They Speak, But Who Listens?

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A Parable of Connexion

Scene: A small room with a bed and a washbasin.
Characters: A man and a woman.

It's the third time this man has paid to spend time with this woman. She only speaks a few words of his language, but he seems kind and she decides to take the risk. She tells him she is being held prisoner and wants to get out. Will he help her?
The man is sympathetic but he doesn't want to get too involved, certainly not to take charge of this woman. So he takes out his cellular phone and says: "Make any call you want."
The woman hasn't used a telephone in months. The only number she knows by memory is her sister's, back in the Ukraine (...or Paraguay....or Burma). She has trouble dialling, doesn't know any of the codes, but the man helps her. They have to hurry, because he's only paid for a short time, and they have to whisper, because there are people in rooms on both sides of them.
The call goes through! Her sister answers. The woman can only say, "Help! Get me out of here! I'm being held prisoner!"
"Where are you?" asks her sister.
"In Israel (...or Holland...or Thailand)".
"But where exactly?"
"I don't know."

Stories like this have made headlines all over the world. In the usual version, the faraway recipient of the call begins a long, arduous search for help through hotlines to embassies and international police. In the end, there is a raid and the woman who made the call is liberated. The police, who knew about the brothel all along, are not the heroes of the story. Neither is the client, who took no risks. In fact, the hero of the story is the small cellular phone that enabled the prisoner to connect to the world and be heard. The story does not end perfectly, however, because the woman is deported, and this is not what she wanted.

When I consider the possible uses of new technology for migrant women, I begin with stories like this one. Here, people are enabled to communicate vital pieces of information. Here, there are processes and chains of events and people help each other. Before we can move to the question 'How will the Internet benefit migrant workers?', other questions must be considered, for these are not simple or straightforward situations.

Geographical double-think

Although commercial sex is now recognised as a global, multi-billion dollar industry, its workers--in their millions--are only referred to as 'illegals', as victims of 'trafficking' and as potential 'vectors' of HIV/AIDS--when they are referred to at all. The same London newspaper that runs the story of 'liberated sex slaves' in Malaysia never mentions the problems migrant Chinese women have finding childcare (or fish sauce) in London. It is the age-old technique of 'disappearing' people simply by not acknowledging them.

To be deemed worthy of recognition and of help, *where* you are is all-important. The same person identified as 'indigenous' in the Andes and included in projects of traditional aid is viewed, if she migrates to the North, as a job-stealer, welfare bum, ghetto resident, drug dealer and addict, candidate for deportation and firmly *outside* the scope of traditional development aid. Unless she puts on some kind of native dress and plays pan-pipes, whereupon she may qualify for 'cultural' funding and will probably be left alone by the police--that is, if she plays well enough to gather audiences.

Those who seek to correct this geographic double-think--whether they are involved in battles for fairer immigration law or for better working conditions for domestics, dancers or prostitutes--often talk about rights: the right to communicate, the right to health care. Similarly, when possible uses of new information and communication technologies are mentioned, we hear about the right to access. But access is a tricky thing with people who are being watched and controlled, don't have much money and are itinerant. Migrant labourers, whether women or men, whatever their labour, have difficulty finding and using the benefits of settled society. Migrants who don't enjoy 'legal' status or whose status depends on a certain amount of fraud or deception, must be extremely cautious about requesting and using services. Migrant prostitutes have the added problems of having to navigate a labyrinth of laws concerning their work. The problems here are logistical and the need is for wireless, rapid and discreet connexions.

The literacy myth and the new information culture

Beyond questions of access lie dreams of educational growth, spiritual expression, 'liberated voices' that media like the Internet offer. Again, advocates often mention rights: to education, to 'life-long learning', to 'self-expression' or 'self-realisation'. The 'rights' argument, however, sets the discussion firmly within First World norms, where citizens not only already have better access and service but more citizens are prepared to take advantage of them. To use the WorldWideWeb and even the simplest e-mail programme, after all, requires a very high level of literacy.

Classic 'Development' projects, whether applied to populations located in the Third World or to migrants who have left it, have assumed that Progress happens in stages, of which literacy is the first. According to this theory, everyone must become literate in the same ways that Western societies have come to take for granted. The use of alphabets to store knowledge is said to constitute humankind's most significant step up on the ladder of Progress, the step that distinguishes people from animals and cultures that 'succeed' from those who don't. Yet alphabet technology is comparatively recent and has *not* taken hold with all the world's people. In recent years this Eurocentrism has been widely criticised for extinguishing 'indigenous

knowledges', but this has not affected assumptions that even indigenous people need to get alphabetised. According to this way of thinking, if poorly educated domestic and sex workers are to participate in new technologies, they must first attend literacy classes in their own languages, then get some basic education, computer instruction and perhaps English, after which they can finally learn about the Internet. Even were access not a question, the proposition would be absurd.

In the classic literacy myth, the center of everyone's desire is to enter the Golden World of Books. And the way it is now, the Internet mimics books, whose contents are scanned whole onto web 'pages'. But even among those who know how to read, relatively few routinely read more than headlines, cartoon stories, romance novels, product labels, street signs and horoscopes, and many never write at all. When those who hold reading and writing sacred deplore these 'low' uses of literacy, others feel inadequate and ashamed about the ways they know and learn about the world.

Those using the Internet are avid readers and, more important, are oriented to 'getting information'. This concept--that 'information' is something to 'get'--is also being discussed currently as a right, but, again, assumes acceptance and agreement about crucial values--how to work, how to know things, how to ask questions, where to look for answers and from whom and how to judge information as 'correct' or 'true'. Most of the world doesn't belong yet to such an 'information culture', and these values ought not to be imposed, even by evangelists who are sure people will be saved or uplifted by them.

Right for whom and for what?

The question shouldn't be whether we can provide egalitarian access points to the Internet for all the world's people. If we construct the conversation on 'rights to access', 'freedom of speech' and visions of Progress and Development (who has the electricity and telephone infrastructure, who has the money for a computer, who can go to school to learn about technology, who sees information as a 'consumer' item and a right) then we reproduce the same conversation we found oppressive in the first place.

Some of those now excluded from much of mainstream societies *want* to include themselves in this new technology, whatever it turns out to be. They see themselves as protagonists of the revolution. But what about those who are excluded and who see nothing (so far) about this new technology to attract them or who don't know it exists? Should they be forced to be included, if being included could 'help' them (get useful information, tell their stories, educate others)?

In the United Kingdom, travellers (the old word gypsies is not preferred) have lived deliberately on the social margins for centuries, and have consistently been viewed as either perverse or pathetically disadvantaged, to be hounded out of decent places or forced to adopt a 'normal' way of life. Finally accepting gypsies' desire to live in mobile houses, planners build them 'sites' with connexions to water and electricity. But the sites organise their vans into straight rows at measured distances and ignore travellers' needs, such as space to work with scrap metal.

Many conversations about outsiders like travellers and sex workers revolve around questions of free choice. But even people willing to believe that gypsies want to move around will not believe that prostitutes might. Instead, they change the subject to what's wrong with prostitution. If the subject always changes to how to abolish prostitution or how to find work alternatives for all current prostitutes (in their many millions) or how to change men so they don't desire prostitutes, we will never address the realities of sex work that lead to exclusions from services and policies that might benefit them. This is why many activists are focussing on getting occupational health and safety regulations applied to sex work.

The acceptable face of 'difference'

To understand policies that consistently exclude people, we need to recognise a contradiction: that societies which not only tolerate but desire 'difference' in its *proper* place will demonise and harry it when *out* of place. Circus sideshow performers, transgender artists, beggars who stand at church doors and children who break-dance in the street, when found in a 'nice' residential neighbourhood, will be quickly moved along. When the outsiders are sex workers, they will be moved to very particular locations. So while governments currently discuss 'trafficking' and immigration law as though their only concern were the well-being of 'victimised' women, they continue to facilitate the business of commercial sex in all the most obvious ways and punish *only* the women involved when someone must be punished. Migrant prostitutes' access--or their perception of access--to even the most basic services is still widely in question, even in Europe. Moreover, many services are provided without understanding how migrants live and what they want. It's essential not to assume that all migrant prostitution is forced and all brothel workers are slaves. It's imperative not to project our own desires and assumptions onto others. The only way we can know what others want is to give them room to tell us.

Which brings us to the centre of this essay: How do 'we' know what 'they' want?

How to offer opportunities?

How can we provide possibilities to use new information and communication technologies to marginalised and migrant women? If we believe that the chance to tell their stories *could* be liberating, enlightening or useful to them, how can that opportunity be offered? The specific case I address is that of women from the Third World--and particularly from Latin America--who have migrated to Western Europe to work as domestic and/or sex workers. These women in their many thousands are found from one end of Europe to another, and very commonly continue migrating as opportunities close and open. Those who offer information on new opportunities, those who facilitate journeys and those who take advantage of migrants know how to communicate with them.

Currently, the world of interested and 'helping' agencies, largely ensconced in comfortable offices, bemoans the manipulation of migrant women by criminal networks and wonders where women have gone when they suddenly disappear. The solution to this is evident: get out of those offices. Supporters need to stop producing and giving out ever more excellent written materials

and do more following and listening. They should learn from the 'criminals' and start knowing not only where the women are but where they are going next. The information available to women comes from those who go to them. To influence the empowerment of a migrant sex worker means accepting her reality and going to meet her there.

Visions of a postmodern scribe

So imagine an educator who carries her wares with her. To visit domestic workers isolated in big suburban houses and not allowed visitors, she goes to a local plaza (or laundromat) on Sunday afternoon. There she offers to help with problems, find people, even predict the future. Instead of a crystal ball, she carries a small computer notebook and a cellular phone. From her bag she may also vend envelopes, stamps, postcards and paper. She may carry a telephone book, the latest edition of the classified advertisements and various small dictionaries. Perhaps she gives impromptu lessons in the local language. She might have a recording Walkman and some music tapes. She is a kind of postmodern scribe, also a cultural worker, or maybe a travelling saleswoman.

She will be able to contact some sex workers in nail and hair salons but she will soon feel frustrated by the vast numbers not reached. In possession of a large van, however, and a driver, she can cover a wide territory. Parking near sex-trade zones, she lets workers know when she's arrived and offers them now a wider range of services, from bed, toilet, shower, food, condoms, blood test to fax/telephone and Internet connexions. Some women might want to know the weather in a city they're considering going to, others to send e-mail to alert other workers about trends in police harassment, dangerous clients or new wrinkles in immigration law. The scribe can look for and print from the Internet AIDS information in the women's own language; if they don't read she can tell them what's most important to know. The technology, the education, the services are mobile, like the workers. A fleet of such vans in different parts of Europe would form a true network, which women could enter and leave at different points.

Such an approach--technology not isolated in offices, not connected to formal education, not touted as a new religion, not pushed as a 'right', but instead associated with coffee, sandwiches and chat--would not appeal to everyone. Some women might not be able to take seriously a computer in a van, or not have time for it. Others might learn to type and send their own e-mail or look for their own information on the web. The vans themselves would *be* a communications technology connecting travelling women who rarely avail themselves of services located in inhospitable buildings and neighbourhoods.

Does cyberspace have margins? Can gypsies find vestigial spaces to park in? Will those who get bored reading or don't understand 'clicking' find ways to communicate through images and sound? Could the Internet become softer, like holograms, and find itself on walls, be projected on curtains and heard in the shower? Will there be ways to wrench it out of its current place in hard plastic boxes and give it a 'virtual' reality? How would it be to carry an Internet connexion on a wristwatch? Alternatively, what if huge screens were set up in marginalised neighbourhoods and websites beamed onto them with the kind of big sensuous sound found in popular movies and discotheques?

The concept of information needs to be reconceived to include not only ‘indigenous knowledge’ but also ‘street smarts’. Just as Western scholarship overlooked Mayan writing and Inca quipus for so long because they didn’t come in the form of books, so current thinking continues to exclude ceremonies, spontaneous ‘happenings’, oral and musical events, a group of women spending the evening together watching a *telenovela*, conversations on the assembly line and creativity by teenagers on the dance floor. Those who wish to honour the value of non-written traditions need to accept that the word Literacy can extend to include ‘reading and writing’ other things besides letters--the forest, the street, the television screen. Instead of condemning the easy access criminals and entrepreneurs have to migrant prostitutes, we need to mimic that access--find out how they do it, what works best, where and when. Let’s go out to those in the margins and listen to them. For, with all the rhetoric about the need to liberate ‘unheard voices’, we miss an essential point: those voices have been talking all along. The question is who is listening.