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Media monitoring is a catalyst for transformation

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The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) has been a mechanism for transforming the media over the past 19 years and an anchor for gender reporting in many media houses. This article looks at its influence in some of the patterns and changes we see in the media today, especially in the coverage of new voices, the role of citizen journalism and how minorities engage the media.

When the media monitoring agency was first established in London in 1852 by a Polish newsagent named Romeike it only focused on print media.¹ It basically served the interests of artists who wanted to know how the print media portrayed them. And issues on how the women portrayed women were not given any prominence.

And years later when radio and television broadcasting were introduced in the 20th century, press clipping agencies began to expand their services into the monitoring of these broadcast media as a profit-making venture and this task was greatly facilitated by the development of commercial audio and video tape recording systems in the 1950s and 1960s which saw the services being used by the private sector. It eventually led to the importance of social media monitoring as a profitable business with a view to targeting the audience for markets.

With the growth of the Internet in the 1990s, media monitoring services extended their reach to the monitoring of online information sources using new digital search and scan technologies to provide output of interest to their clients. Many professionals and entrepreneurs in the media see monitoring as a tool for understanding their audiences, which are ever changing, and they use the media for positioning their products in the market sector.

Gender media monitoring on the other hand has brought into sharp focus the role of the media in enhancing the right to communication for women, which is so critical to women's survival, and in ensuring that the coverage of any issues to be consistent with "freedom of expression".

But whereas gender monitoring and advocacy groups have existed since the 1980s, according to Margaret Gallagher, an international media consultant and researcher, it was not until the 1990s that the potential of this approach became noticed and people began to use it.²

When the Fourth UN Women's Conference took place in Beijing in 1995, it was seen as a defining moment for the formulation of actions to address issues that were affecting women at all levels and especially those exacerbated by poverty. The most critical commitment of all was the need to integrate a gender perspective into all aspects and spheres of society.

What is of great importance is the recognition on the role of media in addressing gender inequality in the society. It is no coincidence that in reports to the United Nations, among the

12 areas of the Beijing Platform for Action 53% of countries cited media as their top priority for achieving gender equality.

This meant that the media needed to start engaging with women and their issues differently as opposed to seeing them merely as selling points for commercial media. This necessitated analysing the media from a gender perspective and coming up with methodologies to identify the role of the media in enhancing gender equality in terms of portrayal, visibility, policies, opportunities and enhancement of freedom of expression.

Using research and media monitoring to build capacity in media

“The media do not merely represent; they also recreate themselves and their vision of the world... What they reproduce is chosen, not random, and not neutral, not without consequences... The media, for better and frequently for worse, constitute one of the major forces in shaping our national vision, a chief architect of... a sense of identity.”

This observation by Patricia J. Williams, a feminist scholar at Columbia University, New York, underlines the realization that the media are powered by awesome and fast changing technologies and, given their vast reach, the media represent one of the most powerful forces on earth today for shaping the way people think. And they continuously recreate the world for the public without proper presentation of women in their rightful roles but always portraying them as victims and in a stereotypical manner.

Critics recognized that the media had the power to change perceptions and attitudes and that it could be useful instruments for advancing the status of women and fostering equality between men and women. No longer regarded as a preoccupation merely of the urban middle-classes, the media were understood in Section J as playing a fundamental role in the perpetuation of unequal gender relations at all levels of society.³ This is because access to information and communication for social change is critical to all communities irrespective of their status.

However, during those years, gender in media was an uncharted realm of exciting and frightening realities as observed by Thenjiwe Mtintso, a former board member of Gender Links.⁴ She observed that it would challenge the status quo, which she referred to as the “lion’s den” where one was bound to encounter extreme difficulties.⁵

According to media scholar Liesbet Van Zoonen, the new perspective of feminist media researchers has brought in new ways of looking at media practice such as: How are discourses of gender encoded in the media text? How do audiences use and interpret gendered media texts? How does audience reception contribute to the construction of gender at the level of identity?⁶

These questions and arguments laid the ground for gender training in most parts of the world. Media began engaging with new ways of doing things such as gender-sensitive reporting, realizing that a good story told by the media can be accounted for by patterned differences in social roles and the experiences of both men and women in their daily lives.

Gender-aware reporting as it was soon to be known addresses issues around gender equality and challenges centuries of socialization, compounded by such “untouchables” as culture, custom and religion. It soon became apparent that there was need to build capacity of journalists to understand the science of communicating gender issues through the media and this was taken up by organizations such as Inter Press Service (IPS), the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), Gender Links, African Woman and Child Feature Service, and the Intentional Media Women Centre based in Washington among others.

Since then research and capacity building has been implemented through the prism of the fact that the media could no longer afford to be gender neutral or gender insensitive. And, honing the skills of the media in gender reporting would transform the manner in which the media reported topical issues. Gender analysts argued that whether be it politics, economics, or business, both genders are affected differently and each gender should have the space

and time to articulate their perspectives. Journalists have a professional and moral obligation to capture both sides of the story.

This understanding has seen several manuals developed in regard to reporting and writing on gender and other related issues in the media with the aim of building and strengthening relevant skills and techniques for effective reporting. For example the handbook *Whose News? Whose Views; Southern African Gender in Media*⁷ was developed on the premise that the media can and should play a critical role in mainstreaming gender relations in society. This handbook has since been used in Africa by media trainers and media practitioners to interrogate every sentence and angle and the language used. It has also been used to advocate for changes to editorial policies and to help media houses develop gender policies.

The *Mission Possible: A Gender and Media Advocacy Toolkit* published by WACC (2006), which seeks to demystify gender and media and the use of media advocacy to change gender representation and portrayal of women in and through the media, has also been used to build capacity of journalists and gender activists globally.

A few media houses recognized the need to have a gender policy as an integral part of their editorial policies and to enhance the capacity of their journalists through training and partnering with the media – especially in the African region – to use calendar dates such as International Women’s Day to produce a pull-out or a program dedicated to women’s development.

One such was the Nation Media Group in Kenya which was instrumental in spearheading a women’s pull-out on International Women’s Day. Its then editorial director, Mr Wangethi Mwangi, commented during the launch of the pull-out in partnership with the African Woman and Child Feature Service (AWC), “Gender issues not only make the story interesting, but it also makes economic sense.”⁸

How the GMMP has become a catalyst for media transformation

While the aim of the GMMP in 1995 was to monitor news on television, radio and in newspapers on one “ordinary day” and release the results to coincide with the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, it brought with it the need to start looking at the media as a special case when it came to issues of gender.

For the first time, the GMMP gave women a tool which they could use to scrutinize their media in a systematic way and a means by which they could document media biases, stereotypes and how they portrayed women. The process brought together media practitioners, gender activists and lobbyists and created awareness of the pervasiveness of gender stereotyping within the media. The study found that women constituted 17% of news sources.

GMMP research from 1995, 2000, 2005 and 2010 showed consistently that women’s voices are silenced through stereotyping or lack of representation in news media coverage. The GMMP showed how, when unquestioned, the routines and practices of journalism frequently resulted in news stories that reinforced gender stereotypes.

Over the years it has generated a body of evidence on media bias, misrepresentation and over-commercialization which has since been used by various media houses either to develop gender policies or to change their editorial policies altogether. The GMMP for the first time has helped to create a detailed picture of the numbers of women and men in the world’s news on a particular day, the different ways in which they make the news, the roles they play and so on.

For example, in Kenya, when the 2010 GMMP result was presented to the Kenyan Editors’ Guild, it transformed the manner in which the 2013 General Elections were reported. The research findings were used as a resource to train journalists on reporting elections from a gender perspective.

Impact of GMMP in transforming the global media landscape

The uniqueness of the GMMP is found in the very fact that it brings together journalists, advocates, activists and researchers in an extraordinary global network, dedicated to documenting and changing patterns of portrayal in the news.

What each study has demonstrated is the power of collective effort in a common cause. The results have been used in countless ways – to illustrate global patterns in news content, to highlight the persistent lack of women in national news media, to start a dialogue between media advocates and media practitioners, and much more.

Most importantly, the study has impacted on individual lives of women across the globe, and even more so on women in political leadership who have found space in the media to articulate their views.

This unique project has introduced gender aware reporting in the many newsrooms throughout the world. It has also introduced a deliberate and conscious paradigm shift among media managers and a host of media policies to mainstream gender within its human resource framework, content, programming, news desks and also among media consumers.

The GMMP was able to demystify gender-aware reporting through qualitative and quantitative data which revealed that it can bring out a host of hitherto hidden stories. The views of women on war could be a major force for peace. Women's views on the economy and service provision could have a major impact on how we view macroeconomic policy, how services are designed and delivered. Women's views and involvement in politics could fundamentally redefine the way power is viewed and exercised. And it has been able to challenge journalists and editors to go beyond all too common event-driven reporting to issue-based reporting.

Conclusions

A continuous body of research such as GMMP has the potential to strengthen the professional work of media. There is also need for continuous capacity building and training for media managers to understand what gender mainstreaming is all about, media professionals to be able to write and edit well-balanced stories from a gender perspective. The research can also be used to persuade advertisers not to promote adverts that further stereotype women and women's issues. It is through such approaches that media managers can challenge personal, institutional and systematic barriers to women's participation in the media.

Women are entitled to equal voice and participation in every facet of social, economic and political life. Integrating the gender dimension into media will be facilitated by promoting gender-sensitive reporting at all levels of professional media training and journalism education, by developing the critical abilities of young people to evaluate and produce media content with a gender perspective, by fostering media and information literacy and by supporting initiatives to develop media outlets managed by both women and men.

The views expressed above are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Ford Foundation.

Notes

1. Romeike established the world's first press clipping agency in London in 1852. Actors, writers, musicians and artists would visit his shop to look for articles about themselves in his continental stock. It was then that Romeike realised that he could turn this into a profitable business. The agency later became Romeike & Curtis and is now part of Cision.
2. Margaret Gallagher (2001). *Gender Setting. New Agendas for Media Monitoring and Advocacy*. London: Zed Books and WACC.
3. Section J is on Women and Media in the Beijing Platform for Action adopted during the Fourth World UN Conference on Women in Beijing-China
4. Gender Links (GL) is committed to a region in which women and men are able to participate equally in all aspects of public and private life in accordance with the provisions of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development.
5. Thenjiwe's foreword to *Whose News? Whose Views*. Southern Africa Gender in Media Handbook.

6. Van Zoonen, Liesbet (2002). "A 'New' Paradigm" in *McQuail's Reader in Mass Communication Theory*, ed. by Denis McQuail. Sage Publications.
7. The book is edited by Colleen Lowe-Morna, Executive Director of Gender Links
8. AWC is a Nairobi-based media organization with an African regional outlook.

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