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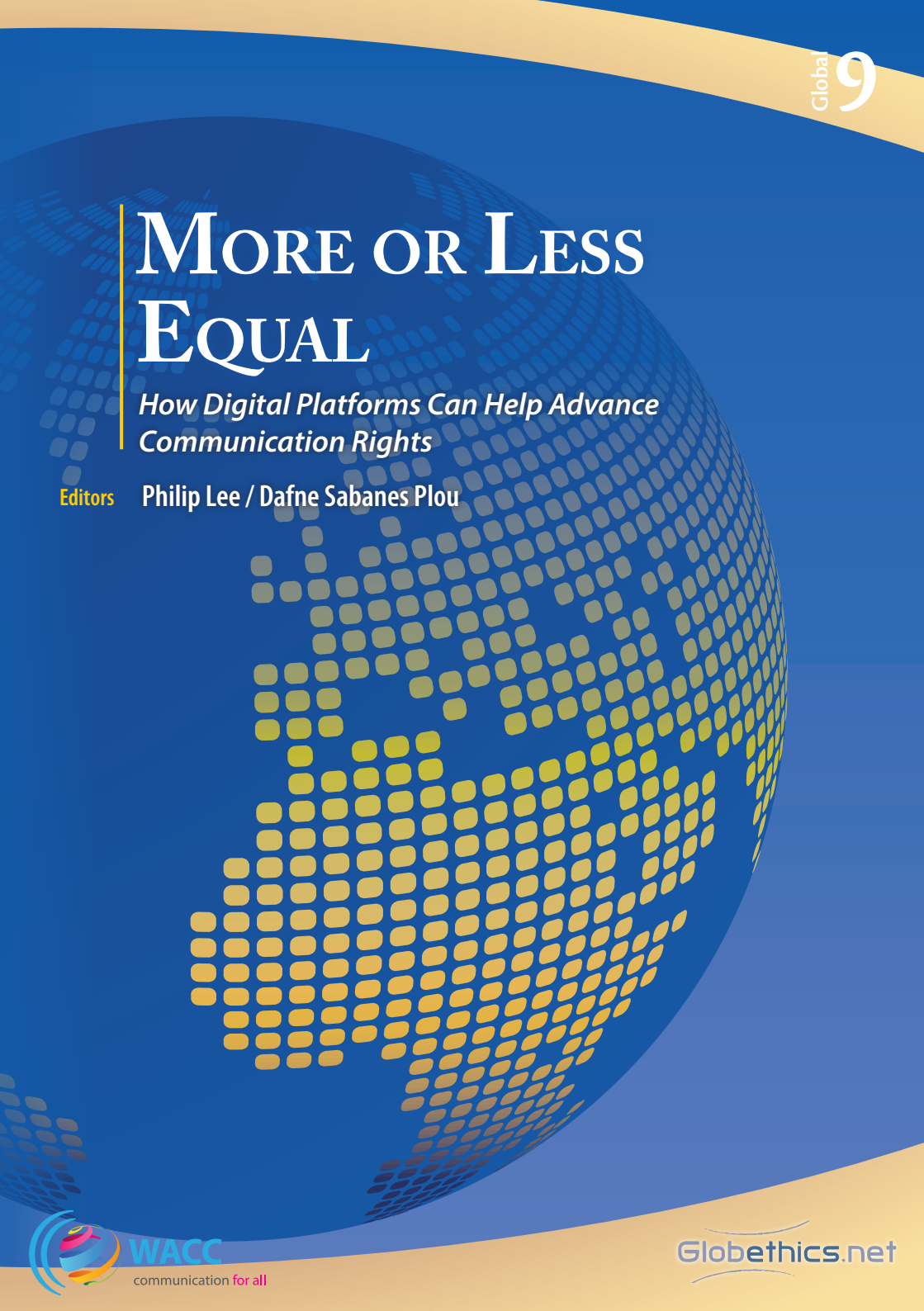
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Global 9

More or Less Equal

How Digital Platforms Can Help Advance Communication Rights

Editors Philip Lee / Dafne Sabanes Plou



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communication for all

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How Digital Platforms Can Help
Advance Communication Rights

Philip Lee / Dafne Sabanes Plou (Editors)

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8

FLYING BROOM'S "LOCAL WOMEN REPORTERS' NETWORK"

Selen Doğan & Sevna Somuncuoğlu[1]

In democracies, media are described as the fourth power (after executive, legislative and judicial powers). Media are also the "third sector" (after state and economy). The American sociologist Rivers describes media as "the other government".

It is expected that the media as a significant power use this power also for equality, justice and peace. Yet, the media have become a tool for struggle in women's world, just like in other "disregarded", "weakened" communities. A dangerous tool! This is because women constitute half of the population on a global scale. In this respect the media should not exist by addressing and being nourished by only one half of the population. However, today's media form a structure, in almost every part of the world, in which only men make decisions and media context is male-dominated. The media, with their sexist language and perspective, are far away from representing women.

For this reason, it is a must to develop an alternative to the current media with a gender perspective! For years, Flying Broom has tried to establish this goal with its website, magazine and Local Woman Reporters' Network (LWRN).

[1] Translated by Eda Özyurt Kılınç & Sanem Akın & Gökşen Görgülü

Why are media important for us women? Because the media:

- Are a means for women's struggle to change/transform their lives.
- Enable us to keep informed about each other.
- Are a means to fight, to draw attention, to make a point, to give emphasis, to remind about responsibilities, to talk about what has been and what has not been done, to create public opinion.

But media:

- Legitimize patriarchal/sexist language.
- Violate women's human rights.
- Create a sexist discourse about women's bodies, despise women.
- Indeed "ignore" women; disregard and annihilate in a symbolical way.
- Profit from exposing women's bodies, commercialize women's bodies.
- Oppose gender equality.
- Expose private life.
- Preach morality.
- Present the victim as guilty.
- Tabloidize violence.
- Normalize inequality.
- Turn women's bodies into goods for entertainment where everybody is watching.

Nevertheless, media can be women-friendly; can be a partner for social transformation by realizing that sexism is men's problem as well; can defend human rights and be a partner for equality and justice-based work; and can play an active role in promoting gender equality.

8.1 Local Woman Reporters Network

Flying Broom Women's Research and Communication Association intended to open up a field for women to create their own media while developing local reporting, when it first established the Local Woman Reporters Network (LWRN) in 2003. Since then, this network has continued its activities and is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year.

The most important characteristic of this network was that it developed an alternative to the often disturbing media with its language, perspective and the value it gives to the news. Within the process, the network not only achieved this function, but also raised media literate women and made important contributions to the "women media" experience in the world.

What was the Local Woman Reporters Network aim?

- To strengthen women's media, promote the production of news from a gender perspective and make women's agendas visible.
- To announce the demands and priorities of local women to the government, local authorities and mainstream media. This way, the "real" agenda of women would be prominent via the news of local woman reporters' network.
- To develop critical media literacy among women of all ages.

What do we intend to do with Local Woman Reporters Network?

- We try to coach news-literate women.
- We want gender sensitive reporting to be widespread.
- We get informed about women's agendas in the provinces.

- We want to make the problems, demands, and successes of women visible.
- We encourage local authorities to develop right and efficient policies for women with our news.
- We expect the local media to give more space to women's news.
- We want local news to be on the agenda of the mainstream media and not just be restricted to the provinces.

Who is the target group of Local Woman Reporters Network?

- Any woman can join this network.
- The only criterion for becoming a Flying Broom reporter is to have a gender perspective.
- Since this network was established to teach women about rights-based journalism, the target group is women of all ages.
- In addition, since the news made by our reporters aims to give a gender perspective to its readers as well, anyone who follows the media is within the target group.

8.2 Reporter Trainings (Gender Based News Workshops)

Gradually, we realized that women reporting for a long time gain experience. On top of that, they direct other women to do reports as well. But another need of extending this news network, especially in big cities, and reading the city agenda with a different point of view appeared. For it to happen, more women needed to take part in the production of news and in a way so that this news network could function for many years.

Flying Broom made an announcement to add new women to its reporters and strengthen its network. In a short while, hundreds of applications were submitted. By October 2013, 603 women had registered in this volunteer news network.

An Analysis

The highest number of local women reporters of Flying Broom (216) is in Ankara. The other cities which have the highest numbers after Ankara are respectively İstanbul (145) and İzmir (55). Alongside these three metropolitan cities, our local reporters in more than 50 cities in Turkey such as Adana, Konya, Mardin, Erzurum, Trabzon, Edirne etc. are watching the local agenda.

We have been receiving applications not only from Turkey but also from other countries. We currently have women reporters from many countries such as the Netherlands, Finland, Malta, Brazil, Poland and Azerbaijan.

One third of the applicants to the local women reporters' network are high school students or university students, one fifth of them are unemployed. There are also academicians, public employees, lawyers, journalists, teachers and psychologists, architects, tourist guides, accountants, bankers and dieticians among our local women reporters. There are even retired women who are not in active working life anymore.

The average age of the reporters that we received application from is 26. The youngest voluntary reporter is 15 years old, as for the oldest, she is 68 years old. Whoever they are whichever occupation they are dealing with and whatever age they are, this shows us that women all need to create their own media.

8.3 Training

With the participation of experts we have been organizing trainings since 2003 to meet the expectations of reporter candidates and to increase their alternative media experience.

During these training sessions (between 2003 and 2013) we conducted workshops on:

- mainstream media analysis with a gender equality perspective;
- news collection and writing techniques;
- media ethics;
- women's movement and media relations;
- feminist media examples;
- importance of local reporting for women;
- the problems of women reporters in areas of conflict;
- empathy;
- reporting issues such as political participation, discrimination, violence, entrepreneurship, etc.;
- sexism in advertisement; and
- reflection of mental illnesses in the media.

In these trainings for the Flying Broom Local Woman Reporters Network, communicators, academicians and reporters acted as trainers and facilitators and sometimes politicians and writers attended as guest lecturers.

8.3.1 Advocacy and Lobbying Studies in Local Woman Reporters Network

- Is it possible to do reports without violating women's rights and reproducing the victimhood of women? For us, yes! The Local Woman Reporters Network has been established to strengthen this possibility and make it tangible.

- Each report written by our reporters in the network draws readers' attention to women's issues. They focus on violence, discrimination, poverty and under-representation while also including the success of women, and the things they are able to do. And of course, the reports brought their demands/expectations to the agenda. Therefore, the network itself became a tool for advocacy.
- In parallel with this work in the network, Flying Broom pointed out consistently and persistently how media violate women's rights. We did that sometimes with press releases and interviews and sometimes with presentations in the national parliament.
- Advocacy does not happen only through critical analysis. We also need to show that the wrong context in the media could be easily reshaped and reproduced with a gender perspective. For that reason, Flying Broom's website has been broadcasting continuously since 2002 and includes "non-sexist news". Reports from Local Woman Reporters Network are published on this website as well.

8.3.2 As for lobbying

- In the 2000s, when we felt the need to extend our target group to spread women's media and women's language, we began a creative action regarding the national parliament: we started to send weekly newsletters to women parliamentarians to inform them of women's agendas throughout the country and in the local areas. These newsletters prepared in the Flying Broom News Centre included information for them to use as a background for their legislation activities.

- With the editors of our news centre and our Local Woman Reporters we visited national media institutions and local authorities. During these visits, we told them about the importance of strengthening women in media and that our news is an alternative source of information for the mainstream media.
- We organized workshops for our reporters in some other cities outside Ankara (like Çanakkale, Mardin). During the organization of these workshops, we held meetings with local women associations in these cities and suggested that alternative women's media should begin there as well. With that, our work on media became more widespread in Turkey.
- Since 2010 we have been publishing Child Brides Almanac every December. We collect child marriage news that has appeared in the mainstream media and show the way these reports are structured and inform reporters about women's problems. These almanacs are sent as soft copy to journalists, parliamentarians and non-governmental organizations.
- Flying Broom chose to broadcast all the radio and TV programmes we prepare on state channels. We see this as part of lobbying. For example in the radio programmes we prepared for two years for the state channel TRT, we touched on issues that were never spoken of before (such as incest, child marriages and domestic violence) and moulded public opinion. We prepared TV spots for TRT on the topic of ethnic discrimination and women. We produced the very first feminist TV shows on TRT channels and we shot and broadcast alternative media shows for local channels nationwide.
- For five years we have been working in coordination with the Local and Regional Televisions Union, which is an umbrella organization for thousands of local radio and TV channels.

We ensure that the shows and spots we prepare are broadcast on local channels. Therefore, we contribute to the spread of gender-sensitive broadcasting.

- Before the last local elections, we published a magazine in which we included the expectations of women from candidates, women friendly city demands and the campaigns of women candidates. The aim of this magazine was to show alternative reporting methods about women candidates and the relation of women and media.

8.4 What Do We Plan For The Future?

We will create a media monitoring team under the name "Red Pencil Media Monitoring Group". Media Monitoring is a new, necessary and effective way of combating discrimination, violation and violence stemming from gender inequality in written, visual, online and social media.

The first example of such an effort in Turkey was MEDİZ (Women's Media Watch Group). This group, formed by women's associations from various cities, organized conferences, published books and held demonstrations to combat sexism in its first years. However, it could not maintain sustainability and MEDİZ lost its effectiveness. There is now a gap in gender-based critical media monitoring and Flying Broom News Centre with its 600 reporters all over the world has the capacity to monitor.

Red Pencil Women's Media Monitoring Group will be established under the roof of Flying Broom to denounce sexist, racist, male-dominant language and perspectives, to develop the alternative media approach and to encourage women to produce news accordingly. This group will also aim at reporting, generating data, organizing trainings and activities besides monitoring and denunciation.

The group summarizes its approach as “pointing to alternatives while uncovering sexism in the media and underlining sex-based discrimination, in other words teaching the right way while criticizing”. The group takes its name from the red pencils editors never give up: Critical reading is done by underlining the lines, emphasizing the mistakes, and pointing to the unseen. For that, editors use red pencils. They cross out mistakes with this and write the correct version as well. They note down alternative expressions on the side with red pencils. Red Pencil will monitor the media with a red pencil in hand.

8.5 Local Women Reporters: A Guideline for Gender-Sensitive Reporting

The most important point of Local Women Reporters (LWR) is that women reporters are making alternative news with a gender perspective for media that are blind to the difficulties created by language, limited perspectives and a male-centric approach to the news. Medias are tools for transforming/changing women’s life; and they keep us informed about each other.

Using media, we recycle our words and draw attention, make a point, underline, remind about responsibilities, tell what has been done and not done, and shape public opinion

8.5.1 The Relationship between Women and Media

This has increasingly turned out to be a problematic relationship. On the one hand, we all know that media are very important tools for women, but on the other hand we try to understand why they are not women-friendly, why they tend to ensnare women and how to transform them to be the other way around. In this way, we are challenging an enormous system that has a tendency to be on the opposite side. For not leaving

media in the hands of a patriarchal system, we women are *here* in spite of the fact that media ignore us!

We need to come up with alternative ways of reporting because news and its images, montage process, and reporting language are all done while ignoring the perspective of women. Neither the people working in the preparation process of news or the person who has editorial decision-making power may consider preparing news from a gender-sensitive perspective. This is the reason visibility of women in the media is a problem. It is us who will notice and transform it.

8.5.1 Everything is Newsworthy!

Women want to be newsworthy not only when they are murdered in "honour crimes", thrown into the street or when they are defying poverty. They want to be newsworthy for their successes, solidarity, and efforts to reduce problems arising from being women, with their own dreams, expectations and needs. There is a common prejudice that news about women is news about "women's problems". Women should show that this is not the case in alternative news. A few examples will suffice by way of explanation.

We read news about women who made a street demonstration about taking legal measures against marital rape in X city. Sexual crimes are among the most important problems of women all around the world. We can do street interviews with women in our cities about what women are thinking about it, do they know what to do when they experience such things etc. In this way we can see the global problems' impact on the local agenda.

Or there is an immense earthquake in X city. Those rendered homeless are fighting for survival in temporary shelters. In such disasters women are challenged by different difficulties than men. We can make news about hygienic problems in the shelters, women not being able to

obtain medical supplies and the situation of pregnant women. We can tell of the measure to be taken and the needs of women in our news – because Turkey is an earthquake prone country.

Another example might be an official or an actor or a politician who speaks publicly using sexist language and inveighing against women, magnifying discrimination and sexism. What are the thoughts of women in our city? What do they have to say about it?

8.6 Smiling Examples

Suppose that the students of X university put pressure on the university management to include a gender mainstreaming class in the curriculum. They organized a demonstration, collected signatures and expressed the importance of this class to the local media. We need to get their messages and make this action visible by reporting it as news.

Suppose that women living in a neighbourhood of X city organized themselves to look after each other's babies while they are at work. Some of them had participated in meetings of women's organizations and became conscious of their rights. Then they explained what they had learned to other women in their neighbourhood. They also made an effort to raise the awareness of their husbands and fathers who did not support them. As a result, these women were empowered and contributed to behavioural change in their neighbourhood. If we can find such examples, they can be reported as news. Other examples:

- Why do the names of awards in art or literature or sports generally belong to males? Why do people not realize that there are successful women whose names can be used?
- Why do the names of streets, main roads, and parkways generally belong to males? Why are the women whose names are used for streets generally historical characters? (Like Nene Hatun).

- In the city we live in, the heels of the shoes of women generally break on the cobbles of the streets. Since the pavements are so high, women have difficulty walking with baby carriages.
- The railings on bridges and the stairs of busses are not suitable for women wearing skirts. Insufficient street lightning causes an increase in crimes against women. Women feel uncomfortable in the subways where there is little security.
- In general there are no toilets for women in the bazaars or if there are toilets for women, they are poorly maintained.
- Sometimes the location of the bazaars is far away and women cannot afford to go there even by bus. Why are the municipal authorities not aware of these problems?
- How many women know the addresses of public authorities such as governorship, police station, and the social services centre?
- How many women are aware of the hotline for suffering women and children?

8.7 How Will We Reach the News?

The information or document that we are calling alternative news will not fall into our hands in a ready-made format. There are many sources that can be used and keeping in touch with them, collecting information about their activities, consulting them about women issues will make the work easier. You can also benefit from the news and press releases published on many different web sites.

In addition, women's news is not confined solely to women. All vulnerable groups (children, people with disabilities, elderly people, gays, minorities etc.) can be the subject of our news. A gender mainstreaming perspective requires hearing and projecting the voices of groups that are

marginalized or ignored. What is important is that we are making news that takes sides – the side of women and vulnerable groups. But whatever we do, stories must be clear, factual, well-presented and – above all – gender-sensitive.