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# Gaps in media and communication governance: towards a gender-aware research and advocacy agenda

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Gender aware communication scholarship has been slow to engage with the domain of media and communication policy: though preoccupations about women's equal access to media content, employment and decision-making, about their fair representation in the media and about the constraints to women's communication rights in the evolving digital context are clearly dependent on policy determinations, the broader policy context of gender inequalities in the media has seldom been investigated. The situation is gradually changing, with contributions exploring different aspects of the policy dimensions characterising the nexus between gender and media (Jorge, 2000; Jensen, 2005; Sarikakis and Shade, 2008; Sarikakis and Nguyen, 2009; Gallagher, 2011, 2014; Byerly, 2011; Padovani and Pavan, 2013; EIGE, 2013). Yet much remains to be done in terms of conceptual clarification, the elaboration of analytical frameworks adequately grounded in feminist theory, efforts to reduce existing fragmentation in research programmes, the conduct of cross-cultural and comparative investigations.

As a group of committed scholars within the IAMCR, we feel it is appropriate to devote specific attention to these aspects at a particular moment in time. Over the next two years a series of international events, processes and debates relevant to the nexus between women and media and gendered relations, will take place: the UNESCO promoted *Global Forum on Media and Gender*; the celebration of the *UN Beijing + 20 conference* and of the *UN promoted World Summit on the Information Society +10 summit*<sup>1</sup>; the final phase of the Millennium Development Goals<sup>2</sup>. The year 2015 promises to bring renewed and heightened attention to the many concerns women and men have about their rights to communication in digital and knowledge societies. It therefore seems timely to develop a theoretically sound and comprehensive research agenda, and to contribute to those debates by setting the stage for much needed investigations and reflections aimed at informing future media policies and, more broadly, the governance of global communications, with an explicit and forward looking gender orientation.

For some decades now we have been persuaded by Wildavsky's (1979) suggested role of policy analysts as those who 'speak truth to power'. More recently, Peter Haas (1992) developed the concept of epistemic communities as networks of professionals with recognized knowledge and skills in a particular area, who share sets of beliefs that provide a value-based foundation, useful to guide decision-makers towards the adoption of appropriate norms and institutions, by framing and institutionalizing specific issue-areas. As an epistemic community, IAMCR aims at operating as a source for policy innovation; hence at the IAMCR 2013 conference in Dublin a multi-vocal conversation was initiated to address and frame gender gaps in media policy as an issue area. A panel titled 'Speaking truth to power about gender and communication: International and regional policy developments towards Beijing+20' was organised; scholars from different regional and cultural contexts, and with different research interests and methodological approaches – including Carolyn Byerly, Karen Ross, Aimée Vega Montiel, Peter Kareithi and Susan Abbott– contributed their views; and written versions of their contributions have been collected in an issue of *Feminist Media Studies* (forthcoming 2/2014). That conversation helped clarify if and how far institutional and media actors are indeed promoting meaningful changes towards more gender-aware media policies and practices in different world regions, suggesting at the same time how the scholarly community can contribute to make those changes happen.

The rest of this article focuses on the latter aspect: on what ground an epistemic community like IAMCR can become a more relevant stakeholder, in cooperation with other entities, particularly UNESCO, in framing and fostering a set of guiding principles for media and communication that reflects well established principles of equality and non-discrimination, while realising the objectives of increased women's participation and empowerment in and through the media, balanced and non-stereotyped representation of women, freedom of expression for women and full enjoyment of their communication rights.

## Towards a gender-focused research and advocacy agenda

In general terms the panel recognised the need to consolidate the knowledge that has been produced so far, through academic research as well as through the many analyses conducted by international organisations and local and national entities, including media unions and media monitoring organisations; and the need to reduce knowledge fragmentation, particularly across regions, by fostering the networking of knowledge and practices related to gender-aware media governance. Furthermore, there is a shared feeling that scholars can contribute to highlighting persistent gaps and inequalities as well as to identifying new and open issues, particularly those deriving from evolving media and communication environments, which need to be framed, investigated and included in the agenda also as reflections of existing geo-cultural diversities.

To these ends, I address four specific aspects that I consider relevant to understanding, analysing and fostering gender-aware policy developments: a. Conceptualising communication governance from a gender perspective; b. Interrogating the findings from explorations in gender and media; c. Recognising existing contributions by the scholarly community beyond research; d. Setting the bases for structuring a policy and gender-aware research and advocacy framework.

### a. Conceptualising communication governance from a gender perspective

In the first place it is crucial to define the boundaries of gender and media as an issue area by offering a definition of the complex, multi-level, multi-actor domain under discussion. We argue gender-sensitive communication governance can fruitfully be conceived as emerging from

the multiplicity of networks of interdependent, but operationally autonomous actors, which produce relevant knowledge and cultural practices; develop frames that imbue public discourse and orientate policy agendas; articulate principles and visions towards normative frameworks and policy responses to shortcomings and imbalances characterising the interlinkages between women, men, communication processes and mediating technologies. (Raboy and Padovani, 2010; Padovani and Pavan, 2011).

Given the above definition, the policy dimension of gender and media is to be approached across a multiplicity of aspects and policy-relevant practices: the plurality of the actors involved, not only policy-makers and regulators but also media professionals and their unions, media organisations and their management, civic organisations concerned with communication as a fundamental process in human societies and media academics; the cognitive dimension of producing policy-relevant knowledge through different forms of communication and media channels and sectors, including public service, commercial and community; the framing of problematic issues and the translation of those frames into principles and normative references, also through monitoring existing media content and routines; the policy frameworks elaborated in response to specific conditions in national and regional context, and their relevance to internationally agreed standards of behaviour, for instance: pluralism, access to the media, protection of privacy, cultural and linguistic heritage and gender equality policies and practices.

Given this comprehensive definition of communication governance, scholarly efforts as well as advocacy interventions aimed at promoting gender equality in and through the media may take different orientations and operate at different levels, through a plurality of entry points that would shed light on specific aspects, from the definition of agreed-upon rules (as in the Beijing Platform for Action Section J) to the social recognition of norms and their cultural adaptation and actual implementation (i.e. how are the principles expressed in Section J translated in local context and realised across a diverse media environment?).

When it comes to developing a research and advocacy agenda, such a constructivist conceptualisation of the policy domain should engage with feminist theory. In this respect I refer to Ann Tickner's (2002) analyses of world politics, where she outlines that theories and analyses that incorporate gender aspects in the study of (international) politics should satisfy three criteria: they should discuss historical variability, thus the very possibility of change; they should allow for the possibility of talking about the social construction of meanings; they should permit theorising about power in ways that uncover hidden power relations. Tickner thus indicates a path for investigating the gendered dimension in/of media policies that acknowledges the possibility for change while stressing the fact that change is not just about actors' behaviour, but also about social meanings that are often proposed (and imposed) by media industries. This implies that in organising conceptual and analytical frameworks to fill in existing knowledge gaps in media policies and communication governance with a gender perspective, we should consider ideational and cognitive factors, and the deriving policy frameworks, as the outcome of interactions and negotiations, often hidden or non-visible, where gendered and unequal power relations are inevitably at work.

### b. Interrogate findings from explorations in gender and media

Secondly, we can reflect and build on existing research findings. To provide just a few examples, I refer to a recent European project and resulting report (EIGE, 2013) focused on advancing gender equality in decision-making in media organisations. An overview of policy provisions at the level of the European Union shows, for instance, that provisions adopted to promote gender equity and overcome stereotypical and degrading representations of women by different entities from within the Union - the Commission, the Council and European Parliament - are often different in tone and wording, thus expressing different underlying interests; they are mostly 'soft provisions' leaving it to media actors to develop their own principles, guidelines and internal policies. Also, the focus of resulting normative frameworks changes over time, for instance showing more attention to issues of women's access to decision-making positions in media industries in the 1990s than in early 2000s, while returning to portrayals, images and stereotypes as a main focus precisely at the time when the Union is fostering women's participation in decision-making bodies and boards (Council, 2012). From the analyses it also appears that European policy-making relating to the media and audiovisual industries has been characterised over time by a lack of attention to gender equality issues and a seeming lack of commitment in pursuing gender-sensitive outcomes.

The same Report also accounts for the internal policies, codes and implementation of monitoring mechanisms that have been adopted by 99 media organisations across the 28 European countries: fewer than 1 in 7 such organisations have specific gender-related equality plans; in general they reflect the general non-discriminatory principle included in the Audiovisual Media Service Directive of 2010, but no proactive intervention specifically on gender is found; few organisations have formal mechanisms for monitoring their equality policies, including dedicated overview committees for equality issues, or equality/diversity departments or staff with a specific remit for equality. Without such monitoring mechanisms, organisations are unable to evaluate their own performance against the very guidance they have initiated. Furthermore, the existence of national laws, media organisations' equality plans and codes of conduct do not, in themselves, bring about change and the actual presence and relevance of women in managerial roles remains much lower than that of men.

Referring to the North American context, Byerly (forthcoming 2014) argues that 'for women, media conglomeration also signals the consolidation of men's economic and political power, and the further marginalisation of women's' in that it 'reinforces existing structural blocks to women's voices in public discourse and the social and political participation that flows from that discourse.' Women have traditionally owned or controlled few newspapers, radio or television stations anywhere, but there is some evidence that in the US, women held a larger share of the controlling interest in boards in the 1970s before neoliberalism took hold than they do at present. Looking at the global context, Byerly recalls that media companies in many nations are concentrated, and this has had a range of impacts on women, including fewer employment opportunities and a narrowing of viewpoints in the news, as well as segregation in managerial roles. According to a study sponsored by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWFM) (Byerly, 2011), which surveyed 522 companies in 59 nations across all regions of the world to determine the level of women's participation in governance, management, newsgathering, production and administrative roles, overall women occupy only a fourth of the governance and top management positions. Similar results derive from the above-mentioned European report (EIGE, 2013; Ross, 2014).

Latin America does not look better in this global picture. As Aimée Vega Montiel (forthcoming 2014) notices across the continent, non-homogeneous histories and communication systems and policies are found; at the same time something that seems to be a shared history is the lack of 'plans of action based on the BPfA. Placing the Platform in the public debate has been a strategy followed by feminists, but not by institutional actors. Hence, there is an inadequate implementation of gender policies in all sectors, including the media: there is not a formal 'gender sensitive' media policy operating at a legislative level; what can be found are just some general principles or weak recommendations that have poor effect on the operations of media industries.' In Vega Montiel's terms, in Latin America, in spite of current progressive developments in countries such as Argentina, Ecuador and Mexico, there is not only a misconception of what gender equality is, but also a culture of prejudice about feminism and women's human rights.

Nevertheless, good practices have also been mapped out and investigated through research projects and should be made known, as models and possible benchmarks for further collective efforts, at the national and regional levels, in order to promote initiatives and mechanisms that realise the potential of gender equality.

Examples can be found in the European context: for instance the BBC's Gender Equality Scheme adopted in 2007; innovative strategies initiated by the Corporación de Radio y Televisión Española (RTVE), including advertising campaigns; raising awareness of discrimination and violence against women; use of non-sexist language; the Austrian public service broadcaster Österreichische Rundfunk (ORF) gender equality plan aimed at raising the overall representation of women to 45% of the workforce.

Also, well known experiences that have engaged women and women's groups worldwide are worth mentioning, as possible anticipations of alternative media landscapes and normative frameworks. The latest effort is represented by the UNESCO proposal for a Global Alliance for Media and Gender, but we should also recall longer-term initiatives, promoted by civil society organisations involved in fostering gender-respective normative frameworks for the media: the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) promoted the Global Media Monitoring Project<sup>3</sup>; the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) and its Women's Networking Support Programme<sup>4</sup>; the collaboration among GenderLinks, MISA and other southern African groups, which led to the 15-nation South African Development Community (SADC) protocol on gender and development, which incorporates two articles that ensure 'gender is mainstreamed in all information, communication and media policies, programmes, laws and training, in accordance with the Protocol on Culture, Information and Sport'.

Scholarly analysis (Padovani and Pavan, 2012) also shows that such initiatives are not always coherent and networked undertakings: density of interaction amongst players in the domain is rather low, and the normative frameworks promoted do not always reflect widely-shared sets of principles (beside Section J of the BPfA, which remains the core normative reference). Often, initiatives from the ground up tend to focus on the problematic side of the nexus between gender and media, on denouncing inequalities and the lack of equal access, voice and representation; seldom do they make efforts to elaborate innovative and alternative normative frames to address challenges deriving from a transformed media environment.

We therefore see how findings from wide cross-national and comparative research projects offer insights on the common and persistent problems that prevent gender equality in the media and women's access to decision-making, as well as on the linkages between such constraints and policy frameworks, interventions and orientations. More such investigations are needed with a clear comparative and cross-national and cross-cultural approach, based on rigorous analytical schemes and methodologies; and more effort is required to making the knowledge we produce better known, accessible and understandable, particularly in dialogue with the many entities that operate and have a stake in this area (for example, media organisations, professionals, advocates, citizen and consumer associations) and to translate research findings and analyses into policy-relevant inputs and 'usable knowledge'.

### **c. Recognise existing contributions by the scholarly community beyond research**

A third element worth mentioning here are those resources that have been created, often in connection to or as outcomes of research projects and international collaborations (both academic and non-academic), precisely with the aim of translating scientific knowledge into more accessible, operational and policy-relevant knowledge platforms and tools.

To mention but a few, we should recall the recently adopted Gender Sensitive Indicators for the Media (GSIM) elaborated by UNESCO and the recently published Learning Resource Kit for Gender-Ethical Journalism and Media House Policy<sup>5</sup>, resulting from a collaboration between WACC and the International Federation of Journalists.

With a more explicit orientation to providing policy-relevant resources to media actors, decision-makers and advocates, two thematic sections devoted to Gender and Media have been created in the context of the Global Media Policy project and platform<sup>6</sup>. One section relates to Gender-oriented Communication Governance (GoC\_Gov) understood as the set of transnational governing arrangements that promote a social agenda for change based on gender equity<sup>7</sup>; a second thematic section is titled Gender and Media in Europe<sup>8</sup> and focuses specifically on the European region. Both sections of the database include profiles of people, organisational actors, policy documents and resources – news portals, archives, publications, training courses etc. – composing the broad landscape of media policy that resonates with, reflects on, addresses and pursues gender equity in and through the media.

Also worth mentioning is the Women & Media in Europe web-based platform<sup>9</sup>, one of the outcomes of the European research project on 'Women in Media Industries' (EIGE, 2013). This is a digital platform publicly accessible to anyone interested in gender equity and media, particularly in the European region. It is mentioned here as it reflects the desire, stemming from a research collaboration, to maintain and support a regional network of scholars. It operates as a collaborative space where researchers, but also educators and media professionals, may share information, discuss policy developments and contribute their knowledge and understanding towards meeting the goals of the Beijing Platform for Action.

These are just a few examples showing that mapping, sharing knowledge and making these and other existing resources widely known and usable is a challenge but also a potentially powerful resource: they also constitute examples of the contribution research activities can bring towards more inclusive and gender-aware policy orientation.

### **d. Setting the bases for structuring a policy and gender aware research and advocacy framework**

To conclude, I would like to outline the basics of a research framework and agenda, to orientate future efforts in enriching and translating relevant scholarly knowledge into transformative practices on the ground.

I suggest it is important to maintain a focus on the normative dimension of gender and media, where norms are to be understood as 'shared standards of behaviour for actors with a given identity' (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998): to develop a better understanding of the current normative bases concerning 'women and men in the media' and their application; to reflect on normative developments that may be needed in an increasingly digitized and interconnected media environment, beyond principles of access and participation; and to explore the challenges and opportunities to develop stronger, more coherent and productive connections between global, regional and local/national norm-relevant frameworks in this area.

Also, a focus on existing regulatory frameworks is needed: an updated assessment of how much and what has been done in response to the Beijing PfA in this specific area across the world, at the national and regional level, would offer the basis for coordinated interventions. This would include full appreciation of existing (and missing) gender equality plans addressing media roles in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment and in-depth exploration of media policies in order to identify and understand cultural, social and economic challenges and constraints.

Thirdly, the structural and cultural contexts within which the media operate and media policies are adopted are to be investigated with a specific focus on gender implications. Media concentration may have different impacts on men and women in their professional and personal lives; cultural features of specific regions and countries influence policy orientations; and socio-economic conditions, particularly in a time of multiple crises affect and reflect, and often explode, gender inequalities, including in the media and communication sector.

Furthermore, media organisations' internal policies and practices need to be more thoroughly investigated, through nation-based as well as cross-country comparative analyses, with the aim of not only confirming existing knowledge about inequalities in women's access to media professions and particularly to decision-making and managerial positions, but also to gain a more qualitative understanding of how a media sector undergoing profound transformations – globalisation, digitalisation and crisis – is responding to the challenges of gender equality. This invites analyses of codes and plans as well as investigation of media organisations' working routines and practices such as training, monitoring and content creation.

We should also develop a better understanding of civic organisations' roles and contribution in monitoring media content and activities as well as governing arrangements; in developing tool kits and informational and educational activities, particularly in creating competences for leadership and skills for women in the media; in experimenting with more sustainable practices of transnational networking, also through digital media, making their own knowledge and resources available across regional and geo-cultural spaces. Particularly important would be to focus on and foster networking initiatives, such as multi-stakeholder dialogues, to develop channels of interaction, information sharing and cooperation between media professionals, consumer associations, advocacy groups, educators.

Finally, we should be aware and creative in relation to the many roles academia can play in its contribution to gender-sensitive media policies: through research activities, the production and sharing of knowledge; through the creation of knowledge resources and engagement with normative discussions, including through the use of digital platforms and technologies. Furthermore, more systematic efforts should be made to appreciate and respond to the new responsibilities of higher education institutions in a global society, by fostering critical understanding, promoting awareness and developing adequate competencies for students who are to contribute to transforming media policy environments in the future.

As an academic community that produces and shares scientific knowledge, and an international NGO that has always been concerned with communication rights and challenges worldwide, IAMCR certainly has a role to play in all this, and wishes to join forces with UNESCO and other entities in identifying possible directions for mastering our understanding of the different policy dimensions involved in the realisation of gender equality in and through the media.

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1 We recall that all final documents, adopted by governments and the civil society sector at WSIS, included sections specifically devoted to the challenges posed by information and communication societies to women and girls. In particular:

Official WSIS Declaration of Principles, Preamble no. 12: 'We affirm that development of ICTs provides enormous opportunities for women, who should be an integral part of, and key actors in, the Information Society. We are committed to ensuring that the Information Society enables women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis on equality in all spheres of society and in all decision-making processes. To this end, we should mainstream a gender equality perspective and use ICTs as a tool to that end.'

Civil Society Declaration 'Shaping Information Society for Human Needs', Core principles: '...it is essential that the development of information and communication societies be grounded in core principles that reflect a full awareness of the challenges to be met and the responsibility of different stakeholders. This includes the full recognition of the need to address gender concerns and to make a fundamental commitment to gender equality, non-discrimination and women's empowerment, and recognise these as non-negotiable and essential prerequisites to an equitable and people-centred development within information and communication societies.'; also recalled in par 2.1.3 on Gender Justice: '...Proactive policies and programmes across all sectors must be developed for women as active and primary agents of change in owning, designing, using and adapting ICT. To empower girls and women throughout their life cycle, as shapers and leaders of society, gender responsive educational programmes and appropriate learning environments need to be promoted. Gender analysis and the development of both quantitative and qualitative indicators in measuring gender equality through an extensive and integrated national system of monitoring and evaluation are "musts".'

2 Of the 8 Goals identified by the international community in the year 2000, Millennium Development Goal 3 focuses on gender equality and women's empowerment in different areas, such as education, non-agricultural employment, political representation, sexual and reproductive health.

3 GMMP Reports available at: <http://www.whomakesthenews.org>.

4 APC WNSP available at: <http://www.apc.org/en/about/programmes/womens-networking-support-programme-apc-wnsp>.

5 Available at: <http://www.whomakesthenews.org>.

6 Mapping Global Media Policy is an independent project initiated by the Global Media Policy Working Group of the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR). It is hosted and supported by an academic consortium led by Media@McGill, a research and public outreach hub based at McGill University (Canada), and includes University of Padova (Italy), Center for Media and Communication Studies (CMCS) at Central European University (Hungary) and the University of Cardiff.

7 Available at: <http://www.globalmediapolicy.net/node/849>.

8 Available at: <http://www.globalmediapolicy.net/node/6305>.

9 Available at: <http://womenandmedia.eu>.