

# The primacy of the social sphere

by Elizabeth L. Enriquez

*The thesis of People's Communication for Development (PC4D) brings to mind the theory of former documentary filmmaker and journalist, now media and cultural studies professor, Brian Winston concerning the history of media technology.*

One of the huge mobilisations of women's groups and other social movements at the 6th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Hong Kong, China in 2005.

Photo from Wikimedia Commons

In *Media Technology and Society - A History: >From the Telegraph to the Internet* (London: Routledge, 1998), Winston methodically disproves the claim of technological determinism and proposes that social, political and cultural factors determine the social sphere in which technologies may arise, and not the other way around. Winston argues that social forces calibrate the speed at which technologies prosper and consequently affect the social sphere, by pushing or hindering the development of technology so that it does not disrupt existing social formations and processes.

By using a historical approach, he shows how the advance of media technologies that supposedly had profound, revolutionary effects on the social sphere

— such as the telegraph, telephone, radio, television, computers, internet, etc. — were actually enhanced or controlled by social necessity and by economic interests.

He thus disputes the concept of an Information Revolution, a technological determinist claim that has gained so much currency in so much adulatory discourse about the supposed exciting, radical changes being wrought by the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) on societies today.

Winston's argument about the primacy of the social sphere squares with the findings of the researchers and writers who put PC4D together, who examined for three years whether there was basis for the claim that new ICTs empower grassroots women,

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such that the absence of access to ICTs must be a hindrance to empowerment. In the five countries where the study was made, it was consistently shown that access was not the only issue.

The accuracy of information and its transformative quality are as significant. Furthermore, access required not only the hardware and software of ICTs but the use of local languages and other tools suitable or appropriate for the grassroots women or community - such as interpersonal face-to-face communication. Information is deemed accurate if based on research from the ground or the community.

Transformative quality, which is more abstract and unpredictable in its outcome, requires information that initiates change. Even if physically accessible, the mere presence of new ICTs may not satisfy such prerequisites and therefore may not produce the profound effects technological determinists may predict.

Which raises another point: questioning the appropriateness of the new ICTs, or any communication and media technology or tool for that matter, in terms of whether they are effective or not for particular groups of people, may not suffice to understand the important role the media are assumed to play in empowerment and development.

There is a tendency among those who use the media as tools for such purposes to assume that the media are just that — tools; and that exposure or use of the proper tool will lead to the expected and desired effect.

The problem with that assumption is that, whatever the intentions of the communicator, it does not account for the fact that a singular, standard effect on target audiences is rarely produced. Audiences or those with whom we communicate may react in varying ways to the same text or message and may produce meanings in different, sometimes unanticipated ways. Communities and individuals interact or negotiate with messages in complex and often unpredictable ways.

Interrogations of all communication and media technologies must also raise questions about the concepts of development, empowerment and progress, which PC4D does.

The book presents diverse understandings of empowerment and development, which unsurprisingly do not exactly conform to the western measures of such abstract but profoundly significant notions.

The issue of power does raise one more point: any investigation of organizations or structures behind media and communication must question not only corporatized media but all media, including those run by states, the so-called civil society, and other interest groups.

Corporatised media and communication are problematic to empowerment. But so are the media and communication structures run by states and other social formations. All are engaged in the project of shaping consciousness, and must all be subject to critical examination. ■