thought of as dominating the discussion when they participate at anything beyond that minimal level. Another relevant finding was reported as regards the value placed on women's contributions to mixed gender discussions. Specifically, Herring, Johnson and DiBenedetto (1992) found that both men and women responded more to comments made and questions posed by men, thereby suggesting a recognition of the more powerful status of men in the group overall (Stewart & Shields, 1997).

Stewart, Shields, & Sen (1997) documented many of the same patterns on a monitored listserv set up with the goal of creating open dialogue on topics related to the class, though there was more participation from women and people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Although several women commented that they felt "safe" on the listserv, their participation rate was still lower, Caucasian males still dominated the listserv. All of the cited studies support an argument for the development of policy related to the use of academic networks by faculty and students. Most institutions have netiquette policies, but there are few policies supporting faculty in their attempts to integrate technologies into the classroom, or as they begin to teach entire classes online. They are rarely given released time to develop the skills needed for leading online discussions, nor are they given training and guidance emphasizing the need for gender, cultural equity in online discussions and "virtual classrooms".

As academic institutions push for an increased "online presence," they usually fail to consider faculty initiative in developing online classes as part of the requirements leading to tenure. These faculty members have put a tremendous investment of their own time and energy (and sometimes finances) in taking their students online to participate in a technological environment now common in corporations. Faculty investment is frequently reaped by academic institutions, because these institutions gain a higher profile or presence in the area of online learning or distance education. Unfortunately, many times, these same institutions have failed their faculties because of the absence of policy leading to coordinated planning and strategies in using instructional technologies, particularly in online environments. Even more sadly, it is ultimately students and the larger society who suffer from this policy absence. It leads to lost opportunities where democratic participation by all members of society could have been increased.

Different cultures develop different models of democracy and capitalism. Perhaps women also tend to have different notions of democracy than men. Turkel, in a 1996 interview with Technology Review, observed the tendency of women to become low profile or invisible in online groups when verbal behaviours become aggressive. Women become silent or leave. They do not seem to believe in democracy of the loudest brawler as described by P.J. O'Rourke (1996, p. 55):

I want them all shouting. I want to watch them battle for their points of view, fight their fights with society and each other. I want to see each one of them trying to make the nation over in his or her own image.

Perhaps too many women have already been made over into an image they never chose, an image derived from a myth they never birthed. Perhaps too many women have lost sons, husbands, fathers in wars where one society fought with another to "make (a) nation over in (its) own image". And almost always, the "image makers" found God on their side. Too many women have been painfully molded by too many images.

Benjamin Barber (1995, p. 5), a Rutgers University political scientist argued that "electronic democracy" may not lead to greater participation in the democratic process, but do the opposite. "The new demagoguery is much more dangerous because it passes as more democratic…unless we are able to distinguish between the real electronic democracy and the spurious, cloaked as democracy." The former president of Haiti, Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1997) described democracy:

One of the defining characteristics of civil society is the high percentage of women participating. Bearing witness against human rights abuses, organizing cooperatives, creating community health projects - women have long filled the ranks of people's organizations. However, this degree of participation is not at all

reflected in the number of women involved in decision-making at all levels. World-wide, women hold only 12% of all the seats in parliament, and 6% of those in national cabinets. Cyberspace echoes the "real world". Women are not welcomed into many male dominated groups, from political institutions, to the hierarchy of different religions, to the upper rungs of academe and corporations. It is only seventeen years ago that Vigdis Finnbogadottir earned a place in record books "by becoming the first woman in the world to be elected a constitutional head of state (Marilyn Gardner, 1997). In the United States, the glass ceiling shows a tiny crack, but it has not been breached. It is far from shattering.

It is recognized that the educational level of women is directly related to the economy and democracy of a country. Educating women leads to economic improvement in developing countries, and economic stability encourages social stability and democracy. There is a huge, underused resource in Latin America, its women. "It is usually the women who are the poorest, the least educated…but they are key to their country's social and economic progress" (Shields and Stewart, in press).

As the telecommunications infrastructure of the region is modernized, the infrastructure for distance learning through the Internet is being built. And the possibility of reaching women who will become part of building the economies of Latin American countries is increased.

Educating women, training them, providing access to capital and information, providing the means for them to reach beyond their present status is probably the most rapid, most efficient, most long-lasting solution open to Latin America as it moves towards a new millennium (Shields, Camacho & Monolescu, 1997).

Technology can narrow the North-South chasm. In the 70s, it was believed that technology transfer would permit developing countries (DCs) to leapfrog the gap. The frog never leapt. The chasm still yawns, but the "appropriate technologies" are now also the most advanced, in building telecommunication infrastructure.

At no time in our history has the frog been bigger and stronger and the gap easier to jump. The relationship of telecommunication infrastructure to social and economic progress is no longer questioned, so we are given another chance, perhaps the last one, to share each other's worlds. But in order to narrow the gap, new partnerships must be forged, new strategies formed, and new stakeholders in the future of the region better defined (Shields, Camacho, & Monolescu, 1997).

Without policy, the leap will never happen. Without women and NGOs participating in the decision-making process of multilateral lending institutions and Policy Think Tanks, it will never happen.

Jean-Francois Rischard (1996) in his "Proposal for a World Bank Group Strategy" states:

Information infrastructure is made up of the networks of telecommunications and the tools of computing. As its sole purpose is to transport, manipulate, store and disseminate information efficiently it has become the "knowledge tool" essential for the management of the economy. And because economic development is about knowledge, the information revolution holds inestimable promise for people in the developing world (1996).

The Summit of the Americas Plan of Action (1994) recognized that many were non-participants in the "information revolution".

Large segments of society in our Hemisphere, particularly women, minorities, the disabled, indigenous groups, refugees and displaced persons, have not been equipped to participate fully in economic life. Nearly one-half of the Hemisphere's population still lives in poverty. Expanded participation of the poor in the region's economies, access to productive resources…are important mechanisms to eradicate poverty….The strengthening of the role of women in society is of fundamental importance not only for their own complete fulfillment within a framework of equality and fairness, but to achieve true sustainable development. Attending to the needs of women means, to a great extent, contributing to the reduction of poverty and social inequalities.

In the United States, women-owned firms employ more people than all of the Fortune 500 corporations combined. In DCs, women form a large part of the informal economy in rural and urban areas. The Summit of the Americas Plan of Action (1994) further notes:

Microenterprises and small businesses account for a large percentage of the employment of the poor, particularly women, and contribute a considerable percentage of the gross domestic product of our countries. Strengthened support for microenterprises and small business is a key component of sustainable and equitable development (1994).

The 1996 World Bank Annual Report Latin America and the Caribbean characterized poverty and inequality as the "Achilles heel" of Latin American development. Because the average adult population has 5.2 years of education, two years less than other countries with a comparable development level, it targeted human development as a major challenge. The problem of illiteracy is exacerbated by the higher drop out rate of women. It is they who help and motivate their own children to learn and remain in primary schools.

Distance education is essential in the training of educators in primary schools, as they learn how to prevent dropouts, absenteeism, and how to involve parents in adult learning programs. There are increasing efforts, some of them very innovative, to reach educators and women entrepreneurs in Latin America (Shields, Camacho, & Monolescu 1997).

Since all countries and international institutions and agencies recognize the relationship of literacy to the socio-economic health of their societies, and the value of women's contributions to the gross domestic product of their countries, it would seem that women would be targeted in their programs. As invaluable stakeholders in their societies, their representation through NGOs could be assumed in Think Tanks forming strategies to bring DCs into greater participation in the "global economy". This has not yet happened.

The World Development Report for 1998 (provisional) is entitled, "Knowledge for Development". It evolved from a Think Tank set up by TechNet, an "initiative of the Finance and Private sector Development vice Presidency of the World Bank, designed to encourage understanding and promote the use of science, technology and information in development. TechNet grew out of a symposium held in 1994. The provisional document is thoughtful, and begins by acknowledging that the factors of production, labour and capital, are now overshadowed by knowledge. The growth of an integrated global economy has produced a shift, confronting us with new ethical issues as well as new opportunities. In the sixteen page document, leapfrogging opportunities, knowledge institutions and networks including NGOs, enterprises, government responses, the need for proactive responses, the danger of growing internal inequalities, intellectual property rights, the production and dissemination of knowledge are all addressed. Under the heading, Educated People, an interesting argument is made:

It will be argued that because knowledge is essentially embodied in people, educated people are the key element for the effective use of knowledge. Relevant education is not just that acquired at different levels of schooling, but also that acquired from on-the-job and practical experience. Some of the key issues to be discussed are the levels and types of education required to create or make effective use of knowledge of different types. The chapter will argue that to the extent that educated people are at the core of the knowledge revolution developing countries have a potential comparative advantage because people are one of their most abundant resources (italics mine). The issue is how to educate people most effectively (italics mine)---now that the knowledge revolution is radically changing the education production function with literacy and numeracy possibly delivered more cost-effectively outside the formal classroom (italics mine). In addition, with the increasing importance of advance knowledge and its codification, it is also necessary to provide more advanced education to the key gatekeepers who can help countries tap into and use the rapidly growing stock of knowledge (Knowledge for Development, 1998).

In its eighteen pages, women are mentioned once under the heading, "INDIVIDUALS AND HOUSEHOLDS - ESPECIALLY THE POOR". The discussion is excellent, and perhaps this is the only time they should be mentioned, but, the question lingers, why are they not mentioned under any of the other headings? Why aren't they integrated into the overall picture, targeted under each heading? The need to target women is discussed:

How might information technology increase educational attainment and reduce gender disparities in education? Or to what extent can increasing access of mothers to knowledge have a significant impact on their fertility, on their preventive health measures such as better sanitation and vaccination on their ability to take care of sick children, on their participation in the labor force, on their choice of occupation? How can improved information on prices of commodities produced by poor farmers increase their bargaining power

relative to buyers? How can group lending and related innovations in credits markets facilitated by better information management help overcome previous barriers in access to credit for micro-enterprises?

How will better telecom infrastructure affect the possibilities for telecommuting or working from home? These points are all excellent and argue for the development of a communication policy that will see women included at all levels. Keeping in mind that this is the provisional document only, it seems to be a step in the right direction. However, it would have been interesting to see the input of women's NGOs.

Our identities are related to the policies that govern our access to information, education, capital, and technology. Our ability to communicate for and about ourselves is weakened or strengthened by policies and laws. Regulatory frameworks govern access to power, its description, its practice, and its reach. Policy defines the relationships of people and institutions within its boundaries. Directly, or indirectly, we are all affected at every level of our lives, and in all countries by policies, or by their absence.

Unfortunately, many women think of telecommunication infrastructure policy, or laws governing access to capital and investment to modernize multimedia infrastructure, as dry areas of research, not being of great interest. However, they are intimately related to human rights.

It is the policies, regulations, and laws relating to infrastructure and performance requirements that determine access, who has telephones, education, businesses, a voice (Shields and Ascencio, 1994). Communication beyond a small group lives or dies depending on access. These policies, regulations, and laws ultimately determine the history, the economics, and the social participation of any group.

When regulatory frameworks for capital and telecommunications infrastructures are imaged as the skeletons that shape and hold a living body - a nation, their power can be felt. If communication and information are the oxygen of a society, then policy becomes the single most important factor deciding our futures, our democracies, and our identities. This is not to deny the dynamic relationship of a national policy to a nation's culture. They have changed and reinforced each other throughout human history.

The multiple-levels of policy, begin with the "rules" we set for behaviour within our families. It is here we set the "policies" for ourselves and our children. Our familial policies can discriminate against the attainment of equitable participation in society, if we set different standards of behaviour for our children based on gender, or if we communicate different expectations of them based on gender. Our family structures give our children their earliest understanding of communication as it relates to power and participation.

Equitable access to Cyberspace is related to technology infrastructure, policies governing telecommunications infrastructures and the use of information technologies, but above all, it is our culture that will determine access. It is our culture that decides the role of government, our systems of accountability in the implementation of our multimedia infrastructures, and who participates. Our notions of democratic participation in the decision-making processes related to power are derived from our culture. It is our myths that constrain us or let us reach out to other cultures. It is time to recreate some of our myths, so our societies can reach further. Carlos Fuentes said, "Only cultures in communication with each other will flourish." The technology is here.

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