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Media pluralism and gender: Not just a question of numbers

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“Media pluralism is the key that unlocks the door of freedom of information and freedom of speech.” – Miklós Haraszti¹

During the mid-2013 summer of discontent in Turkey, crowds of young Turks gathered outside television stations to protest against the virtual blacking out by much of the country’s news media of the demonstrations at Taksim Square, which were extensively covered by international media. Despite the fact that Turkey boasts at least a dozen big TV channels and around 50 nationally available newspapers, besides hundreds of local radio operations, the democratically elected government headed by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was evidently able to exert enough pressure on media organisations to dissuade coverage of the popular uprising, especially in the early days. As the headline of a press comment on the situation pointed out, “Numbers alone do not guarantee media pluralism.”²

Yet discussions on media pluralism – now widely accepted as a vital aspect of freedom of expression in general and press/media freedom in particular – tend to focus primarily on numbers, along with structures, regulations, technologies and ideologies. The relationship between media pluralism and human beings, their experiences, opinions, needs, aspirations and entitlements has received far less attention than it deserves.

Accordingly, mandatory references to the need for “informed citizens” to be exposed to “a wide range of viewpoints across a variety of platforms and media owners”³ if democratic societies are to function properly presume the existence of an archetypal citizen with equal access to various resources, including media and information, and to various rights, including freedom of expression.

They also appear to assume that multiple platforms and owners will automatically guarantee independence and diversity. Similarly, allusions to the roles, rights and responsibilities of “journalists” presuppose a level playing field where all journalists – or at least those employed in news organisations – have equal opportunities to enjoy the “journalistic freedom” that is a prerequisite of “a free and pluralistic media environment.”⁴

Such assumptions are clearly flawed. Fortunately, there are now welcome signs of broader interpretations of media pluralism, highlighting the imperatives of diversity in general and inclusiveness in particular. This is the context within which a gender perspective on media pluralism becomes important.

Media pluralism and gender

The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) was a front-runner among freedom of expression organisations when its 2002 gender policy explicitly stated that “gender equality is intrinsic to a pluralistic and diverse media.”⁵

Despite the emergence of various, increasingly holistic, conceptions of media pluralism, however, perceptions of how gender fits into the evolving scheme remain limited. For example, of the five dimensions of media pluralism identified as “risk domains” by a group of experts developing pluralism indicators, only one refers to women: cultural pluralism in the media. This is described as the presence in the media of a plurality of themes and voices, multiple opportunities for access to and participation in the media (with options for different forms of interaction), and the representation of diverse values, viewpoints and roles in the media, enabling citizens belonging to various cultural and social groups – such as national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups, women, disabled people and sexual minorities – to recognise themselves.⁶

While these are, no doubt, necessary conditions for media pluralism, they may not be sufficient if pluralism is to engender an informed and empowered citizenry. A more dynamic view of media pluralism as “a normative value that refers to the distribution of communicative power in the public sphere ... understood in terms of its ability to challenge inequalities and create a more democratic public sphere”⁷ allows for a better understanding of why gender (and other socio-economic and cultural variables) needs to be factored into any assessment of media pluralism.

As Kari Karppinen has pointed out, “If media pluralism is to serve as a critical concept it must also acknowledge broader questions about the role of media with regard to the distribution of power and influence in society ... Markers of plurality in the media should...rest...on the actual success of a media system in representing and giving voice to different members of society.”⁸

Gender and media ownership

It is widely recognised that ownership and control are critical aspects of media pluralism, particularly “external” aspects of pluralism (i.e. diversity across/between media enterprises). Concentration of media ownership is generally acknowledged as a threat to pluralism, allowing for the “disproportionate influence of one or few economic, social and/or political powers.”⁹ The fact that gender and power are closely linked and that lopsided gender representation can result in such disproportionate influence is rarely conceded.

The current paucity of gender-disaggregated data on media ownership reflects the limited understanding of pluralism that has prevailed so far.¹⁰ But the considerable evidence that does exist of the under-representation of women in media professions (particularly in governance and decision-making positions within both management and editorial structures), as well as in media content, suggests that they are unlikely to be well-represented among owners.

Gender and the media workforce

According to the High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism in Europe, “the journalistic profession should ... reflect the diversity in the general population and media outlets must be encouraged to reflect the diversity of the population in their newsroom and on- screen.”¹¹ This requirement relates primarily to “internal” aspects of media pluralism (i.e. diversity within media enterprises).

Gender balance is an obvious prerequisite for pluralistic media reflecting the diversity of any given population. Notwithstanding the growing and visible presence of many successful, high profile and highly regarded media women, both internationally and in individual countries, recent global research covering over 500 media companies in nearly 60 countries has revealed that in most parts of the world women continue to be under-represented as professionals working in both print and broadcast media.¹² The picture that emerges from the

only recent, extensive global study of its kind is largely corroborated by findings from separate surveys in at least one region and several nations.¹³

Gender and voice in the media

“If media freedom provides the possibility to express oneself and to access information, then media pluralism is the degree of outreach of this freedom – i.e. the outcome being that every group in a society can enjoy this freedom.”¹⁴ The issue of voice refers to both external and internal aspects of pluralism, but is particularly relevant to the question of whether or not “social and political diversity are reflected in media content” through the “representation of different cultural groups in the media as well as divergent political or ideological opinions and viewpoints.”¹⁵

Media pluralism is intrinsically about enabling the presence of a range of voices, values and perspectives in the media and thereby facilitating inclusive public debate, generating open discussion between various sub-groups and systems within a society, and reflecting diverse interests and concerns. This is of crucial importance because “a society’s most inclusive conversations with itself are conducted through the media. If those media do not reflect society in all its facets, all its complexity, that conversation becomes distorted and simplistic in ways that nourish intolerance.”¹⁶

One element of the need for diverse voices involves media professionals and the extent to which they are able to make their voices heard on a variety of events and issues. There is considerable evidence to suggest that women’s voices are not proportionately heard in the media, especially on certain critical issues. Surveys in the US and UK, for example, suggest that the overwhelming majority of public voices continue to be male.¹⁷

Another component of voice concerns representation in media content as sources of news, information and opinion. Here, too, the available global data is discouraging. Despite the slow but overall steady increase in women’s presence in the news over the past decade (from 17% in 1995 to 18% in 2000, 21% in 2005 and 24% in 2010), the world depicted in the news media still remains predominantly male.¹⁸

The picture is not significantly better in different parts of the world covered by the Global Media Monitoring Project.¹⁹ There are bound to be honourable exceptions among individual countries, but they may merely prove the rule since the GMMP data is more or less corroborated by smaller studies across the world, both regional and national.²⁰

Gender and new media

There is widespread acceptance of the idea that the rapidly evolving media and information environment, facilitated by the apparently incessant innovations in information and communications technologies over the past couple of decades, has significantly democratised the media space. Many believe that the Internet and digital technology have breached the boundaries of availability and access to such an extent that media pluralism is no longer as vital an issue as it once was or, at least, that it is pertinent only to the “old” media, which are no longer central in the new scheme of things.

They point out that the abundance and ascendancy of bloggers, citizen journalists and social networkers have narrowed, if not eliminated, the gap between professional journalists and others using interactive, participatory new media to express themselves, report events, analyse issues and exchange views.

However, several experts are evidently not convinced that the technological and socio-cultural changes in the contemporary media environment have actually led to real diversity and a meaningful plurality of voices. They acknowledge that some of the new communication technologies can and do support more diversity and pluralism than others but suggest that it is unwise, if not naïve, to assume that the Internet and other technological advances will automatically eliminate problems related to media pluralism.

According to them, the indisputable increase in new media does not guarantee pluralism, and communicative abundance alone does not make questions about the distribution of

communicative power and political voice obsolete – it merely reconfigures them in a more complex form. They point out that disparities in the opportunities offered by new media largely reflect previously recognised socio-economic inequalities.²¹

From a gender diversity standpoint, the latter stance appears to make sense, especially in view of continuing gender differences in access to information and communication technologies.²² Beyond access, there are questions about the nature and perceptions of women's use of new media. While the gender gap among bloggers appears to be reducing, there seems to be a persistent gender divergence in terms of the topics covered by male and female writers even in the new media.²³

And, although several studies have established women's substantial and active presence in social networks (outnumbering men in most),²⁴ perceptions of the relative importance of male and female social networkers seem to vary, with leading publications evidently not taking women's activities as seriously as those of men.²⁵

The Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 included a pilot survey of Internet news which may well be the first international research on gender in online news. The findings suggest that the under-representation of women in traditional news media has been carried over into the virtual news world.²⁶ There are, of course, honourable exceptions, such as the international citizen media news site, Global Voices, which boasts equal participation by women.²⁷

Beyond the issue of representation among users and sources, there are growing concerns about new hierarchies of power and forms of concentration that are specific to the new media. Several critics call attention to the fact that, despite all the diversity, plenitude and complexity, concerns about concentration of power and homogenisation of content have not actually disappeared. According to them, even if in principle the Internet provides an almost infinite diversity of voices and greatly expands the number of information sources, in practice the structure of the medium tends to create a high degree of concentration of content among a small handful of sites.²⁸

According to an independent policy report commissioned by the European Union, "It is a fact that while the new technologies lower the entry barriers, thus facilitating the entry of new players, their real impact on media pluralism is still questionable."²⁹

This does not mean that the democratic potential of the Internet and the many opportunities it offers can or should be discounted, let alone dismissed. However, it is clearly important to examine closely what the Internet means for media pluralism and how media pluralism can be protected and promoted through the Internet. This appears to be a crucial issue to scrutinise through a gender lens, too.

Gender and alternative media

Women have historically created and creatively used alternative media, at least partly because of the hurdles in their path to accessing "mainstream" media. Feminist media, specifically designed to serve as spaces enabling women to share experiences, information and opinion on events and issues of special relevance and importance to them, have flourished in many parts of the world in different languages and forms since the 1970s. Print, radio and, more recently, the Internet have all been effectively utilised to establish such parallel forums. Some have been more successful than others, some have survived longer than others, but all of them have played an important role in providing platforms for women to express themselves and their concerns – as long as they were independently established and autonomously run by women.

The importance of ownership and control even within alternative media is brought home by the experience of community radio in some parts of the world. Community radio is widely seen as one of the most inclusive of media, which has enabled a range of women (including poor, illiterate, rural women) in several countries to exercise their communication rights.

Even so, in 1990, women involved in the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), who felt the need for a parallel forum within the organisation to push

for a stronger and more equal role for women within the emerging community radio movement, set up the Women's International Network (WIN). After a WIN survey revealed that women were relatively marginalised at the decision-making levels in the community radio sector, a gender policy for community radio was adopted by AMARC in 2010 and efforts to promote the equal participation of women and men are continuing.³⁰

Conclusion

If media pluralism is understood as “the scope for a wide range of social, political and cultural values, opinions, information and interests to find expression through the media,” efforts to monitor and evaluate the state of media pluralism must factor gender – and other, often cross-cutting, socio-economic and cultural factors (such as class, caste/race/ethnicity and creed) – into the equation.

The gender dimensions of media pluralism need to be officially recognised as a crucial aspect of freedom of expression and media development if “the fair and diverse representation of and expression by ... various cultural and social groups, including ethnic, linguistic, national and religious minorities, disabled people, women and sexual minorities, in the media”³¹ is to become reality.

It is axiomatic that media pluralism will be achieved only when the media environment not only offers “a wide range of views and opinions” but also reflects “the diversity of a country's population”³² in terms of ownership, personnel and content.

This article is partly based on research done for a chapter on gender and media pluralism in the UNESCO report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development scheduled to be released in November 2013.

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