

PART ONE

Foundations

Feminist Media Perspectives

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Feminist media scholarship has emerged as one of the richest and most challenging intellectual projects within the field of media and cultural studies over the past twenty-five years. The range, complexity and transdisciplinarity of feminist media studies today bears little resemblance to the fledgling body of work that began to appear in the 1970s. Nevertheless one common thread underpins feminist media theory and criticism from its origins to the present. The defining characteristic of this body of work is its explicitly political dimension.

With its substantial project, it is the reciprocal relation between theory, politics and activism, the commitment of feminist academics to have their work contribute to a larger feminist goal (however defined), the blurred line between the feminist as academic and the feminist as activist, that distinguishes feminist perspectives on the media from other possible perspectives. (van Zoonen, 1991, p. 34)

It was indeed a political impetus that first shaped the academic agenda of feminist media analysis. One starting point for Western feminists was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), with its searing critique of the mass media. At a global level the United Nations International Decade for Women (1975–85) was a catalyst for debate about the many sites of women's subordination, while the media's role as a specific source of oppression was documented in reviews initiated by UNESCO (Ceulemans and Fauconnier, 1979; Gallagher, 1981). These early analyses found the media to be 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” (Tuchman, 1978). That general critique quickly came to be positioned around two central axes: an analysis of the structures of power in which women are systematically subordinated; and a focus on the politics of representation and the production of knowledge in which women are objects rather than active subjects. These two concerns were

addressed in many studies of the late 1970s and early 1980s as problems of “women in the profession” and “images of women in the media.” But they have gradually come together to produce a complex analysis of the structure and process of representation, the cultural and economic formations that support these, the social relations that produce gendered discourse, and the nature of gendered identity.

In many respects the contemporary field of feminist media scholarship looks vastly different from the relatively straightforward terrain occupied by most “women and media” studies of the early 1980s. For instance, initial classifications of feminist media scholarship into categories – socialist, radical, liberal, cultural – designed to highlight its particular theoretical and/or political orientation (Steeves, 1987; van Zoonen, 1991) soon seemed inadequate to depict the “variety and intermingledness of feminist theory” (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 13). In fact, the crossing of intellectual and disciplinary boundaries that characterizes much of today’s work can be traced back to some of the most creative points of departure in feminist media studies. For instance, as far back as 1977 Noreene 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 territory to many feminist media scholars today. Yet its implementation has demanded the location and articulation of a distinct feminist voice outside the framework of male-defined binary oppositions that characterise Western intellectual work (see Valdivia, 1995). It has required feminist media scholars to “create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms from another perspective – a view from ‘elsewhere’” (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 25).

This has involved a difficult and protracted struggle to achieve intellectual legitimacy within the general field of media and communication studies. An early testimony from the Women’s Studies Group at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in England, speaks to the enormity of the enterprise:

We found it extremely difficult to participate . . . and felt, without being able to articulate it, that it was a case of the masculine domination of both intellectual work and the environment in which it was being carried out. Intellectually, our questions were still about “absences.” (Women’s Studies Group, 1978, p. 10)

Twenty five years later, defining and realizing a feminist approach to the study of media remains a sometimes painful venture for those who must “teach against the text” (Rakow, 2001a, p. 383; see also Valdivia, 2001 and Eaton, 2001).

Redefining the Field: Whose Feminism, What Scholarship?

Charlotte Brunson, a member of the CCCS Women's Studies Group, later reflected on the intellectual limitations imposed by "the notion of a women's studies group which is 'filling in the gaps' in an already existing analysis, and which has a kind of 'what about women' public presence" (Brunson 1976, quoted in 1996, p. 283). Such limitations had a general effect on the initial direction taken by feminist media scholarship, much of which was indeed concerned to "fill in the gaps" in communication studies by identifying areas that had been ignored or rendered invisible by the field's traditional categories of enquiry (see Rakow, 1992). Gradually issues such as the mediation of male violence, sexuality, pornography, language as control, verbal harassment, the body, beauty, consumerism, fashion, and the study of "women's genres" – magazines, soap opera, melodrama and romance – were brought onto the agenda. A more fundamental revisioning, which would have an impact on communication research methods – particularly in terms of the relation of the researcher to the subject of study – also emerged, as new strands of feminism began to modify the original feminist critique of the media.

Early feminist theory had emphasised the commonalities of women's oppression, neglecting profound differences between women in terms of class, age, sexuality, religion, race and nation. As its exclusionary nature became evident, the collective "we" of feminism was called into question. The inadequacies of feminist theorizing that conflated the condition of white, heterosexual, middle-class women with the condition of all women were highlighted in North America by black and Latina feminists (hooks, 1981; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981), in Britain by black and Asian feminists (Amos and Parmar, 1984), and by the analyses of lesbian feminists (Lont and Friedley, 1989). Such critiques evoked the concepts of "interlocking identities" and "interlocking oppressions". Black women's experience of sexism, to take one example, could not be conceived as separable from their experience of racism:

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, p. 49)

Related and more radical analyses came from feminist scholars in the Third World, where quite different agendas were called for (Bhasin and Khan, 1986). These critiques highlighted the irrelevance of Western feminism's analytical frameworks to the lives of most women around the world, and attempted to reposition feminist debate within broader social, economic and cultural contexts of analysis advocated by scholars such as Janus (1977).

We are not just concerned with how women are portrayed in the media or how many women work in the media. We are also concerned about what kinds of lives they lead, what status they have, and what kind of society we have. The answers to these questions will determine our future strategies for communication and networking. Communication alternatives therefore need to emerge from our critique of the present world order and our vision of the future. (Bhasin, 1994, p. 4)

Such critiques spoke from a post-colonial position, in which the self-assumed authority of Western feminists to speak about – or indeed for – others was disputed and de-centred. Influential accounts of the tendencies of a masculinist-imperialist ideological formation to construct a “monolithic ‘third-world woman’” (Spivak, 1988, p. 296), discursively constituted as the universal victim of Third World patriarchy (Mohanty, 1984), challenged feminists to “unlearn” their privilege and to deconstruct their own authority as intellectuals (Ganguly, 1992). These positions appeared to question the legitimacy of “outside intervention” of any kind, whether intellectual or political.

Although subsequently attenuated by Third World scholars anxious to move beyond standpoints that threatened to mark all feminist politics as either inauthentic or unnecessary (Sunder Rajan, 1993, p. 35), they were enduringly influential in highlighting a fundamental methodological issue in feminist media studies. This issue, which turned on an interrogation of questions of “identity” and “authority” in feminist media criticism, was to affect the ways in which feminist scholars approached and represented their work, particularly in studies of media content and media audiences.

Identity, Position and Authority

After many years in the academy, I am beginning to feel that I can question some words, such as pleasure and resistance. Why do some scholars talk endlessly about pleasure and the text? I more usually encounter frustration. Why do I read about resistance in every corner when I see more of the same and less of the different? Why do my spectatorship positions continue to be ignored or spoken for without research? (Valdivia, 2000, p. 3)

With this introduction to her volume of critical essays on the location – and locatedness – of Latinas and Latin American women in media culture – Angharad Valdivia speaks from several positions: as a Latina whose experience of popular culture does not easily “fit” within interpretations of audience reception that assume a white, middle-class, Anglo-American subject; as a scholar who brings that experience into play in questioning some of the most influential ideas within the feminist canon; as an individual whose personal story openly and candidly informs her analyses and theoretical starting points. Within the essays themselves, Valdivia sometimes inhabits more specific speaking positions – for example mother, researcher, consumer, citizen. These shifting but inter-related positions,

rooted in day-to-day experience, exemplify well the tension and fluctuating nature of identity that has been argued in more abstract terms by feminist theorists such as Rosi Braidotti:

Speaking “as a feminist woman” does not refer to one dogmatic framework but rather to a knot of interrelated questions that play on different layers, registers, and levels of the self. . . . Feminist theory is a mode of relating thought to life. As such not only does it provide a critical standpoint to deconstruct established forms of knowledge, drawing feminism close to critical theory; it also establishes a new order of values within the thinking process itself, giving to the lived experience priority. (Braidotti, 1989, pp. 94–5)

Speaking “as a feminist woman,” or the expression of the “personal voice” in feminist intellectual work, has been partly inspired by a reluctance to speak inappropriately “for” others, or to endorse the grand narratives of communication theory that appeared to permit an impersonal, authoritative objectivity. But the personal voice within feminism is not to be confused with self-centred subjectivity. Historically, it was a route used by feminists to uncover the gendered nature of experience. Charlotte Brunsdon (2000) traces its first politically significant use to the process of “consciousness raising” frequently employed by the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s:

It involved the recounting, usually in closely monitored “turns”, by individuals in a group, of chosen experiences . . . This experience telling would provide the data for the group to work collectively to attempt to establish the gender paradigms of the experience. To attempt to see the individual experiences – e.g. of being fed up with always being the one who cleaned the bathroom – as both representative and symptomatic of a gendered rather than simply a personal experience. (p. 88)

If “the personal is the political” was the slogan used to describe this early insistence on the role of experience, contemporary feminist scholarship has gone further, offering accounts that problematize the links between the personal and the wider intellectual context (see Riley, 1992), and eventually using the personal as a means of interrogating theory – articulating a position from which “the personal is the theoretical” (Valdivia, 2000, p. 12).

This emphasis within feminism on a fluctuating, fragmented experience of identity as “position” has had an important impact on understanding, within media scholarship as a whole, of how media processes, texts and audiences should be conceptualized. As Ann Gray (1999) puts it, feminist work has demonstrated “how discourses flow in and out of constructions of identity, self, private and public, national, local and global. Boundaries, thus, are permeable, unstable and uneasy” (p. 31). Similarly, the feminist commitment to rendering visible female experience and agency has quite profound epistemological consequences that prove “troublesome” in a field that remains stubbornly gendered (p. 23). The relationship between the researcher and the subject of research has been a

recurrent issue, particularly in feminist ethnographic work on media and culture. The feminist researcher is aware of – indeed may regard as determining – her own position within her field of study. For example, Ann Gray herself, in an early study of the gendered use of home video, speaks plainly about a “class-based” identification with the women in her research:

I consider this shared position as quite crucial to the quality of the conversations that I had with the women and that the talk that ensued was, in most instances, enriched by that shared knowledge. To put it quite directly, I am a woman in my study. (1992, p. 34)

In fact, as Gray later reflected, “being a woman” in relation to the women in her study was much more ambiguous than she initially suggested. In retrospect, she recounts a complex interplay of gender, class and ethnicity in the production of meanings from her conversations with these women (Gray, 1995). Recognition of the different subject positions between researcher and researched, and the inherent power differential in this relationship, is a theme in much feminist media criticism. The relationship is further complicated by the contradictory positions of the researcher as “one of the group” and as “authority,” a tension which is often acknowledged in self-reflexive accounts of the research process. Describing her research with fans of a British crime drama, Lyn Thomas admits being split between a conscious intention to behave as “neutral facilitator” of the discussion and the desire to switch to “fellow fan” mode. As she remarks:

The combination of being one of the group some of the time and in the powerful position of teacher/researcher the rest means that the cultural agenda which I set is likely to play a significant role in the development of the discussion. (1995, p. 12)

For instance, Thomas recounts how the only man in the group seemed concerned to make an impression on the others and even to obtain a dominant position. She continues: “I certainly saw keeping Jim under control and sabotaging his attempts at dominance as an important part of my role as discussion facilitator” (p. 14). Here Thomas echoes Ellen Seiter’s (1990) analysis of how the power differentials between researcher and interviewee may be played out through class differences in the interview, and may then be obscured by the way in which the interview is written up. These and other feminist accounts (for example Walkerdine, 1986; Gillespie, 1995; Seiter, 1999) choose to problematize methodological issues and in particular the role of the researcher. In doing so, they destabilize ideas of objective investigation and authoritative findings. The “voice” that emerges through much contemporary feminist media research is therefore characterized by a high degree of self-reflexivity, which problematizes the relations between researcher and researched. Valerie Walkerdine (1986) has drawn attention to the material significance of these relations, pointing out that the interpretations produced by research are not simply rooted in an abstract struggle

over meanings or values. They are, she argues, a “struggle about power with a clear material effectivity. One might therefore ask how far it is possible for the observer to ‘speak for’ the observed” (p. 191).

Speaking about Women: Approaches to Media Content

The question of how women are “spoken for” or “spoken about” is at the heart of the feminist critique of media content and its implication in the construction of gender. Within feminist scholarship the debate has moved on since the quantitative content analyses of “sex-roles and stereotypes” that typified the mainly North American research of the 1970s. Nevertheless, studies of this kind are still carried out, and they remain important in recording some of the basic elements in a very complex situation.

In an ambitious global monitoring exercise, women from 71 countries studied their news media for one day in January 1995. More than 15,500 stories were analyzed, and the results were dramatic. Only 17 percent of the world’s news subjects (news-makers or interviewees in news stories) were women (MediaWatch, 1995). The proportion of female news subjects was lowest in Asia (14 percent) and highest in North America (27 percent). Women were least likely to be news subjects in the fields of politics and government (7 percent of all news subjects in this field) and economy or business (9 percent). They were most likely to make the news in terms of health and social issues (33 percent) or in the field of arts and entertainment (31 percent). The results of a second global monitoring project, carried out in 70 countries in February 2000, suggested that the news world might have been standing still for five years. On that day women accounted for just 18 percent of news subjects (Spears et al., 2000). The degree of concordance between the main results from the two global monitoring projects was remarkable, though hardly surprising. The embedded, gendered nature of news values and news selection processes is such that the overall patterns detected by quantitative monitoring are unlikely to change appreciably even over the medium term.

Yet apart from the statistics, the qualitative analysis in the 2000 global media monitoring project showed a striking absence of female voices in news items that concerned women in very specific ways. For example, stories that covered plans to establish a Family Court in Jamaica, the high abortion rate among teenagers in Scotland, women’s rights to seek divorce in Egypt, maternity plans in Northern Ireland, the punishment of women for marital infidelity in Turkey – these were just some of the cases where the exclusion of any women’s point of view seemed blatantly negligent. This tendency to ignore women or – at best – to speak about, rather than to or through women, demonstrates a very real and contemporary absence of women’s voices in the media, and the profound lack of attention paid by the media to the telling of women’s stories generally.

The limitations of such studies have long been clear (see Ang and Hermes, 1991; van Zoonen, 1991). However, particularly at the global level, work in this tradition contributes to the documentation of persistent patterns of exclusion. The data it generates has provided feminists with straightforward arguments with which to challenge media whose mandates include a requirement to promote pluralism and balance (see Gallagher, 2001). While this approach may seem to sit uneasily with that of methodologically sophisticated textual analysis, the two approaches should be considered in terms of the different interpretations and understandings of media content that each aims to produce. For if the broad sweep of media monitoring is directed primarily towards giving women a “voice” in the world of the media, the intense focus of feminist textual analysis has developed at least partly with the intent of giving a “voice” to women within media scholarship itself (see Brunson, D’Acci, and Spigel, 1997, pp. 8–10).

The “high culture–mass culture” debate is familiar territory within media studies, where the “mass” is invariably explained as a pejorative referent for (lower) “class” cultural preferences. However, as Huyssen (1986) demonstrates, the high culture–mass culture dichotomy is also permeated by considerations of gender. Europe’s late nineteenth-century industrial revolution and cultural modernization, he argues, coincided with the first major women’s movement. Huyssen shows how turn-of-the-century political, psychological and aesthetic discourse consistently gendered mass culture and the masses as feminine, and thus inferior. This idea retained a position in much later theories of mass culture – as, for example, when Adorno and Horkheimer conjure up the fairy tale evil queen to claim that “mass culture, in her mirror, is always the most beautiful in the land” (quoted in Huyssen, 1986, p. 192).

The dichotomy that gendered mass culture as feminine and inferior has strongly patterned media criticism and analysis, which disregarded femininity, gender and sexuality in discussions of the “political.” Feminist critics rejected the dominant, narrow definition of the political in terms of “the market” or “public policy,” arguing that it must include a consideration of everyday life, domesticity and consumerism. It was within this context that feminist media scholars set out to “reclaim” the popular media of mass entertainment. As a result, genres such as romance, soap opera, sitcoms, popular drama and rock music became legitimate subjects for critical analysis. The extremely large body of work that developed over the 1980s and 1990s is one in which different critical approaches have become increasingly intertwined (for a comprehensive review, see Brunson, D’Acci, and Spigel, 1997). While some scholars have limited their work to textual analysis per se (for example, the close reading of narrative structures, iconography, symbolic codes and themes, and of the solicitation of pleasure, identification and subjectivity within the text), others have increasingly fused textual analysis with other approaches. For instance, studies of the discursive, social and institutional contexts in which the texts themselves are produced have looked at the historical and organizational imperatives and constraints that shape

female characters and audience interpretations of them. Studies of the context of reception have focused on how texts are viewed and interpreted in the framework of domestic and familial relations.

Despite these increasingly multi-layered analyses, until the mid-1990s a great deal of feminist criticism continued to focus on “feminine” genres within popular culture. Charlotte Brunsdon’s study (2000) of the development of research into television soap opera argues that the feminist approach to “feminine” genres such as soaps and romance not only was innovatory, but had a precise historical specificity. By studying a subaltern field feminist criticism struggled to address the issue of hierarchy within media research in a gendered way. For Brunsdon and the interviewees in her study – all pioneers of television soap research – it was the legitimization of the academic study of popular culture that was, in retrospect, feminism’s supreme innovation. Beyond this, however, Brunsdon argues that the feminist study of soaps provided the feminist intellectual with an original – though somewhat ambiguous – “speaking position” within the academy: “it is this, the production of positions, rather than the object of study as such, which was significant in the feminist encounter with soap operas” (p. 217).

Arguing the importance of a feminist move outside expertise in “subaltern” fields, Brunsdon concedes that such a move requires “the difficult production of new speaking positions” (p. 218). And indeed this proved to be a challenge for feminist media scholarship. For instance, the “public knowledge project” – analyses of “the media as an agency of public knowledge and ‘definitional’ power, with a focus on news and current affairs output and a direct connection with the politics of information and the viewer as citizen” (Corner, 1991, p. 268) – remained a blind spot in feminist media criticism throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Reflecting on the implications of this, Liesbet van Zoonen (1994) concluded:

The public knowledge project tends to become a new male preserve, concerned with ostensibly gender-neutral issues such as citizenship, but actually neglecting the problematic relation of non-white, non-male citizens to the public sphere. (p. 125)

The absence of a comprehensive feminist perspective on the full range of media genres and areas of representation – as Christine Geraghty put it, on “blue” as well as “pink” topics (Geraghty, 1996) – was one of two important areas of concern for feminist media scholars as the 1990s progressed. Another was the emphasis on questions of consumption as opposed to “the production of consumption” (McRobbie, 1997, p. 74). These two preoccupations, increasingly voiced in feminist writings in the course of the 1990s, evoked several of the foundational concepts of early feminism – the structural nature of power relations, socioeconomic exclusion, and the representation of gender in public discourse. Certain strands in recent feminist media research witness a re-engagement with those central questions of structure, ideology and agency.

Negotiating the Public–Private Division

Over the past two decades many feminist scholars have focused on gender representation in the news and other forms of journalism (for a useful review see Carter, Branston, and Allan, 1998, pp. 1–8). However until recently the interrelationships between gender, politics and communication have received relatively little attention (Sreberny and van Zoonen, 2000; see also Norris, 1997). The emerging picture is extremely complex. Women entering the political arena provide the news media with a problem. As women they embody a challenge to masculine authority. As active, powerful women they defy easy categorization. Often the media attempt to contain the threats they pose by trying to situate them as “women” rather than as “politicians.” Studies show that while the media emphasize the political record and experience of male politicians or political candidates, with women the focus is more on their family situation and their appearance. This pattern is true even in countries with a strong tradition of women in political office such as Finland (Koski, 1994), Norway (Skjeie, 1994) and Sweden (Börjesson, 1995). And while certain types of popular media tend to stress the family relationships of all politicians, men and women are not necessarily presented in the same way in terms of their families. For instance, van Zoonen (2000) found that the Dutch gossip press depicted the families of male politicians as a source of support, while for female politicians the family was portrayed as a source of conflict for women pursuing a political career.

When women disobey the rules of feminine behavior, they may be portrayed as “iron women,” aggressive or belligerent. South Africa’s Nkosazana Zuma is one example. Said to be the “antithesis of the obedient woman. Her position and her role have brought her into frequent and turbulent contact with the media. Zuma embodies all the qualities that are frequently admired in male politicians” (Media Monitoring Project, 1999, p. 165). Media coverage of such women at times shows clearly how parallel evaluations – of the politician and the woman – run side by side in a way that rarely occurs in the case of men. And while at one level journalists and editors may be aware that these evaluations lead to contradictory conclusions, at another level the framework is hard to resist. In their study of women in South African politics, the Media Monitoring Project illustrated how this dilemma can be simultaneously acknowledged and downplayed by the media. “Zuma has been one of the most effective cabinet ministers in the Mandela government” ran one national newspaper editorial (August 1, 1998). “It is precisely because of her strong character, and the fact that she feels very passionately about her job, that Zuma has attracted the kind of negative publicity that surrounds her.” Yet the editorial failed to compare Zuma’s treatment with that of male politicians with similar strength of character and passionate commitment. At the same time it distanced the media from the coverage of Zuma by labeling it as “publicity” rather than news reporting (*ibid.*).

Several studies of media coverage of Hillary Rodham Clinton demonstrate the force of traditional gender interpretations in slanting media coverage. As a “first lady” (wife of the incumbent president), she was constructed as a kind of “gender outlaw” because she stepped outside the conventional dichotomies of citizen and wife, public and private (Brown and Gardetto, 2000, p. 22). As a political candidate in her own right, she was depicted as over-ambitious and power-hungry. Only when portrayed as a victim, in the aftermath of her husband’s confession in the Monica Lewinsky case, did Hillary Rodham Clinton attract sustained sympathetic coverage from the media. This leads to a troubling conclusion: “we are to fear women with power, yet admire women with the status of victim” (Parry-Giles, 2000, p. 221). Other studies in the United States have found that the public seems to have a more positive attitude towards political candidates when they act in a way considered gender-appropriate (Chang and Hitchon, 1997) and that female politicians may actually choose to play to gender stereotypes (Kahn and Gordon, 1997). Indeed research in the United Kingdom shows that women in politics are conscious that the images and language used to describe them are different from those used to describe their male colleagues, and that this can have an impact on their ways of dealing with the media (Ross and Sreberny, 2000).

All of this adds up to a complicated scenario. For although it is clear that the image and language of politics as mediated by television, radio and the press “supports the status quo (male as norm) and regards women politicians as novelties” (Ross and Sreberny, 2000, p. 93), it is not at all clear how women can most effectively intervene in and change that system of mediation. Annabelle Sreberny and Liesbet van Zoonen (2000) point to a paradox in feminist attempts to break down the public–private division that characterizes gender definitions and relationships in social and political life.

[There is] a depressing stability in the articulation of women’s politics and communication . . . The underlying frame of reference is that women belong to the family and domestic life and men to the social world of politics and work; that femininity is about care, nurturance and compassion, and that masculinity is about efficiency, rationality and individuality. And whereas women’s political activities try to undermine just that gendered distinction between public and private, it seems to remain the inevitable frame of reference to understand it. (p. 17)

The implication is that by accepting the public vs. private divide as the framework through which gender differences are analyzed and interpreted, women help to confirm the very divisions that they seek to undermine. Nevertheless, a good deal of feminist activism in relation to the public sphere is motivated by a belief that women’s perspectives and agendas must be given more importance in politics, precisely so that current gender-based divisions in relation to public and private will be eroded (see Gallagher, 2001).

The Socioeconomic Framework, Ideology, and Representation

A broader move towards analyses of the socioeconomic contexts of media structures and processes responds to the concerns of critics who have regarded the post-structuralist feminist concentration on “words, symbols and discourses” as inadequate to an interpolation of the larger social structures of power, and as immobilizing to feminist activist politics (Steeves and Wasko, 2002; also Rakow, 2001b). As these critics point out, media representations and gender discourses take shape within particular, and changing, socioeconomic formations which must themselves be analyzed and understood. 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 suggest that the transformations of 1989, and the adaptation of the media to market-oriented demands have resulted in previously absent representations of women as sexual objects (Zarkov, 1997; Zabelina, 1996; Azhgikhina, 1995).

As economic ideologies change, so do media discourses and representations. In Asia, for example, the media in many countries have recently seen a spectacular transformation. Dozens of new commercial cable and satellite channels have proliferated, and the privatization of old state-run media has led to an explosion of new market-oriented content. Current research from this region highlights the tensions and conflicts that such changes introduce into representations of women. For instance, studies from India and Singapore point to the often contradictory ways in which the media and advertising are accommodating to women’s multiple identities in contemporary society. Images of the “new woman” as an independent consumer whose femininity remains intact, or as a hard-headed individualist, whose feminine side must be sacrificed, illustrate changing social and economic demands on women – whose “femaleness” nevertheless remains the core issue (Basu, 2001; Malhotra and Rogers, 2000; Munshi, 1998; Bajpai, 1997; Lee, 1998). Economic issues intersect with political analysis in a number of these studies. For instance Mankekar (1993) argues that Indian television of the early 1990s addressed upwardly mobile women as the prime market for consumer goods, while simultaneously trying to engage them in the project of constructing a national culture through television serializations of the great Indian mythological epics – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata – in which women’s role in the family, community and nation was depicted as cardinal. So the “liberties” of consumerism were in constant conflict with the duties of nation and family-building as presented in the televised epics.

Going beyond the issue of socioeconomic formations, therefore, some feminists have 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. As various recent commentators have pointed out, images of this kind never reflected existing reality: "the social realist tradition was intended to create an ideal reality and utilised this model to portray the exemplary woman of the radiant Communist future" (Lipovskaya, 1994, p. 124; see also Voronina, 1994; Azhgikhina, 1995).

In such a situation female imagery becomes a metaphor for a particular political ideology, rather than a representation of women's lives. In her analysis of the powerful media definitions of womanhood in revolutionary China, Elizabeth Croll (1995) argues that "imaging" actually became a substitute for living or experience:

The eyes of the billboard- or poster-women overlooked the foreground as if it was of no importance, and it frequently was blurred in pictorial representation. . . . If we combine this long-sighted distancing revolutionary gaze with its semantic equivalent, that is the language of rhetoric . . . then we have what might be called a "rhetorical gaze". The main characteristic of this rhetorical gaze is that it is separate from the experience of the body and its senses and ultimately denies it. In these circumstances women began to represent their own experience or permit their experience to be represented rhetorically in speech, picture and text as if the rhetoric constituted their experience. (p. 81)

The disjuncture between image and reality becomes profound when governments attempt to mobilize people for certain kinds of social change. In a retrospective analysis, Graham-Brown (1988) gives examples from post-independence Algeria and Nasser's Egypt, where "modernist" and westernized images of women were used as emblems of progress and enlightenment. In contemporary Egypt, according to Lila Abu-Lughod (1993), the ideological message of certain "national interest" television serials conflicts with the experience of life in particular communities. In all these accounts, women emerge as the "sacred markers of culture" (Basu, 2001, p. 184), a point well-illustrated in Dulali Nag's (1991) analysis of contemporary sari advertisements in Bengal. Designed to appeal to the urban, middle-class woman, these ads mingled images of rural utopias, the "high" culture of Bengali poets, and women's domesticity to conjure up a notion of "essential" Bengali tradition. Thus a discourse of modernist consumerism is filtered through the prism of a nostalgic national identity, with women at the center of both.

In his analysis of global shifts in the relations between capital and class, Murdock (2000) points out that emerging narratives of this kind – which reflect and contain several cross-cutting discourses – demonstrate how the meta-ideology

of cosmopolitan consumerism and its attendant “new” middle class stratum are both profoundly gendered. The interplay between gender and class in the creation of contemporary consumerist identities – identities that invoke both traditional cultural specificity and a modern, cosmopolitan self – is central to much feminist scholarship (Basu, 2001; Nag, 1991). Indeed this strand of work has lately begun to emerge as one of feminism’s significant contributions to the overall field of media and communication studies. For 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 provides an important entry point for a revitalized and urgently needed class analysis of contemporary change in the organization of communications and culture (Murdock, 2000, p. 24).

Connecting Feminist Theory, Research and Media Practice

The intellectual project that began so hesitantly in the 1970s around “women and media” issues very quickly developed into fully-fledged feminist theorizing. Through the 1980s and 1990s it moved through more complex understandings of power and its manifestations; of gender and identity – its situated, shifting, performative aspects; through ethnographies that brought a shift in the conceptualization of media processes, texts and audiences and the “leaky” boundaries between them; into postmodernism and its concern to throw into question the very notion of “subjecthood”; and on into the realm of cyberfeminism where the concept of the cyborg would transcend all dichotomies – including female/male – promising a genderless utopia. Where does this intellectual journey leave feminist media theory and practice today?

In her review of the contribution of feminist theory to communication studies Andrea Press (2000) distinguishes between the impact of feminism within the academy and in the wider world. On the first point she is optimistic, arguing that the insights of feminism “have made it impossible for us to proceed comfortably with business as usual” (p. 40). Yet it is difficult to find much empirical evidence for this. For instance, as Graham Murdock (2000) points out, despite the wealth of feminist writing on the inter-relationships between gender and class, most class analysts appear to be unable – or unwilling – to assimilate these insights within their existing models and theories (p. 20). Ann Gray (1999) too speaks of the “apparent impermeability of ‘male’ work to feminist scholarship” (p. 33), particularly in the traditionally gendered field of political economy in media studies. Here Murdock’s (2000) integration of feminist perspectives into his “reconstruction” of a class analysis of communication and culture in emerging capital formations is an illuminating exception.

A glance at most current textbooks and curriculae will bear out Ann Gray’s assertion that “feminist-inspired work is constantly kept at the margins of media

studies” (1999, p. 25). For example, introducing the rationale behind a recently published collection of essays for use in mass communication courses, Elizabeth Toth explains the need that she and her students felt to fill a gap:

The book took form, in recognition that most standard text-books did not discuss mass communication from the standpoints of gender and diversity. The books we looked at had an air of “objectivity” but no acknowledgement of whose objectivity and experience we were meant to believe. Because we were grappling with material that did not speak to our own gender and diversity, we thought others might have the same problems. (Toth & Aldoory, 2001, pp. viii–ix)

The uncanny resemblance between this contemporary account and that of the Women’s Studies Group of the CCCS (quoted at the beginning of this chapter) would seem to indicate that, despite the passage of twenty-five years, “business as usual” remains rather firmly entrenched within academic institutions. In fact, as Charlotte Brunsdon has pointed out, feminist media scholarship has been only semi-institutionalized within the academy. Brunsdon speaks of “academic parallel universes in which a space of difference is cultivated alongside, in opposition to and sometimes in dialogue with, the mainstream” (1997, p. 170). Speaking from this space of difference, feminist criticism thus remains “a subordinate field which although it has had to transform its own foundational category, ‘woman,’ and has produced a quite substantial literature still seems to have had remarkably little impact on the wider contours of the discipline” (p. 169).

But what of the impact of feminist scholarship in the wider world outside the academy (Press, 2000)? On this point Andrea Press is less positive, believing that the epistemological breakthroughs of feminist theory have yet to be transformed “into ones with actual political effects and impacts” (p. 40). Yet here it seems important, as Liesbet van Zoonen has reminded us, to make a clear distinction between the different struggles in which feminism is involved. It is a “double-edged” social movement: on the one hand, an interest group which lobbies and struggles for social and legal changes beneficial to women; on the other, an intellectual force that aims to challenge cultural “preoccupations and routines” concerning femininity and gender.

Undeniably, both struggles are political and inform each other, nevertheless, they are of a different kind resulting in different interactions with the media and different requirements of media performance. (1994, p. 152)

These “different interactions” and “different requirements” mean that feminism(s) may engage with media processes and developments in ways that appear to be completely unconnected but can in fact be understood within a shared political framework. Jenny Sundén (2001) gives a useful example of this when she explores how new information and communication technologies are conceptualized – and used – quite differently within two strands of cyberfeminism. One revolves around the sophisticated theoretical debates about identity, most obviously

epitomized by Donna Haraway's notion of the gender-less (or gender-free) cyborg. The other is linked to a concrete political movement to construct spaces for women within the structure of the Internet, and to develop women's global networking – thus insisting on the foundational nature of the very category “woman” that cyborg theory strives to abolish. But both approaches arise from a common search for cybersites of “difference” within the patriarchal structures of the Net. Sundén argues that this “doubleness” at the heart of feminism should be seen not as a divisive fault-line but as a dynamic force that can link very different women, in the sense that each “side” will embrace elements from the other. Or, to take van Zoonen's formulation, they will “inform each other” so that the boundaries of each are in constant movement.

This element of push and pull between theorizing, research and activism has been a constant feature of feminist media studies since the earliest days. Over the past twenty years women have not been content merely to denounce biases and inequities in the established media. Women have created and used countless alternative and participatory communication channels to support their struggles, defend their rights, promote reflection, diffuse their own forms of representation. Pilar Riaño (1994) argues that this process has made women the primary subjects of struggle and change in communication systems, by developing oppositional and proactive alternatives that influence language, representations and communication technologies.

Standing outside the mainstream, “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 enabled women to communicate through their own words and images. If print and publishing were initially the most widely used formats, in the past two decades other media such as music, radio, video, film and – increasingly – the new communication technologies have also been important. Over the same period, in most regions there has been a steady growth of women's media associations and networks, and an increase in the number of women working in mainstream media (many examples of such developments worldwide can be found in Gallagher and Quindoza-Santiago, 1994, and Allen, Rush, and Kaufman, 1996).

One of the most far-sighted of these initiatives was pioneered by Betty Friedan and the late Nancy Woodhull, when they established the Women, Men and Media project in 1988. Their aim was to carry out regular studies that would track progress, and then release the findings at symposia that would bring together journalists and media executives with activists and academics. Together, these usually separate groups would critically examine the values and priorities that result in the patterns of gender representation we find in the media. The establishment of Women, Men and Media signaled a new development, and a realization that without dialogue – between researchers, activists, advertisers, journalists, radio and television producers – there could be no way out of the impasse in which the debate about gender representation appeared to be locked at that time

(Gibbons, 2000). And indeed, over the past decade, many activist groups around the world – from Cotidiano Mujer in Uruguay, the Centre for Advocacy and Research in India, to Women’s Media Watch in Jamaica, to name just a few of them – have opted for a similar strategy (Gallagher, 2001). Central to the recent work of groups like these has been a search for data, concepts and language capable of involving media professionals, and of stimulating them to think about gender as a factor in the choices they make and the representations they produce. In essence, it involves the “translation” of what are often abstract and esoteric academic research findings into terms that strike a chord with media people.

How then can we sum up the role of feminist scholarship and feminist activism in relation to media theory and media practice? Manisha Chaudary uses an apposite analogy: “It’s like riding a tiger: once you get on you can’t get off. It’s a continuous process. You cannot stop it. There is no beginning, there is no end” (quoted in Gallagher, 2001, p. 183). And indeed, the development of the media industries themselves presents constant and ever more complex problems for feminist scholarship. Yet feminist media criticism survives, despite the regular appearance of “post-feminist” arguments and the onslaught of more overt backlash. Stuart Hall, the first director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, helps us to understand how and why this happens in his account of what was perceived as the “eruption” of feminism into the work of the Centre in the 1970s. He says, “Many of us in the Centre – mainly, of course, men – thought it was time there was good feminist work in cultural studies. . . . Being good transformed men, we were opening the door to feminist studies. And yet, when it broke in through the window, every single unsuspected resistance rose to the surface – fully installed patriarchal power, which believed it had disavowed itself” (Hall, 1992, p. 282). Indeed, the disruptive challenge of feminism – even when it is considered theoretically and politically desirable – can be very difficult to handle. And perhaps that is how it should be.

Disruption, as Todorov (1977) tells us in his account of the structure of narrative, causes disequilibrium. This is followed by action to re-establish equilibrium. The second equilibrium is similar to the first, but the two are never identical. This is as good a description of the impact of feminism as I can find – disrupting the narrative, which is then restored to equilibrium by other forces, but is never quite the same as before.

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