

Media for Social Change

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Earlier this month, Anthony Giddens, former director of the LSE, gave a [talk](#) on how technologies are mediating every aspects of our lives in a revolutionary, and rather gloomy way. Then last Friday, as I was telling a friend how robots were going to take over, the heart of my country was attacked, by a different kind of robot.



In the midst of all the emotional turmoil that followed the Paris attacks, I started to wonder whether media technology has made us numb to politics, and instead passively satisfied with misinformation and metadebates about social media behaviour. I am a strong believer in media for social change, but at that point, as I was pulling out my hair in front of the screen, I really needed someone to restore my faith in humanity.

Hope often comes to me in a scattered way, and usually manifests itself in human encounters. I like to call it ‘the human touch’. Thankfully, at LSE I have encountered many people who radiate their passion and enthusiasm. People who are here because they feel that they have something to contribute. [Antonella Notari Vischer](#) was one of them.

[Antonella Notari Vischer – Womanity Foundation](#) from [Polis Video](#) on [Vimeo](#).

After eighteen years working with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) (and studying the MSc Media and Communications at LSE), Antonella is now head of the [Womanity Foundation](#), a Swiss philanthropic foundation established in 2005 by Yann Borgstedt. investing in women’s rights and women empowerment.

In her Polis talk, Antonella Notari Vischer shared the experience of a career she has undertaken with ‘intuitive intelligence’. Here are a few things she told me in an interview on the topic of media for social change.

Social change in practice: choose your partner wisely

Often criticized for being top-down, or participatory but not really empowering, development projects are not all about rainbows and peace signs. Development is a complex endeavour that requires a critical eye, and a creative mind.

Notari insists on the importance of ‘being really serious about partnerships’ in development projects. Feedback from partners is critical: you need to allow space for their inputs, and more importantly, you have to be receptive and ready to change your own assumptions and approach to the project. It is in the exchange, she says, that positive things can happen. The Womanity foundation partners with social enterprises like [Radio Nisaa](#) in the Palestinian Territories, a female-led radio station addressing women’s rights and their role in society. From Antonella’s experience, social entrepreneurs are “deeply knowledgeable about the problems they seek to address, and driven and passionate about the solutions they propose” – they know what they need to succeed.

We see our role as helping them in developing the capacities of their teams, the structures and the tools they need to scale up the programme, in order to increase the impact that they have and create systemic change.

Partnership is a co-creative process.

But what about the power dynamics of such partnerships? There is an embedded imbalance in the grantee/grant maker relationship. If the grant receiver's financial situation is fragile, there may be a temptation to 'please the grant maker in order to get the funding'. Womanity tries to avoid this situation by not giving grants directly to the organization, but instead funding capacity building; technical expertise and support.



Photo Credit: Farzana Wahidy for Womanity, Advancing girls' education in Afghanistan

New technologies in development: a force for good?

ICT in development is 'the next big thing', but unleashing the potential of technologies without creating undesirable side effects can be a challenging task.

Teaching high-school girls in Afghanistan how to code is one of Womanity's most recent projects. Of course, teaching ICT skills can be tricky in certain locations where you have no electricity or internet connection. Infrastructure certainly has to come first, but in Notari's words, you also have to anticipate the fast-paced development of infrastructures and services. Some industries are already 'screaming for ICT skills', and job openings requiring ICT capabilities are the fastest growing on the Afghan employment market. For girls to have career opportunities they need to possess such skills. Women's employment can be the entry point to a virtuous development circle, one that paves the way for capable women in leadership positions.

There are still challenges to be faced: one of them being language, knowing that girls who speak English have an advantage. Moreover, the media and ICT industries are gender-biased, and too often women are kept out of it because it 'gives them too much freedom'.

Measuring the impact of a development project is also a challenge. In development, Facebook likes won't tell you much. Audience polls can be an effective way of measuring attitude change but you need to take the audience's opinion into account, not just their participation.

What about mediatization? Mediation? Mediality? And all the confusing terms encountered in theories?

By now you probably have gathered, 'media' is not just about the media.

Beyond the technology itself, it is important to look for ways in which media and communications are influencing the very nature of social change. According to Antonella Notari Vischer, technologies have enabled a new kind of interaction with the beneficiaries of social development programs. You are now getting their valuable feedback – and this is new for NGOs. Could we then say that social change is more inclusive? That's for you to discuss in your seminar groups, or at the pub.

At a crossroads between education and career? Keep calm.

If there is one thing you need to take away from Antonella's talk, it is the following:

Figure out what you're passionate about and get very good at it. Reading, meeting people, talking to people, getting the information and the knowledge. And then from that position: produce, write about it, talk about it, and make it known that you have something to contribute in that field.

And finally: "Ask yourself where you will perform best, and have fun while doing it."

As for me, I have to admit, sometimes studying at the LSE can feel like you're looking for a black cat in a dark room – you keep bumping into things and you're not exactly sure what to look for. But I guess my advice is to keep looking until you hear the 'meow', listen carefully and see where it takes you.

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