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Stasis and shifts in feminist media scholarship

Abstract

Originally a keynote speech at an international feminist conference, the article reviews patterns in women-and-media research and poses new directions. Over forty years of feminist analysis of media, researchers have focused disproportionately on women's representations and excluded the structural causes for those representations. The author emphasizes the need for macro-level investigations in communication law and policy, industry structures, and financing to better understand the gendered power dynamics that cause women to be underrepresented in media decision making positions and in serious news and programming.

Keywords

Women and media; feminism and media; feminist theory of media; global women's media issues

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[1]As feminist media scholars living in today's age of new media, with seemingly unlimited formats for interpersonal and mass communication, we are challenged in our critical research agendas to locate women's interests, to discern whether those interests are being served, and to ascertain the gendered relations of power that control media industries. Above all, we are faced with creating scholarship that is useful to those in the academy as well as feminists working in popular movements for greater equality.

A good starting point for such assessment, as well as for setting research agendas, would be to identify what our feminist media scholarship

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[1] This article is adapted from the author's keynote speech given at the Gender in Focus Conference, Braga, Portugal, in June 2014.

currently emphasizes in its investigations. One international gathering recently provided an opportunity to do this. The "Gender in Focus" conference, held in Braga, Portugal, in June 2014, convened feminist media scholars from nations in Europe and other regions to discuss feminist media research. Examining the titles of 114 presentations scheduled for this conference (not including those of keynote speakers), I found that the vast majority – nearly three-fourths – appeared to be analyses of gender representation in media texts. Substantially fewer focused on other aspects of women's relationship to media; these included media activism (10%), media audiences (8%), and employment (7%). The titles of papers suggested there was little or no attention to matters of policy, finance or the ever growing problem of conglomeration, i.e., the structural aspects of the women-and-media relationship that critical scholars would be particularly concerned with.

Admittedly, this was a small sample associated with a single event and not strongly scientific in its analytical approach. If each paper had been individually examined in terms of its substantive content, the results may have been different. However, while only a glimpse, my observations at this conference easily mirror the longstanding trend of women and media scholarship around the world. As I have explored in greater detail elsewhere, the tendency has been for feminist media scholars over some 40 years to emphasize representational issues of women in the media to the neglect of deeper questions related to the contexts and relations of power that produce those representations (Byerly, 2012). This trend of privileging representational over structural issues – the latter involving power relations – illustrates what I define as the stasis in women-and-media scholarship. I will trace and problematize this trend in the following discussion, while also pointing out the important shifts that have taken place along the way, particularly over the past decade.

1. ORIGINS

Women and media research at the global level goes back to the 1970s when feminism emerged as a world movement, aided in no small way through the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975-1985. Delegates who met for the first of three UN Decade for Women conferences in 1975 in Mexico City articulated – among other things – the first feminist critique of media. That critique was very basic and clear in its three main points. First, delegates said, women were omitted from the serious news of the day.

This referred to the silence and invisibility that Gaye Tuchman (1978) would later call "the symbolic annihilation of women in the mass media". Second, they said, women were misrepresented in media when they did appear in news, advertising and entertainment. This referred particularly to the problem of sex role stereotyping that showed women in mothering and caretaking roles, as helpless victims, or as over-sexed jezebels. In truth, women have always had a broader range of social roles and identities, and we have actively contributed to community and nation building – where were those representations? Third, delegates said, there were too few women in the media professions that created these messages and images. The assumption here was that if more women had greater control over the creative and decision-making processes within the news and other media, there would be increased visibility, more accurate representations, and a larger view of women's problems and social contributions (Byerly, 2012).

Delegates in Mexico City set forth a program of action that called on the United Nations to study women's representation in advertising, news, and television, and to launch programs that would better enable women to take control of the messaging and imaging processes and to increase global news flow about women. By 1980, UNESCO had funded a series of studies that would become the foundation of our international academic literature on women and media[2]. In succeeding years, various UN agencies would also fund training programs for women journalists and would underwrite projects like the five Women's Feature Services, the subject of my own dissertation research nearly 25 years ago (Byerly, 1990; 1995).

That first critique of the women and media problematic was important. It put media content on the global feminist agenda in a clear and compelling way, and it called for strategies to put women more directly in charge of the making of media content. In addition, it associated women's access to media with women's participation in the public sphere, and it opened avenues for women to expand their access both through traditional news and through alternative media (Byerly, 1995). With this emerging array of media concerns, it remains a question as to why feminist scholars have remained as focused as they have on analyzing mainly what they see (i.e., media representations) rather than the wider range of issues associatd with those representations – i.e., decision making structures, gender relations in media professions, women's media ownership patterns, and feminist grassroots

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[2] See, for example, Mieke Ceulemans & Guido Fauconnier, *Mass Media: The Image, Role and Social Conditions of Women* (Paris: UNESCO, 1979); and Margaret Gallagher, *Equal Opportunities: The Case of Women and the Media* (Paris: UNESCO, 1981).

activism the world over that has challenged media portrayals and employment practices associated with women's ability to be hired and advanced.

This is not to downplay the seriousness of the imagery that we see or the messages that hear in news, television programming, advertising and other media every day. These bombard us, engage our imaginations, and shape our perceptions of ourselves, each other and the world. For these reasons, representations of women in the media matter and they will remain legitimate research concerns for feminist scholars. At the same time, we must recognize that feminist media research could be asking harder questions, questions that interrogate why so many problematic messages continue to exist to distort and misrepresent us, who is creating these messages and images, and what is being done to change the situation? Also not to be overlooked are the questions about where things have improved: How have women's representations become more egalitarian in different media outlets and different nations over the years? What are the conditions that allow such change to occur? What are the levels and forms of women's participation in media companies' decision-making at both management and governance levels? How do national laws, government-media relationships, political framework, and culture shape media representations and women's ability to enter into the professions and advance? To what extent do women own media outlets today? Does women's greater control over media companies and production result in more favorable news coverage and representation?

2. Levels of Analysis

These questions have implications for determining whether and how the feminist scholarly agendas have changed over time. One way to gain a better understanding of both the statis and the shifts in the women and media research is to organize that research by the levels of analysis that define the kinds of studies we undertake. These include the micro, meso, macro and external levels of analysis.

Most research on representation, i.e., on the image, portrayal and other messages of women contained in media texts, comprises the micro-level of media analysis. Micro-level analysis tends to be descriptive, considering things like how much and what kind of news coverage women and women's issues receive, whether women are being sex-role stereotyped, and whether content has a feminist perspective, among other things associated with the visual and auditory aspects of the text. Micro-level analysis

has been important over the years because it has allowed scholars to document the extent to which women's exclusion and stereotyping have persisted over time, and when and how these have improved. On the other hand, the descriptive nature of most micro-level analysis typically offers little in the way of explanation for how media content is created, who is involved or what effect it has on those who consume it. Nor does it examine the larger media environment shaped by the political economy of finance, laws and policies – an environment within which media companies operate. Micro-level analysis was first set forth in the 1970s in collected volumes like Tuchman, Daniels and Benét (1978) *Hearth and Home*, and, as discussed earlier, it remains a staple of feminist interrogations into the popular culture.

It is not clear why feminist scholars have devoted disproportional emphasis to image and other representational research and tended to neglect other dimensions of women's relationship to media. One possibility may be that analysis of texts is relatively inexpensive and readily achieved. For example, images and printed messages are easily gathered from sources of popular culture, or by using university data bases like EbscoHost or Lexis-Nexis, and these can be examined using fairly standard procedures of qualitative or quantitative analysis. Time required is also undoubtedly a factor, with most representational studies able to be started and finished within a matter of weeks, and authors thus able to produce conference papers, book chapters and journal articles in a relatively short time frame. The cost of such research is also minimal.

By contrast, studies that involve field work (e.g., chasing down source material or conducting interviews and/or focus groups), or that require purchase of data are both more time consuming and more expensive. In addition, as research designs become more complex, the steps involved also increase in number, and the time required to complete the work lengthens. Many scholars are pushed by their departments to produce quantities of work for advancement through their academic ranks, with less emphasis placed on the depth of the scholarship. In addition, scholars whose institutions provide little or no funding, and who may work in nations with few external monetary sources for their research, encounter resource barriers to the pursuit of more complex research. Even so, feminist media scholars with many years of experience in media fields, and who have developed collaborative networks within and across nations, have made substantial progress overcoming these problems, as shall be seen shortly.

This is also not to say that there have not been advances, i.e., shifts, in the approach that some scholars have taken in their micro-level research.

Several examples will serve to illustrate the ways in which studies that begin with micro-level concerns can proceed toward a deeper analysis by complicating their research questions and methodological procedures. One such example might be found in the mixed methods approach taken by Jenny Kitzinger (2004) in her studies conducted over a period of years, determining first how sexual assault is framed in the news, and then how actual news coverage affects the feelings and knowledge of female survivors of assault. Using both textual and framing analysis to examine the content of news about sexual assault, she then conducted dozens of focus group interviews with sexual assault survivors. In the end, she addressed nearly all levels of media analysis – micro, meso, macro and external – in her research.

A second example may be seen in the Global Media Monitoring Project, to begin its fifth round in 2015. The GMMP, which is sponsored by the World Association for Christian Communication, in Toronto, Canada, has been conducted every five years since 1995 and is the most extensive ongoing mechanism for tracking the amount and kind of news about women around the world. In its 2010 round, 107 nations participated, and the project expanded its methods for data collection and analysis. Thus, the output provided much more thorough information about the number of women's bylines, issue-focus of news, gender aspects of photos and other images, and whether stories contained a feminist perspective. In addition, the GMMP report also placed each nation's findings in relation to trends in the media industries, such as mergers and concentration of ownership, and the possible impact of these on women's inclusion and portrayal in the news. This effort to consider women's representation in news within the context and relations of production that produced that news signals an important shift in this important longitudinal cross-cultural research (*Who Makes the News*, 2010).

Another advancement, or shift, in micro-level research may be seen in scholarly efforts that try to place problematic imagery of women within the relations of production that create that imagery. Within US society, where race relations have historically permeated all institutions, Black feminist scholars have been especially concerned with the persistent stereotyping of Black women by mainstream media industries, particularly television and music. Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2004) took on the second of these by problematizing the exploitation of Black bodies in the hip hop music industry, considering not just the hyper-sexualized, sometimes violent stereotyping of Black men and women artists and models, but also by questioning who profits from those images and lyrics, and how

popular culture helps to reinforce unequal racial positions within (US) society. Collins' work thus situates problematic sexist and racist imagery within a critical political economy framework that helps to show how the subordination of women and people of color by industries owned by White rich men produce a situation she calls the new racism.

Research concerned with the generation of content fits within the meso-level of analysis. It is at the meso-level where the gender politics in production of media texts is located, as well as issues of women's employment and role in creative decision-making about content. In other words, it is at the meso-level where production values and newsroom routines exist, and where, in Stuart Hall (1973) language, messages are encoded with meaning, that is, ideologies are introduced into the media texts that audiences will later consume. Thus, who is doing the encoding becomes a key to better understanding whose meanings are instilled in media texts. For many years, there was very little research on women's media employment, newsroom cultures or gender politics within the relations of production. Studies tended to be small-scale and statistical in nature with little contextual information to explain the findings.

Feminist scholars have taken increasingly greater interest in women's employment in media industries these last 20 years with both regional and global-level studies. Under UNESCO funding, Margaret Gallagher (1995) published the first global baseline study of women's employment with her survey of 237 companies in 43 nations. Such a broad international effort would not be seen again until 2011 with publication of Byerly's (2011) study for International Women's Media Foundation, an investigation of women's status in 522 news companies in 59 nations. While the two studies differed in many ways, they both tried to provide context for their data in order to explain why women had excelled or lagged behind in the respective nations whose media they examined. My own research (i.e., the IWMF-funded report just cited) enabled me to commission researchers in 29 of those original 59 nations to interpret their nations' findings in light of related studies, cultural traditions, government-media relations, and other factors for a second book, the *Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Media* (Byerly, 2013). And, in 2013, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) commissioned European feminist scholars Karen Ross and Claudia Padovani (2013) to conduct a study of the 29 nations of the European Union in relation to gender equality in media organizations' decision making. That report, *Advancing Gender Equality in Decision-making in Media Organizations*, provides survey data from 99 companies on women's roles within the

companies' structure, as well as detailed information about gender equality laws, history of women in media professions, and individual company policies on gender.

Add to these studies recent feminist research on gender politics in the newsroom culture by a number of feminist scholars like Karen Ross, Marjan deBruin, Louise North, Monika Djerf-Pierre, Juana Gallego, and Barbi Pilvre, among others. Their meso-level work has expanded our understanding of how established male values and ways of doing things dominate even as women advance in number and seniority within media organizations. These recent studies mark not only an expansion of interest in meso-level analysis of women's relationship to media, but also a maturation process within feminist media scholarship in which research designs are more complex and findings more extensively interpreted.

A particularly important aspect of media analysis – and by far the least developed in feminist scholarship – is macro-level analysis. This is the realm of institutional and financial arrangements that shape the media environment. It consists of industry, national and international policies and regulatory mechanisms; financial mechanisms; ownership patterns; and organizational structures which together help to explain how media operate and perform. It is macro-level feminist research that would determine things like whether laws protect women's employment, or regulate violence against women in television programming, or enable women to own media companies today. As media industries converge their technological platforms, concentrate their ownerships, and globalize their reach, where do women fit in? Feminist scholars are challenged to accomplish what US sociologist Saskia Sassen (1998) urged us to do nearly two decades ago: make women visible in every level of the global economy, whether as skilled workers building computers and digital TVs, as media professionals stuck at the glass ceiling, or as marginalized would-be owners of companies who cannot get a foot in the door of today's conglomerated industries.

Women's relationship to the policy apparatus is possibly the most neglected area of feminist media research, and the need for such is begging. Addressing this challenge, Margaret Gallagher (2014) surveyed the past three decades to discern how women were systematically excluded from international policy forums on media, including the New World Information Order debates (of the 1970s and 1980s) and the World Summit on the Information Society (2003 to the present). Among other things, Gallagher points out that while feminists increasingly engage with the media policy domain, the powerful actors within that domain show little interest

in feminist analysis of policy issues (Gallagher, 2014, p. 461). This suggests a need for scholars to track feminist activist efforts to influence policy in women's interests and to continue to advance those analyses to challenge the power structures that seem so resistant to change. A number of scholars, most notably Canadian researchers McKercher and Mosco (2008), are refining and using political economy theory and analysis to examine problems in women's media labor. And a number of useful national-level studies, such as Alison Beale and Annette Van Den Bosch's (1998) comparative analysis of gender in media policy in Canada and Australia, and Aimée Vega and Patricia Ortega's (2013) in Mexico, have undertaken research to argue for greater national-level gender sensitive media policies as well as to document women's activism to have such policies adopted.

In spite of these advances, the macro-level remains the most under studied area of the women and media relationship. The need for a more decided shift to greater attention to macro-level issues was suggested to me most recently when I was editing the *Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Journalism* and discovered that 19 of the 29 chapters' authors noted that media conglomeration – something produced through neoliberal political and economic policies – was a problem in their nations and that it affected women's employment in newsrooms. Louise North (2009) in Australia represents something of a trailblazer in this regard with her study of news workers' response to company downsizing occurring when a larger news company buys out a smaller one. The situation demanding investigation and theorizing is this: As men's control over ever vaster empires of media and other companies expands, so does the consolidation of their economic dominance and political influence. In the US at present, we are seeing the number of owners of broadcast stations decline through conglomerate buyouts, with women and racial minorities' ownership now slipped into the low single digits (Byerly, Park & Miles, 2011). And, we are not surprisingly also witnessing the industry executives, lobbyists, and lawyers rise in influence within our national Congress, the legislative branch of government, and in the administrative branch, where the regulatory processes are found. Industry attorneys wrote what became the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the law that created the legal basis for deregulation, which the Federal Communication Commission subsequently incorporated into ownership rules. These two events led to a frenzy of mergers and acquisitions among US-based media companies in the late 1990s and to the present time. This process of conglomeration has brought the US-based

media ownership landscape to one dominated by five or six giant media conglomerates[3].

The last level that concerns the women-and-media relationship is the external-level of analysis, which investigates the ways that women use and are affected by media at both individual and societal levels. A major genre of external-level research is the audience study, with most of this genre involving ethnographic techniques such as interviews and participant-observation, but some also taking a political economy approach. Audience research has contributed to our knowledge of how women interact with media texts and, in some cases, with the reporters who create them. Parameswaran (2013) whose own work has complicated the genre of audience research over the years, takes stock of the evolving nature of the study of female media audiences, observing that the genre "has thrived and expanded to include a range of audiences, media genres, modes of audience engagement, and institutional and international sites of reception" (p. 13). Her observations come to life in work like that of Youna Kim (2014), whose research on the Asian female media audience utilizes a complex approach that includes ethnographic interviews with women from ages 20 through 50, and an analytical framework informed by political economy and the politics of neoliberalism and globalization. Similarly, Sahar Khamis's (2014) interviews with female journalists in Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain investigates the professional, political and activist dimensions of their reporting of events associated with the Arab Spring uprisings between 2011 and 2013.

Instead of shrinking, feminist scholars must be fully engaged with our critical scholarship that documents the problem and its effects, that identifies points of intervention and resistance, and that produces a range of useful studies for activists and public interest lawyers to use in challenging the problem. This is an arena where feminist scholars can contribute in most of our nations today, if we begin to develop our research strategies now.

3. Summary

Feminist media scholarship has undergone a maturation process from the 1970s to the present time. While attention remains fixed disproportionately at the micro-level of analysis, where concerns are primarily with women's representation in media texts, there have been shifts toward a

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[3] For a fuller discussion of media conglomeration in the United States and the problems it has generated for democratic society, see John Nichols and Robert W. McChesney, *Dollarocracy* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

more complex set of questions and frameworks of analysis in this form of research. In addition, research agendas and methods have also expanded at the meso- and macro-levels. However, in the era of new technologies and rapidly changing ownership structures, the large frontier for feminist scholarship lies decidedly in the last of these. Gendered relations of power both within and across our societies require more vigorous examination at the macro level of media research. One of the things that will enable that is the strong scholarly networks formed by working relationships that have developed among feminist researchers. These began informally through communication associations like International Communication Association (ICA) and International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), but formalized as one or more scholars developed specific research projects and secured funding to conduct it.

All of the global-level studies cited in this essay are examples of the work arising from the formalization of feminist research networks. Ross and Padovani's (2013) coordination of the European Union-funded study *Advancing Gender Equality in Decision-Making in Media Organizations* is one example of what such arrangements can produce. Ross and Padovani engaged colleagues, most of whom they had already established working relations with earlier, in the 28-nation study. My own coordination (Byerly, 2011) of the massive 59-nation study *Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media*, for the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) is another example of international collaboration. The IWMF study involved 160 researchers and statisticians, many of whom I knew or located through years of networking at international meetings. Most recently, the largest-scale project to date has launched. In 2014, Janet Wasko and Aimée Vega Montiel, IAMCR president and vice president, respectively, led formation of the Global Alliance on Gender And Media (GAMAG), a research entity to be housed in and supported by UNESCO. The group held its first steering committee meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, in November 2014, to begin discussions of GAMAG's research agenda and to define ways it will advance issues into United Nations-sponsored meetings on women, as well as meetings of the World Summit on Information Societies (WSIS). At this writing, GAMAG's members, who include myself, are still in active discussions to develop the direction of our research programs. Once the details are worked out, and UNESCO's administrative and funding roles are clarified, GAMAG-affiliated researchers are expected to undertake some of the challenges that have been identified in the preceding discussion.

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