

Feminist media coverage of the Social Forums

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'Alternative' events focusing on globalisation, such as the European and World Social Forums, and the World Summits on the Information Society generally ignore issues related to women's rights. This article describes the experience of a team of women – some professional journalists, and others who had never written for publication – which created its own media in order to provide a feminist perspective on several of these events. In so doing, the team aimed to influence the discussion and debate at these events, as well as providing women's and feminist organisations with a source of information about the global issues under discussion.

The late 1990s saw widespread demonstrations against the particular form of neo-liberal economic globalisation promoted by the large international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation, and the G8. These demonstrations, which culminated in protests against the WTO ministerial meeting held in Seattle, USA, in 1999, represented the emergence of an international movement of 'alter-globalists'¹. They also prompted the decision to hold an alternative event, the World Social Forum (WSF), in 2001 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, a town renowned for its promotion and use of participatory democracy. This event launched the social forum movement.

Many feminists and alternative journalists attended this first social forum: some because they wished to participate in the event with its message that 'another world is possible', and others because they wanted to report the event to the biggest audience possible. Feminist journalists, such as those affiliated with the international feminist media agency Les Pénélopes², seized the opportunity to participate in the 'media dance' (*farandole de medias*, known as the Ciranda). This unique Brazilian initiative allows and commits any volunteer, professional or not, to publish as much information covering an event as they wish, in their own language. In this way, feminists were able to provide media coverage of debates and initiatives at the event that included a feminist analysis.

Needless to say, providing this 'instant' media coverage on a daily basis proved to be a struggle. However, the women who had taken part were inspired to go on to

organise feminist media coverage at subsequent social forums, including the European Social Forums (ESF) in Paris and London, two World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS), and two World Social Forums (WSF). This culminated in the production of three issues of the feminist magazine *Digitall Future*, to cover the third ESF in London in 2004, the fifth WSF in Porto Alegre in 2005, and the WSIS in Tunis in 2005. Each issue was published in French and English, and was produced by a diverse team of women from different geographical and political backgrounds, many of whom had not written for publication before. Many of the women involved spoke positively about their experiences of working on the magazine, and the opportunity that it gave them to share their experiences and impressions of these events. The publication also received some coverage itself, in the 'traditional' media, such as *Le Monde diplomatique* and *France Culture* in France. However, lack of funding, as well as fatigue brought on by a lack of attention and support from the more established feminist networks, and from social movements as a whole, mean that the project has been discontinued, marking the end of this rich experience.

Feminists for another globalisation

Why is it important that feminists attend the social forums? Why is globalisation relevant to women? Representing about 70 per cent of the world's poor, and 67 per cent of those who are illiterate³, women bear a disproportionate burden of the world's poverty. In some cases, globalisation has widened the gap, with women losing jobs, social benefits, and labour rights. From tax systems to trade regimes, economic policies and institutions often fail to take gender disparities into account. With too few seats at the tables where economic decisions are made, women themselves have little chance of rectifying the inequalities⁴. This is why women's involvement in discussions related to militarism, war and conflict, poverty, international trade, or privatisation of public goods, is essential to ensure their rights are respected. Globalisation is relevant to women because they are part of this globalisation, and often the disadvantaged part. Therefore they have the right to ask for 'another globalisation', in which there is greater equality, and where the social and environmental aspects of trade are considered, rather than just economic benefits.

But even at supposedly democratic events such as the social forums, men take the podium more often than women. Dominique Foufelle, one of the French journalists who worked on *Digitall Future*, commented that the increasing number of women attending social forums already represents progress. 'All that can be said about "international exchanges" is just as valid for gender relations: inequality, exploitation, abuse of power . . . Our male comrades, who do not have to put up with the effects of patriarchy on a daily basis, from harassment to [violence], have not grasped the extent to which this system limits their political thought and hinders their freedom to exist. Altruists that we are, genetically programmed . . . is it not our duty to enlighten them

before they become as [unthinking] as those they fight?' (Foufelle 2005). Ready to fight for women's rights, feminists should come and take their place in the 'male' discussions on globalisation.

Providing information in a different way

One way to participate in discussions, and to express a point of view, is through the media. But here, women face another obstacle: the difficulties of gaining access to the mainstream media, and getting our information published or broadcast. According to Cabrera-Balleza (2007), 'Women are underrepresented in media. A lot in the mainstream media and a bit less in the alternative. But they are still under-represented'. One response to this is for feminists to create our own media, which pay particular attention to the double marginalisation that women face in mainstream media, in their invisibility as actors and as subjects of social, economic, and political life. These media would not only serve to inform ordinary people, but would also convey information provided by them. This information should reflect a commitment to diversity, solidarity, equality, and a non-hierarchical approach to power relations.

It is important to recognise the many ways in which information is produced and presented by people with different identities and from different backgrounds, and to support the right of all men and women to create their own media content. Alternative media, and the approaches used by alternative media practitioners, can be seen as complementary to mainstream media, allowing the opportunity for those participating to cover issues that receive little coverage in traditional media. This ensures that information is circulated more openly, and allows for the presentation of specific content relevant to different regions of the world, helping to create a network for the exchange of knowledge and information. For feminists, it also presents a particular opportunity to focus on gender as an issue, and notably the social relations between women and men, the barriers that gender inequalities represent for the development of peoples and societies, and the initiatives carried out by women.

In this example, the development of an alternative media outlet to report on the social forums presented the opportunity to provide a feminist viewpoint on issues with which women are necessarily involved, representing as they do more than half the world's population. Malgorzata Tarasiewicz, a Polish reporter for the magazine, stated that: '*Digital Future* should be an inspiration for discussion and a motivation for action. Women need fresh food for thought to initiate debates on issues such as peace, ICTs, debt, trade, ecology, poverty, homelessness, unemployment, sexuality and fundamentalism' (Tarasiewicz 2004). Daphne Plou, one of the journalists at WSF 2005 and originally from Argentina, adds: '*Digital Future* continues to integrate a feminist perspective in major events where women have decided to sustain their efforts in reminding the world that the struggle for universal rights should not [make] the struggle for women's rights [invisible]' (Plou 2005).

The rise of *Digitall Future*

The second European Social Forum (12–16 November 2003) brought more than 60,000 participants from all over Europe to Paris. Women from east and west came to participate in the Assembly for Women's Rights, and the ESF itself. The European and North American Women Action⁵ and Les Pénélopes invited more than 20 women from about 15 countries to provide feminist written, audio, and video media coverage of the event. All material produced was published on the website of Les Pénélopes in English and French, in order to reach a large audience. Many of the women came from central and eastern Europe, and also spoke at workshops on gender and discrimination, violence against women, trafficking, and information and communication technologies.

Participants' impressions were varied; some of the women said it was their first experience of feeling 'useful' while attending such a big event, and of being active in disseminating information, rather than just receiving it. It was fascinating to share feelings and experiences, and read or listen to other women's reports. Jivka Marinova, a Bulgarian feminist, explained that she felt the ESF was her 'first real European meeting', where feminist organisations from eastern Europe were able to participate on an equal level with organisations from other parts of Europe⁶. At the end of the ESF, there was a feeling that the event represented a new beginning, a new world order where women were more powerful, and able to express their opinions freely in political debates.

A month later, in Geneva, a group of feminists took part in the first World Summit of the Information Society (WSIS). They realised they were a minority in the discussions about freedom of expression and access to information, and government plans for bridging the digital divide and helping developing nations to connect to the Internet. Moreover, they realised that they were very fortunate to be able to participate in such an event, unlike other female colleagues and compatriots. Realising this, they decided to provide their own media coverage of the event. Each participant would write down her impressions of the talks and workshops that she attended, and her own personal reflections; she would describe case studies and experiences related to gender and ICTs, and share them with the world. But how would this be undertaken?

With a little technical help and training, 14 women were able to write and publish more than 40 articles over the three days of the event. The articles were uploaded onto the website of Social Rights Bulgaria, which was used as a portal to publish the feminist coverage of WSIS⁷, and every evening a news bulletin was sent to a large number of mailing lists, news lists, and feminist networks, in order to reach more readers. In this way, participants could openly share their valuable experience with the rest of the world.

Based on the experience from these two events, the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement, based in the Netherlands, and Les Pénélopes, based in France, decided to repeat this process of generating feminist media

coverage at subsequent large events. These included the WSF in Mumbai in 2004, the ESF in London in 2004, the WSF in Porto Alegre in 2005, and the second WSIS in Tunis in November 2005. At each event, reports and articles were disseminated via the Internet; in addition, three printed issues of *Digitall Future* were produced following the ESF in London, the WSF in Porto Alegre, and the WSIS in Tunis.

Much of what is discussed at United Nations summits and the big international financial institution meetings remains hidden from the public; this is also the case with the social forums. *Digitall Future* aimed to provide analysis of some of the many topics covered, including poverty, environmental degradation, HIV and AIDS, conflict, communication rights, and many others. Furthermore, its objective was to present two geopolitical visions of the issues, by publishing different articles written in English and in French. The idea behind this is that English and French information was different in the two versions of the newspaper, and because of this it demonstrated two different visions. The magazine aimed to shed light on public opinion regarding where alliances could be built, from one country to another, and across economic, political, social, or cultural fields.

An extraordinary team: from diversity to a common aim

The project faced two challenges. The first was convincing funders and other mainstream media, as well as feminist organisations in a position to promote the magazine, to accept the legitimacy of the publication. Second was the decision to assemble a mixed team of people of different ages, and from different geographical areas and professional backgrounds, to write and produce each issue of the magazine, and to edit it on their return to their own countries. This would ensure diversity both in terms of the people writing for the magazine, and in the themes covered.

This decision to bring together feminists from different continents, all with different visions, opinions, and strategies to work together was one of the biggest challenges, but also an exceptional feature, of the feminist media coverage. For each edition of *Digitall Future* there were 13 team members: six journalists of different nationalities, one chief editor, one photographer and two editors (one for each language), as well as two designers and one supervisor. The team members were selected according to their past experience and interest in the topic of the event, and this made the task even more difficult. However, despite these potential difficulties, it seemed to work. Mavic Cabrera-Balleza, editor for the English version of *Digitall Future 2* reflected that: 'The most inspiring experience was working with a dedicated team amidst an event that brought together various actors in the global movement for social transformation'⁸.

It was a different way of doing team work, based not on hierarchies, but on collaboration and mutual support. Each contributor was working for the common good, and was free to express her views through her writing. Maria Velichkova, who contributed to the coverage of the ESF in London, said: 'It was a very good school for

online journalism. Everybody was friendly and respected others' work. We were helping each other even when we did not understand each other's languages⁹.

Moreover, the topics of the articles to be written were selected by the authors themselves. As a result, debates took place within the pages of *Digitall Future* that were not part of the discussions at the events, based on topics such as solidarity economy¹⁰ and free software¹¹ for women's organisations. In addition to that, the *Digitall Future* journalists had meetings with people living in the cities where the events were taking place. In Porto Alegre, the team met with local people, many of whom were homeless and living in abandoned buildings. In Tunis, *Digitall Future* contributors met with representatives from the local women's movement, whose members were not allowed to participate in WSIS, and who relayed stories on human rights abuses in their country to the journalists.

Amateur journalism – professional media

But what were the challenges faced by this colourful team of women, travelling to different events and running from plenary to workshop, from workshop to interview, and from there back to the hotel or the media centre in order to write their articles as soon as the day's events were finished? Were the members of the team all professional journalists? Were they used to this type of work? How long did it take for them to train for such specific work?

Is it possible to write an article for publication when you have never written for the media before? Can you publish content on the Internet, when you are not familiar with the technologies? The answer to both these questions is yes. And it requires just a couple of hours of preparation.

The team organised training just before the beginning of each event. This focused on how to write a good article and how to publish it on the Internet. One or two members of the team would share their knowledge and train the other contributors by explaining *Digitall Future's* publication policy, including what type of articles were needed, how the information should be structured, and which style to use. The women would then receive user names and passwords for the website where they could upload their reports. The simple rules of publishing through a contents management system called SPIP¹² would be explained, and the women were then ready for their new role as journalists.

However, what was more important than the training itself was good coordination within the team. Contributors had to meet each morning for an hour and plan who would cover which events. These daily meetings provided a forum for exchanging information, as the women would share what they had heard and what they had found out, and exchange leaflets and brochures for events which they could not attend, but which might be of interest to others. Regarding this, Malgorzata Tarasiewicz from Poland, who joined the team for the first edition of *Digitall Future*, commented: 'It was interesting to observe different styles of journalistic work from different countries. The

atmosphere of friendship and openness was special about the team'¹³. Coordination with the photographer was also important: she often had to join two or three journalists at different times during the day to take portraits, or to photograph abandoned houses or street demonstrations.

At the end of each forum, the collection of articles – some very detailed and others no longer than brief remarks – were collated into a 16-page newspaper, written half in English and half in French, with a common double page spread in the middle with a thematic photo report. In this way, the women who contributed became authors, even though some of them had never written before.

What lessons for the women's movement?

'*Digitall Future* was a good effort in terms of feminist coverage, but I don't think it was sufficient to effect necessary change in the women's movement. Initiatives like this should be done on a sustained basis, and not just in a few events. It must be also conducted alongside other efforts, such as educating audiences and media monitoring.' These were comments made by Mavic Cabrera Balleza after the WSF in Porto Alegre¹⁴. Other team members mentioned that there was insufficient funding to support alternative media such as *Digitall Future*, and that this was one of the main reasons why the project was not continued.

According to Dominique Foufelle, the initiative did not last long enough to bring about any real change in the women's movement. She was also very disappointed by the failure of existing feminist networks to support the newspaper, and its distribution. 'I thought the big feminist networks were connected, and would be involved more actively in distributing *Digitall Future* worldwide. That did not work at all. I had the unpleasant feeling of a lack of solidarity, and a distance between "grass root activists" and "professional activists"'¹⁵.

Conclusion

If these were the feelings of women involved in the *Digitall Future* feminist coverage, was it useful to have undertaken the project at all? What have we learned from these initiatives?

First and foremost, we learned that producing feminist media coverage was possible, with very little funding and with a few technological tools. The women who participated in these initiatives were able to unite despite their different political views and ethnic origins, and were able to bring their opinions and perspectives into a terrain where they have been in the minority. They were also able to multiply the effect of their participation in the forums, by informing thousands of other women about their progress.

In addition, this feminist media coverage contributed towards the creation of a public space for discussion at these events, one where women and men, according to their social, religious, ethnic, generational, and sexual identities, would potentially have the opportunity to express their different needs and interests. In her final reflections on *Digitall Future*, Mavic Balleza concludes: 'In an inter-movement international event like the WSF, it is important to have a medium that reports about the different issues from a feminist perspective. Year after year, the feminist agenda, or even women's perspectives in general, have not been fully integrated in the conduct of the WSF. *Digitall Future* helped [bring] feminist issues and analysis [to] the surface – although this is far from enough, I should say. Feminist voices are still a minority, after all.'

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Notes

- 1 Alter-globalisation (or alter-mondialisation, from the French *altermondialisme*) is the name of a social movement which supports the international integration of globalisation, but advocates that values of democracy, economic justice, environmental protection, and human rights be put ahead of purely economic concerns.
- 2 Les Pénélopes, <http://www.penelopes.org> (last accessed June 2007).
- 3 Source: UNDP, <http://www.undp.org> (last accessed June 2007).
- 4 Source: Unifem UK website, <http://unifemuk.org> (last accessed June 2007).
- 5 European and North American Women's Action, ENAWA, <http://www.enawa.org> (last accessed June 2007).
- 6 ESF Evaluation meeting, 16 November 2003. Unpublished ENAWA report on the Effective E-feminism Programme 2003.
- 7 Social Rights Bulgaria, <http://www.socialrights.org> (last accessed June 2007).

- 8 Interview with Mavic Cabrera-Balleza 17 April 2007.
- 9 Interview with Maria Velichkova 10 May 2007.
- 10 'Solidarity economy' is a term for economic activity which is undertaken so as to express solidarity with disadvantaged groups of people. This contrasts with the private sector, where economic activity is aimed at generating profits, and the public sector, where economic activity is directed at public policy objectives. The term 'solidarity economy' is the English translation of *economia solidária* (Portuguese), *economía solidaria* (Spanish), and *économie solidaire* (French).
- 11 Free software is a common name for computer programs guaranteeing certain freedoms to their users, such as: to run, copy, distribute, study, change, and improve the software they are using. For more information see <http://www.gnu.org>.
- 12 SPIP, <http://www.spip.net> (last accessed June 2007).
- 13 Interview with Malgorzata Tarasiewicz 19 April 2007.
- 14 Interview with Mavic Cabrera-Balleza 17 April 2007.
- 15 Interview with Dominique Foufelle 10 April 2007.

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