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Media and the representation of gender

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Image and reality

“How can the media be changed? How can we free women from the tyranny of media messages limiting their lives to hearth and home?” Media sociologist Gaye Tuchman ends her celebrated essay “The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media” with these two questions (Tuchman 1978: 38). Straightforward, confident, and unambiguous, from today’s vantage point the questions may seem naïve in their formulation. Yet in essence they encapsulate the concerns that continue to drive much feminist media analysis around the world almost four decades later. Despite enormous transformations in national and global media landscapes, and the development of infinitely more sophisticated approaches to media analysis and theorizing, the fundamental issues remain those that preoccupied Tuchman and her colleagues: power, values, representation, and identity.

Feminist cultural politics is a common thread running through much work on image and representation, from its origins to the present. The edited collection Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media, in which Tuchman’s “symbolic annihilation” essay appears, was motivated by “an interest in the progress we are making toward the full social equality of women” and by “the rise of the women’s movement” (Kaplan Daniels 1978: v). These early analyses argued that the US media are deeply implicated in the patterns of discrimination operating against women in society—patterns which, through the absence, trivialization or condemnation of women in media content, amounted to their “symbolic annihilation.” The term, originally coined by George Gerbner in 1972, became a powerful and widely used metaphor to describe the ways in which media images make women invisible. This mediated invisibility, it was argued, is achieved not simply through the non-representation of women’s points of view or perspectives on the world. When women are “visible” in media content, the manner of their representation reflects the biases and assumptions of those who define the public—and therefore the media—agenda.

Much of this early work attempted to establish the extent to which media content departed from “reality.” Some of the earliest analysis was driven by personal experience. In the early 1960s, former magazine journalist Betty Friedan, introducing
her study of how the cultural definition of femininity in the USA shifted between the 1940s and 1950s, explained: “There was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique” (Friedan 1963: 9). A decade later, more systematic studies of basic stereotypes were providing a basis from which to argue that the media provided idealized versions of femininity that were “false.” For instance, the editors of Hearth and Home concluded: “Televised images of women are in large measure false, portraying them less as they really are, more as some might want them to be” (Franzwa 1978: 273).

Despite the use of terms that today we might find lack nuance, these early studies were not necessarily as unsophisticated as they are sometimes characterized. The notion that women were being portrayed “as some might want them to be” theorizes the media as part of a system “that cultivates the images fitting the established structure of social relations,” a system whose function is to create cultural resistance to change—in this case, change in the status of women (Gerbner 1978: 46–8). Gerbner identifies three main tactics of resistance to change used in media imagery of women—discrediting, isolating, and undercutting. He says that the result is a “counterattack on the women’s movement as a social force for structural change” (1978: 50). Betty Friedan, too, was concerned with the interplay between media images, social change, and gender identity. Asking why the “spirited New Woman” who dominated women’s magazines of the 1940s had, by the 1950s, given way to the “happy Housewife Heroine,” while, over the same period, educational and employment opportunities for middle-class white American women had greatly expanded, she concluded: “When a mystique is strong, it makes its own fiction of fact. It feeds on the very facts which might contradict it, and seeps into every corner of culture” (Friedan 1963: 53). What many of these early studies were grappling with, without naming it as such, was the ideological role of the media.

**Ideology and representation**

In many respects the contemporary field of feminist media scholarship looks vastly different from the relatively straightforward terrain occupied by the “women and media” studies of the 1970s and 1980s. The inadequacies of studies that conflate the condition of white, heterosexual, middle-class women with the condition of all women are now acknowledged, and contemporary media research has tried to grapple with more complex understandings of gender identity and experience. As Marsha Houston has put it:

> Women of color do not experience sexism in addition to racism, but sexism in the context of racism; thus they cannot be said to bear an additional burden that white women do not bear, but to bear an altogether different burden from that borne by white women.

(Houston 1992: 49)

Most early studies of “women and media” had analyzed only women’s representation, thereby appearing to assume that the representation of men’s experience was
unproblematic. As feminist media critique developed and deepened, it became clear that masculinity was also represented in quite specific ways in media content. Rosalind Gill contends that studies of masculinities developed as a direct result of feminism’s critique, literally “transforming research on women and media into something that is properly about gender and media” (2007: 32; see also Carter 2012).

The crossing of intellectual and disciplinary boundaries that characterizes much of today’s work can actually be traced back to some of most creative points of departure in feminist media studies. As far back as 1977 Noreen Janus critiqued the theoretical shortcomings of white, middle-class, liberal research into “sex-role stereotypes.” Janus advocated more holistic studies of media content, allied with analyses of the economic imperatives of the media industries and with studies of the perceptions of different audience groups, and the linking of media-related questions to other kinds of social analysis. This type of integrated interdisciplinary research agenda will seem familiar to many feminist media scholars today. Yet its implementation has demanded the location and articulation of a distinct feminist voice. This has involved a difficult and protracted struggle to achieve intellectual legitimacy within the general field of media and communication studies (see Gallagher 2003).

A move towards analyses of the socioeconomic contexts of media structures and processes during the 1990s signaled feminism’s recognition that media representations and gender discourses take shape within particular, and changing, socioeconomic formations which must themselves be analyzed and understood. Indeed, one of feminism’s significant contributions to the overall field has been its emphasis on the relationship between gender and class. The interplay between gender and class in the creation of contemporary consumerist identities was central to much feminist scholarship of the 1990s (for example Basu 2001; Nag 1991). By demonstrating how, in an era of globalizing capitalism, “middle-class women in particular are at the epicentre of the unfolding struggle over the terms of (the) transition” towards consumer modernity, feminist research provided an important entry point for a revitalized and urgently needed class analysis of contemporary change in the organization of communications and culture (Murdock 2000: 24). For instance, studies of the effects of the German unification process on media structures and content noted a new emphasis on women as mothers and housewives, although in the former German Democratic Republic media portrayals generally depicted women as capable of combining paid employment and family life (Rinke 1994). Data from Central and Eastern Europe suggested that the transformations of 1989 and the adaptation of the media to market-oriented demands resulted in previously absent representations of women that emphasized sexuality, mixing entrenched patriarchal conventions with new sexist language and images (Ibroscheva and Stover 2012; Zabelina 1996; Zarkov 1997).

Going beyond the issue of socioeconomic formations, feminists also grappled with the wider concept of political ideology, focusing on how women’s representation is frequently a site on which wider, public meanings are inscribed. At the simplest level, it is clear that in all parts of the world, at different times in history, representations and images of women have been used as symbols of political aspirations and social change. An obvious example was the widespread use of particular asexual, “emancipated” female images in Soviet culture: the confident, sturdy woman on her tractor, on the farm, or in the factory. Images of this kind reflected an idealized political
vision: “the social realist tradition was intended to create an ideal reality and utilized this model to portray the exemplary woman of the radiant Communist future” (Lipovskaya 1994: 124; see also Ibroscheva and Stover 2012). In such a situation female imagery becomes a metaphor for a particular political ideology, rather than a representation of women’s lives.

A clear contemporary example of these political and ideological tensions is to be found in media representations of veiled Muslim women (see Jiwani 2005; Macdonald 2006). In the wake of 9/11, images of women in chadors, burqas, and hijabs proliferated in the Western media. Feminist analysis has focused on how these images have been used to justify wars of “liberation” in Afghanistan and Iraq (Stabile and Kumar 2005; Winegar 2005). Evelyn Alsultany has analyzed these images in terms of its “ideological work” in justifying political agendas and the so-called war on terror (2012). She argues that apparently sympathetic representations of oppressed Muslim women feed a public sense of outrage:

If we are outraged at the treatment of the oppressed Muslim woman, we are far more likely to support U.S. interventions in Muslim countries in the name of saving the women. ... This highly mediated evocation of outrage for the plight of the oppressed Muslim woman inspires support of U.S. interventions against Muslim men and barbaric Islam.

(Alsultany 2012: 99)

Alsultany concludes that media representations of Muslim women and Muslim men are “mirror images” of one another, encouraging public sympathy for the former and moral disengagement from the latter. Crucial to the impact of these “simplified complex representations,” she argues, is the way in which discourses of multiculturalism and feminism have been co-opted by the media and by political institutions. This co-optation, she contends, has “helped to form a new kind of racism, one that projects antiracism and multiculturalism on the surface but simultaneously produces the logics and affects necessary to legitimize racist policies and practices” (Alsultany 2012: 16).

Feminist discourse and media empowerment

The “tyranny of media messages” against which pioneers of feminist criticism railed has, over the past half-century, given way to something infinitely more complex and sophisticated. Contemporary media content frequently draws on and invokes feminism itself, and feminist vocabulary, in a “post-feminist” discourse implying that feminism has been “taken into account” (McRobbie 2009: 12). The result is a paradox. On the one hand, ostensibly feminism has become part of the cultural field. On the other, modern media narratives frequently present feminism as irrelevant to today’s social struggles, and indeed as something to be repudiated—albeit often in a humorous or ironic tone, which of course makes feminist counter-critique particularly difficult (Gill 2007: 268).

With few exceptions, however, feminist discourse in the media remains conservative. Relying heavily on notions of women’s individual choice, empowerment and personal
freedom, it fits perfectly within a vocabulary of neoliberalism. Cultural theorist Angela McRobbie describes this as “disarticulation”—a process which, through its insistent focus on female individualism and consumerism, unpicks the seams of connection between groups of women who might find common cause, and “makes unlikely the forging of alliances, affiliations or connections,” whether locally, nationally, or internationally (2009: 26). This analysis is shared by feminist theorist Nancy Fraser, who distinguishes between feminism as a social movement and feminism as discourse (2009). In the context of neoliberal capitalism, Fraser argues, feminism in the discursive sense has “gone rogue.” As a result, today’s feminist movement is “increasingly confronted with a strange shadowy version of itself, an uncanny double that it can neither simply embrace nor wholly disavow” (Fraser 2009: 114).

These twenty-first-century paradoxes and contradictions—in particular the incorporation of feminist ideas into media discourse—oblige feminists to confront the question of how, despite apparent changes, media images and representations intertwine with political and social ideologies to reaffirm relatively stable gender positions in society. For although media narratives regularly suggest that the struggles launched by the women’s movement of the 1970s are no longer relevant, no country in the world has achieved gender equality. The 2012 Global Gender Gap Report, which since 2006 has measured progress on tackling gender gaps in health, education, economic and political participation, found that in 13 of the 111 countries for which it had data (12 percent), the overall gender gap has actually widened since 2006 (Hausmann et al. 2012: 17).

This tension between the lived experience of inequality and its representation in the media is as obvious today as it was 50 years ago. For example, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), which acknowledged the media as one of 12 “critical areas of concern” that stand in the way of gender equality, was a breakthrough. It moved beyond the concept of women’s “advancement” (within taken-for-granted, existing structures) as expressed in earlier international documents, to that of women’s “empowerment” (implying the potential to transform those structures). The empowerment of women, as advocated in the BPfA, is a radical demand. It depends on “the full realization of all human rights and fundamental freedoms of all women” (United Nations 1995: para. 9). Yet in the years after Beijing the concept was soon emptied of its radical essence. Empowerment became “the word of the moment” across a range of social and political institutions, including the media.

It is a stripped-out, neutered version of “women’s empowerment” that we find in a great deal of contemporary media discourse, which explicitly equates empowerment with sexual assertiveness, buying power, and individual control. For instance, the Dove “Campaign for Real Beauty,” devised by advertising agency Ogilvie & Mather, in its later stages involved online contests that promised women “empowerment” and “creative control” by contributing their own advertisements to promote the Dove Supreme Cream Oil Body Wash (Duffy 2010). In this highly conservative version of empowerment, which chimes fully with the neoliberal economic model, gender equality becomes confused with individual “lifestyle” choices. Told that “you have the power to be what you want to be,” the modern media woman responds logically: “Today, I decided to stop being fat. My decision. My weight loss” (Lazar 2006: 510). The false-feminist rhetoric in these exhortations to exercise “choice”
gives the illusion of progress, while reaffirming the age-old centrality of the female body in media discourse.

As for feminist discourse, this has been incorporated in various ways across all media genres—from advertising to newspapers to television. Analyzing those global patterns of incorporation is central to a large body of contemporary feminist scholarship (for example Ball 2012; Mendes 2012; Bucciferro 2012). These developments have resulted in a vast diversity of media content which, in terms of the challenge it presents for critical practice, is immeasurably more complicated than that which confronted the first feminist media scholars.

**Activism, scholarship, and change**

In the final part of her groundbreaking study of gender and media, Rosalind Gill turns to the issue of feminist cultural politics. Recalling the strategies of activism used in the 1970s and 1980s, she asks what kind of strategies would be appropriate for critiquing contemporary media representations. It is a difficult question to answer, and Gill concludes that “only by understanding the dynamics of contemporary sexism will we know which political tools might be useful” (Gill 2007: 270). Yet neither the sophistication of today’s media scholarship, nor the complexity of representations in today’s media, need produce a sense of futility in the search for change.

Feminism is a “double-edged” social movement—both an interest group that struggles for change and an intellectual force that challenges cultural definitions (van Zoonen 1994: 152). This means that feminists may engage with the media in ways that appear to be completely unconnected but that can inform each other within a shared political framework. The connections are important, but as yet have been insufficiently explored. Carolyn Byerly notes that feminist media scholarship has tended to ignore “the process of struggle represented by women’s media activism,” arguing that this must be examined if the “dialectical nature of gender relations with respect to the media” is to be fully understood (2012: 15).

In their study of women’s media activism in 20 countries, Carolyn Byerly and Karen Ross (2006) identify a number of “pathways” through which women’s agency has opened up spaces for change in the media. This, they argue, is part of a broader political process in which women media activists envisage a world in which “women’s influence shapes everything from culture to social policy, advancing women in the process” (2006: 232). For instance, “women’s movement media” have certainly played a crucial role in women’s struggle around the world. Part of a global networking, consciousness-raising, and knowledge-creation project, they have allowed women to communicate through their own words and images. Women’s radio has been immensely important in this project and, with the possibilities opened up by internet radio, can make new connections between local and global feminist struggles (Mitchell 2004). Women’s news services on the web—Women’s eNews, World Pulse, Women’s News Network, Women’s Views on News, to name but a few—have introduced content and opinions different from those found in “mainstream” media. There are also signs that policymaking, one of the most intractable areas for feminists, can respond to sustained activist effort. A number of recent pieces of
legislation—for example in Spain and Latin America—include provisions to restrain media content that encourages violence against women and, in an innovative departure for legislators, the concept of “symbolic violence” has been included in Argentina’s 2009 Law on Violence Against Women (see Gallagher 2011).

Another important development has been the use of media monitoring as a tool in the pursuit of accountability. There is nothing new about media monitoring. It was one of the earliest strategies used by the National Organization for Women (NOW) as part of its 1970s campaign to file “petitions-to-deny” the license renewals of local television stations across the USA on grounds of discrimination against women (Perlman 2007). In the 1980s and 1990s activists in many countries began to monitor gender representation in their media, at both national and local levels (Gallagher 2001). Mobilization around these issues grew in the early 1990s, coalescing in what was to become one of the most far-reaching collective enterprises of the global women’s movement—the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP). Conceived in 1994, the plan was to monitor the representation of women and men in the news on television, radio, and the press on one “ordinary” day, in the widest possible range of countries. The results of the first study were released at the 1995 Beijing Conference.

The significance of the GMMP has been enormous. The monitoring has been repeated every five years, with the number of participant countries increasing from 71 in 1995 to 108 in 2010. Over that period the percentage of women in the news was found to increase from 17 percent to just 24 percent, with very little variation across different regions. Global, longitudinal studies like the GMMP are rare. They are important because they can show how patterns of inequality change over time and across continents (Ross and Carter 2011: 1161). However, the GMMP is unprecedented in terms of not simply its geographical scope, but also its execution. From scholars and researchers, to activists and lobbyists, to journalists and other media professionals—some with considerable research experience, others with none—groups and individuals from a wide spectrum of backgrounds have taken part. The GMMP is thus much more than a data-collection exercise. By putting simple but reliable monitoring tools in the hands of activists, and developing media literacy and advocacy skills through the monitoring process, it aims to be genuinely transformational.

In their analysis of the ways in which transnational networks try to bring about change, Keck and Sikkink (1998) identify four commonly used strategies: information politics, symbolic politics, leverage politics, and accountability politics. The GMMP combines all four (see Gallagher forthcoming). Accountability politics is at the heart of the GMMP. The consistency of its findings over time, along with the regularity of the monitoring exercise, gives activists a powerful rationale for periodically reminding media professionals and decision-makers of policy commitments, obligations to their audiences, or statements of support for gender equality—and for pressuring them to review their practices.

While the media activist approach may seem to sit uneasily with that of methodologically sophisticated feminist scholarship, each must be considered in terms of the different interpretations and understandings of media content that it aims to produce. Since the earliest days there has been a continuous process of push and
pull between theorizing, research, and activism in feminist media criticism. This is one of the field’s great strengths, sustaining a political dimension whose commitment to change—whether explicit or implicit—is integral to its identity.

References


