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Assessing the empowering potential of gender-based advocacy networks

Claudia Padovani

In March 2010 the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, at its 54th session in New York, undertook a revision of the implementation of the Platform for Action (PfA) adopted at the Beijing UN Conference on Women in 1995. I had the chance to attend some of the official and parallel meetings, being interested in developments concerning the PfA's Section J on Women and Media.

I coordinated the Italian monitoring teams of the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP),¹ in 2000, 2005 and 2010, which for me was an opportunity to look into the specific challenges that face women in their interaction with media and society, to witness the emergence of networks of researchers, professionals and activists, from the local to the global level, and to focus part of my own research on the role and relevance of such networks in influencing cultural change and orienting policy decisions and initiatives in order to promote a better balanced presence of women in the world's media, capable of identity representation and recognition.

I therefore landed in New York with general curiosity to listen and understand and be inspired by the many voices and stories. And I was disappointed, more than surprised, when I realized that little relevance was given to media and communication in promoting women's equality and dignity in contemporary societies. Although some of the speakers at the official gatherings did mention the challenges and the potential offered by media and digital technologies, the official agenda, the meeting website and the list of events paid scant attention for the theme.

It became clear that the crucial role of media and communication technologies in fostering equal opportunities does not feature high on the agenda of the international community. One of the few exceptions was the workshop jointly organized by UNIFEM and the GMMP as a parallel event, with the meaningful title 'What happened to section J?'

Looking at the history of struggles to see women represented and their identities recognized in the media, Margaret Gallagher (forthcoming) reminds us that on the one hand the women's movement has been slow in engaging with media policy on these issues, and on the other hand the lack of gender sensitive policies is an ongoing problem. Nevertheless, my personal experience with the GMMP suggests that these trends are changing. For the past ten years I have witnessed energies mobilized and women struggling for spaces to voice their concerns; I have seen the strengthening of linkages and the expansion of networks composed by activists and researchers, as well as women working in media.

These initiatives are grounded in a common understanding of issues and stakes, but also made of trust and the pleasure of acting together towards a more respectful, plural and democratic world of communication. How to make sense – given the crucial role of the media in contrasting disparities, poverty, and gender discrimination – of the contrast between these realities and the demoralizing scenario of the Commission on the Status of Women?

Change in contemporary communication governance

In my research on governance pertaining to media and communication in the global context,² I am increasingly confronted with the issue of assessing different actors' capacity to influence courses of action and promote change: the interplay among actors of different kinds

(governments and intergovernmental organizations, trans-governmental networks, civic organizations and coalitions, private companies) who express different interests and play out different identities in the global communication environment, calls for a specific focus on how such diversity can be analyzed in terms of 'actors' capacity'.

At UN headquarters, the question for me became once again compelling: who is capable, on the basis of which resources and through what kind of interactions, of framing issues and effectively promoting them through political and public agendas? How can relevant knowledge, such as the kind collectively produced and publicly circulated by GMMP, foster the evolution of principles, norms and standards and ultimately orientate formal decision-making on communication issues? Differently stated: who can promote change in contemporary communication governance, and how?

In addressing this issue, I gradually move beyond a widely diffused understanding of 'global governance' as mainly a matter of coordination and consensus, to adopt a perspective that includes more problematic dynamics of compulsion, imbalanced interactions, institutional biases (Barnett & Duvall 2005). This implies new efforts to elaborate adequate analytical frameworks, starting from a revision of the very concept of the basis on which analyses are to be conducted: that of power. A concept that should be valued for its 'performative character' since '... how we think about power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and subvert them' (Lukes 2005: 63).

I therefore suggest that, in order to make sense of experiences like the GMMP and assess their empowering potential in the broader context of policy arrangements, we should start by thinking of power not in terms of actors' capacity to control other actors, but looking at their ability to 'produce, confront or resist change' (John Locke, cited by Steven Lukes, 2007). Then, we need to connect visible as well as non-visible aspects of power, ideational as well as cultural, normative and discursive elements that may influence actors' capacity.

In the following paragraphs I introduce the GMMP as a relevant case study to focus on power as the capability to bring about change; I briefly discuss an analytic tool that provides guidance for the analysis; and I outline a research agenda to suggest on which ground the project's empowering potential could be assessed.

Global Media Monitoring Project: the power of encounters

Promoted by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC), the Global Media Monitoring Project is the largest and longest longitudinal study on gender representation in the world's news media. It is also the largest advocacy initiative in the world on changing the representation of women in the media; and it is unique in involving participants from grassroots organizations, research centres and media practitioners, who participate on a voluntary basis.

GMMP is a one-day study of the representation and portrayal of women and men in the news media. First conceived at the seminar 'Women Empowering Communication', held in Bangkok in 1994 in preparation for the Beijing Conference, in the course of its four editions (1995, 2000, 2005, 2009/10) the GMMP has developed monitoring tools and a methodology to be applied to mainstream media with the aim of mapping the representation of women in the world's news media, developing a grassroots research instrument and media monitoring skills, and building solidarity among gender and communication groups worldwide.

This comparative study has been supported by earlier analyses on the presence and role of women in the world media, while acting as an incentive towards further in-depth studies. In this dialogue with scholarly research, from the very beginning GMMP has shown that women

are dramatically under-represented in the world's news, their views being seldom heard, their knowledge and competence rarely recognized.

In 1995, the international community acknowledged the need to transform media content and gender portrayal as one of the strategic objectives in fostering equality and justice for women in the world, by devoting a section of the Beijing Platform for Action to the theme. Section J of the Platform is divided in to two parts, respectively stating that the international community commits itself to 'Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication' (J.1) and 'Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media' (J.2).³

Since 1995, the GMMP has provided factual and comparable data and inputs on how to address these challenges; it has helped to strengthen trans-national as well as trans-local connections among monitoring organizations; it has contributed to expanding global awareness on the theme. The project participatory methodology, aimed at balancing a rigorous collection of data with accessibility of monitoring materials and results for non-expert researchers, has been updated and improved with each successive GMMP.⁴

Results from the 2010 edition, a monitoring day organized on November 10, 2009 with the participation of 108 countries, once again show the slow pace of change in redressing gender unbalances in the news media:⁵ only 24% of news subjects – the people who are interviewed, or talked about – are female (the figures were 17% in 1995 and 21% in 2005); women's points of view are rarely heard in the topics that dominate the news agenda, such as politics or economics (of the few stories where women feature, only 19% and 20% respectively concern those 'hard topics'). Even in stories that affect women profoundly, such as gender-based violence, it is the male voice that prevails.

When women do make the news it is primarily as 'celebrities' (26%); their function as representatives of 'ordinary people' and 'popular opinion' has grown (44% in 2010, 34% in 2005), but they remain marginal as figures of authority, experts (20%) or spokespersons (19%). As newsmakers, women are no longer under-represented in professional categories, as there is a clear trend of feminization in media professions (more evident in TV news than in other media); a trend that is finally showing an emerging gender-sensitivity and some efforts to contrast gender stereotypes, which nevertheless remain widely diffused.

The topic mostly covered by women journalists are science and health (44%) and social and legal issues (43%). While the study finds few excellent examples of gender-balanced and gender-sensitive journalism, it demonstrates, once again, an overall glaring deficit in the news media globally.

Promoting change

GMMP is not just about monitoring. Over time its goals have expanded: alongside the aim to map gender portrayals in the world's news media and create awareness within the broad public, efforts were made to develop monitoring skills and to use project results to influence agendas of national as well as international organizations and orientate their decisions. The results of GMMP have been used in a myriad of ways by gender and communication groups worldwide, as well as in conducting training for media practitioners, media literacy initiatives and lobbying.⁶ The GMMP has become a sort of 'brand': a reality with its own identity, widely cited and capable of providing data that are comparable across regions and continents. A reality with an empowering potential for change?

The GMMP is definitely about change. As the Bangkok Declaration stated in 1994:

'It is essential to promote forms of communication that not only challenge the patriarchal

nature of media but strive to decentralize and democratize them: to create media that encourage dialogue and debate; media that advance women and peoples' creativity; media that reaffirm women's wisdom and knowledge, and that make people into subjects rather than objects or targets of communication. Media which are responsive to people's needs.'

And not just the idea of change in media representation but also a vision of democratization of media and communication system is at the origin of the GMMP.

The GMMP is also about the role of data and knowledge in promoting change: it reaches out to scholarly knowledge and the scientific community to develop a methodology for monitoring activities that provide accurate readings of reality, while, at the same time, transforming concepts and analytical tools into resources and widespread skills. Furthermore, scholars and academic institutions have been directly involved in monitoring activities and in publicizing results. We can therefore consider the 'power of ideas and knowledge' at work, through the contribution of an epistemic community engaging transnationally with a shared understanding of values and issues, oriented towards policy-relevant knowledge diffusion.

Moreover, the project is about strengthening transnational cooperation to promote change: monitoring activities develop within and at the same time contribute to create a broad transnational network supported by the whomakesthenews.org website and the people coordinating the project. At the same time the GMMP is composed of national and sometimes regional networks of groups and individual researchers that on many occasions have given birth to further projects.

Finally, GMMP is part of a broader network of intergovernmental agencies, which includes Unifem and UNESCO, as well as nongovernmental organizations. It can therefore be considered a 'transnational advocacy network' (TAN)⁷ and analyzed according to the framework suggested by Keck and Sikkink (1998) who have articulated the different forms of politics at play in TANs' operations: informational politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics and accountability politics.⁸ The GMMP as TAN is therefore a clear example of what has been defined as 'power with': the power to act together with others towards a common goal.

There is also an interplay of levels of action to be considered: from the local adaptation and application of GMMP methodology to the strengthening of national cooperation between research centres, media professional associations and civic groups, to the regional coordination for training and diffusion of results, to the supra-national playing out of project results as data that are now mentioned in official UN reports. This multi-level feature of operation is seldom adequately addressed, and yet it is relevant, both a point of strength and a challenge, for a project like the GMMP.

There is also, beyond the interplay of different actors and levels, an interplay of spaces of action, as we see people organizing for the monitoring project as well as to diffuse and discuss data from the GMMP, moving between the closed spaces of governmental negotiation (Beijing 1995), open official consultations (UN CSW 2010), negotiating spaces for debate (New York parallel events), and claiming (alternative) media spaces to perform different gender representation and story telling (mailing lists and websites that have provided updates and information from within the UN meetings).

Lastly, there are the visible outcomes of some of these interactions, from the framing of specific issues to create public awareness – on gender visibility in the media, gendered roles in media profession, gender positions in the governance of communication networks, the

gendered dimension of the digital divide – to the adoption of normative statements and standards of conduct (Section J of the Beijing PfA).

I therefore see the GMMP project at the crossroads of three distinct but interconnected realities: that of the research community, that of advocacy intervention and that of policy-finding and decision-making formal activities. Each of these realities performs roles that are relevant to promoting or resisting change: in the case of the research community it is the ideas, the knowledge produced and the very framing of issues, that contribute to define gender and media as a policy-relevant topic; in the case of the advocacy community it is the playing out of this understanding to create public awareness and promote actions and cultural practices but also norms, codes of conducts and standards of behaviour; and in the case of policy interventions, it is the decisions taken and the commitment and responsibility to follow up with such decisions.

No assessment of such an articulated reality can be done by taking into consideration only one aspect or another. No one-dimensional understanding of power can shed light on the multiple configurations of actors and actions where GMMP interacts: the visible outcome of formal negotiations (Section J of the Beijing PfA); the less visible outcome of bargaining activities to include or exclude topics from the official agenda (the nexus between women and media not addressed by the CSW); the invisible forces at play in shaping public understanding of issues and challenges.

If we are to assess GMMP's empowering potential, we therefore need to adopt a multidimensional perspective on power to shed light on the different elements that contribute to its capacity to bring about change.

Rethinking power and assessing actors' capacity to produce change

The concept of power has a long history in political thinking and remains at the core of any analysis of political behaviour and participation. Over the centuries, power has been understood as a capacity, as the activation of specific resources, as grounded in different forms of legitimation. The second half of the 20th century has spawned new reflections on the topic, from a now classical conceptualization of power as actors' ability to determine others' behaviour (Dahl, 1961), to a focus on less visible forms of power.

On the one hand it has been acknowledged that 'To the extent that a person or a group – consciously or unconsciously – creates or reinforces barriers to the public airing of policy conflicts, that person or group has power' (Bachrach and Baratz, 1970: 8). This is the kind of power that is mostly visible in issue framing and agenda setting activities. On the other hand, the power to 'prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things' has also been recognized (Lukes 2005: 11). The debate is still open and recent reflections offer a fascinating plurality of approaches.⁹

For the purpose of this paper I refer to a specific analytic framework – the 'power cube' – elaborated by John Gaventa,¹⁰ which is consistent with our goal of assessing the reality of GMMP: different actors engaged on a specific issues, at different levels and in different venues, and playing out different repertoires of action to promote the dignity and full recognition of women in the media.¹¹

The starting point in elaborating the analytic framework is the recognition that perceptions of governing arrangements are changing, thus creating new spaces for engagement and new forms of power within and between them. Secondly, relationships and interconnections between the local, national and global are altering actors' understanding of where power is located and where it may be exercised. Finally, the changing role of knowledge and expertise

creates new boundaries which affect whose voices enter policy processes, and whose knowledge counts.

Relating this to GMMP, it is clear that from community to international debates, a plurality of interventions may contribute to bringing about gender-sensitive media content while more and more women and groups are actively promoting alternative practices of gender-sensitive media. The interaction between local initiatives and supra-national responses is facilitated by communication channels, digital technologies and growing levels of networking; policy actors should no longer disregard the amount of information and knowledge that women organizations have put together concerning imbalances and discrimination in the media.

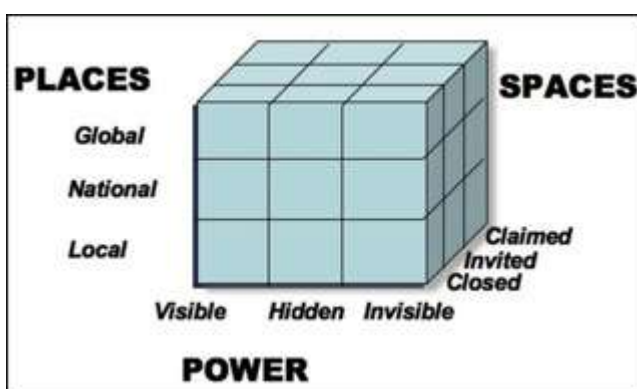
In this context different forms of power can be recognized: when contests over interests (for instance freedom of expression *versus* pluralism in media content and women’s equal opportunities) are visible in public spaces, which are presumed to be relatively open, there is *visible power*; when barriers preclude the entry of certain actors and issues in those public spaces, as it seems to have been the case at the CSW gathering, we have *hidden power*; while *invisible power* is at work when visible conflict is hidden through internalisation of powerlessness or lack of awareness (how often does media professional training promote a gender-aware understanding of media environments?).

As for spaces of engagement – considered as opportunities and channels where citizens can act to potentially affect policies, discourses, decisions and relationships – how the space is created affects the power within it, since ‘freedom is not only the right to participate effectively in a given space, but the right to define and to shape that space’ (Gaventa, 2005: 12).

If a space is closed to public scrutiny it is characterized by exclusivity; if it is open to contributions from the public it may create opportunities for participation, to be assessed empirically; but we can also have the autonomous creation of spaces for action from the ground up, which are claims to express voices through people’s own means and words. Gender mobilization around the media should therefore be aware of the peculiar role of the different spaces of meaning negotiation (for instance exclusive governmental clubs, open consultations and alternative media), as well as of the interplay between them.

The picture represents the way in which the three dimensions of levels, spaces and forms of power can be visualized as interconnected.

Figure 1. The power cube. Source: <http://www.powercube.net>.



As an analytic framework, the power cube can be used to orientate strategies for mobilisation and action as well as to conduct research and to analyse existing specific processes. Referring to the GMMP, I suggest it could be used to map power and possible spaces for change around the specific issue of women and media, from the local to the global; to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the project and its organization; to map its capacity to produce change over time.

It could also be used as an education tool amongst GMMP monitoring teams, to build awareness of and systematically address its empowering potential in engaging with both the cultural and communication environment as well as with policy actors, at different levels.

Towards a research agenda

Considering the history of GMMP and its efforts at fostering monitoring activities also as a means to build social capacity and mobilization, we can approach the power cube keeping in mind that 'From a movement building perspective, it is perhaps when social actions are aligned across levels, forms of power and spaces, that real 'breakthroughs' or turning points in existing structures may occur' (Gaventa, 2005: 27). The power cube therefore provides a multidimensional assessment tool that calls attention to the interconnections between spaces and levels, actors' goals and forms of power, while allowing evaluation of the different goals of the GMMP within a single and consistent framework.

Initial questions for a research agenda could therefore deal with: a) connections across spaces (how do civil society actors involved in GMMP build alliances across spaces and strategies? How do they maintain on-going channels of communication across spaces, and at what costs?) and b) with vertical as well as horizontal linkages (who represents whom across the levels? How are actors at each level held accountable and how do they relate to the overall aims of the GMMP?).

Such questions should in the first place contribute to clarifying how visible, hidden and invisible forms of power take shape at every level, from local struggles to global policy processes, as far as the specific challenges posed by the multiplicity of issues connected to women and media.

A systematic mapping of the contexts within which GMMP operates, from the global to the local, can certainly provide insight into better understanding of the influence the project may have exerted over time and its potential to promote further change, duly considering its diversified power sources: from the data and knowledge produced, to its capacity to network such knowledge and translate it into advocacy, to the actual impact on policy orientations.

Further elements in the analysis may therefore relate to an evaluation of which strategies are effective in strengthening policy advocacy capacities (visible power); which strategies create more inclusive spaces and support grassroots and local movements in airing their concerns (hidden power); which strategies build awareness and mobilise the unorganised (invisible power).

Depending on the researcher's interest, each component of the power cube can be adopted as an entry point to the analysis, which can then move across levels or spaces, in the attempt to identify the challenges and shortcomings of national, regional and trans-national GMMP-related mobilizations.

As for how the power cube should be used, Gaventa also offers some 'tips'. The first tip concerns the fact that power analysis always implies a dynamic and not a static approach: critical reflection should build on the historic record of GMMP since 1995, which provides a useful timeline to address the dynamics of change, both within the project and in the broader media and policy context.

A second tip concerns the diversity and fluidity of spaces of engagement: not only different actors move across spaces and levels, but the spaces in which GMMP has mobilized may have changed over time and may require changes in the project in order to maintain its capacity to act.

Finally, the forms of power are certainly not fixed and static, but constantly interact with each other: understanding the specificities of visible, hidden and invisible power concerning

the nexus between women, media and communication, at different levels, may help re-orientate strategies and resources, thus contributing to making GMMP possibly more relevant in promoting 'media that advance women and peoples' creativity ... (and reaffirm) women's wisdom and knowledge.'

Notes

1. The project is developed within the Media and Gender Justice programme of the World Association for Christian Communication (<http://www.waccglobal.org/>). For further information about the project and its methodology and results, see www.whomakesthenews.org, where all reports from past editions can also be found. On the 2010 GMMP edition and its nexus with the revision of the Beijing PFA and the Millennium Development Goal, see also *Media Development* 1/2010.
2. Padovani 2005, Padovani & Pavan (forthcoming), Padovani & Raboy (forthcoming).
3. Section J of the Beijing Platform of Action also provides a set of guidelines and concrete actions to be taken by governments, media outlets and civic groups. For the full text of the Platform see <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>.
4. Over time improvements in the methodology included tutorial made available in different languages, accessible from the project website and paralleled by seminars organized by WACC and coordinating agencies. It should also be noted that GMMP proposes an adaptable methodology that has subsequently been used for other purposes by other organizations both at the local and international levels. For example, in 2001, RED-ADA, Bolivia's most important women's communication network monitored the portrayal of women in advertising on TV, radio and in the press using the methodology developed for GMMP 2000. In Italy, the Osservatorio di Pavia has used the GMMP methodology to monitor local TVs, thus offering elements for comparison from the local to the global level.
5. The Global report, regional data and a number of national reports are available at: <http://www.whomakesthenews.org/gmmp-2009-2010.html>.
6. Several examples of good practices stemmed out the GMMP are offered on the project website: <http://www.whomakesthenews.org/gmmp-background.html>.
7. 'TANs include those actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse and dense exchanges of information and services' (Keck and Sikkink 1998).
8. Gallagher (forthcoming) offers a detailed analysis of women networks' interventions, including GMMP, through the typology proposed by Keck and Sikkink.
9. Debates around the concept of power in international politics are alive: from Nye's argument about 'soft power' (1990), to Peter Haas's focus on the 'role of networks of knowledge based experts and epistemic communities' as forms of power (1992: 2), to network configurations of power as recently suggested by Khaler 2009, Sikkink 2009, Singh 2008 and Castells 2009.
10. This section builds on Gaventa 2005, 2006. More information and relevant materials can be found at <http://www.powercube.net/analyse-power/>
11. It should be noted that the power cube focuses primarily on power in 'the public sphere', and does not provide insights on the more intimate and private spheres where power relations develop, which have been meaningfully investigated by feminist scholarship. Nevertheless in our effort to assess the policy implications of GMMP, it provides a very interesting tool.

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