Women and Media

International Perspectives

**Edited by KAREN ROSS
and CAROLYN M. BYERLY**

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Notes on Contributors

Carolyn M. Byerly studies the relationship between social movements and communication, including the media. Her articles have appeared in journals such as *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, and *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, and in several edited volumes, among them: M. de Bruin and K. Ross (eds), *Identities at Work* (2003); E. R. Meehan and E. Riordan (eds), *Sex and Money: Intersections of Feminism and Political Economy of Media* (2002); E. K. Thomas and B. H. Carpenter (eds), *Mass Media in 2025* (2001); M. Meyers (ed.), *Mediated Women* (1999); and A. N. Valdivia (ed.), *Feminism, Multiculturalism and the Media* (1995). She teaches in the Department of Communication, University of Maryland.

Ammu Joseph is a journalist and media-watcher now based in Bangalore. Among her publications are: *Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues* (co-authored/edited with Kalpana Sharma, 1994); *Women in Journalism: Making News* (2000); and *Terror, Counter-Terror: Women Speak Out* (co-edited with Kalpana Sharma, 2003). She is also co-author/editor of *Speaking in Tongues: Gender, Censorship and Voice in India* (2002). She is on the visiting faculty of the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai/Madras, and is a founder-member of the Network of Women in Media, India.

Jenny Kitzinger is professor of media studies at the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University. Her research spans audience reception processes, textual analysis, and journalistic production practices. Her substantive research has focused on the media and health, science and

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Dafna Lemish is chair of the Department of Communication, Tel Aviv University. Her research and teaching interests include gender-related issues of media representations and consumption as well as children, media, and leisure. Her publications include: "Gender at the forefront: feminist perspectives on action theoretical approaches in communication research," *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research* (2002) 27(1); "Gendered media: meaning and use," in S. Livingstone and M. Bovill (eds), *Children and their Changing Media Environment* (with T. Liebes and V. Seidmann, 2001); and "'Four Mothers': the womb in the public sphere", *European Journal of Communication* (2000) 15(2) (with I. Barzel).

Caroline Mitchell is principal lecturer in radio at the School of Arts, Design, Media and Culture, University of Sunderland. She has been active in community radio for the past 20 years and in 1992 co-founded Fem FM, the first women's station in the UK. She has worked in women's radio development and training in Europe, in particular with the AMARC (World Association of Community Radios) women's network. Her research is in the area of innovatory, participatory, and community radio, with a particular interest in women's and feminist radio. Her current research is about the use of radio by refugees and asylum seekers. She is a founding member of the UK Radio Studies Network and editor of *Women and Radio: Airing Differences* (2000).

Ellen Riordan is a visiting assistant professor at Gustavus Adolphus College, Minnesota. She is the co-editor of *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media* (2002). Her research focuses on feminist theory, political economy, and popular culture.

Karen Ross is reader in mass communication and director of the Centre for Communication, Culture and Media Studies at Coventry University. Her principal research interests relate to the general and media-specific aspects of (in)equalities. Her recent books include: *Mapping the Margins: Identity Politics and Media* (co-edited with Deniz Derman, 2003); *Women, Politics, Media* (2002); *Women, Politics and Change* (ed., 2002); *Black Marks: Minority Ethnic Audiences and Media* (ed., 2001); *Managing Equal Opportunities in Higher Education* (with Diana Woodward, 2000); and *Black and White Media* (1996).

Gillian Youngs is senior lecturer at the Centre for Mass Communication Research, University of Leicester. Her interests and work cover theory, practice, and policy. She has made expert contributions on information and communication technologies and women to UNESCO and the Society for International Development and has presented her research at major conferences in Europe, the United States, and China. Her publications include: *Political Economy, Power and the Body: Global Perspectives* (ed., 2000); *International Relations in a Global Age* (1999); and *Globalization: Theory and Practice* (co-ed., 1996; second edition forthcoming). She is co-editor of *International Feminist Journal of Politics* and associate editor of *Development*, and serves on the editorial board of *Political Geography*.

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<div align="right">Karen Ross and Carolyn M. Byerly</div>

1
Introduction

Carolyn M. Byerly and Karen Ross

> There is a lot of hype about the wonders of ICTs[1] in transforming the world and in the leveling of all sorts of disparities, including gender. However, we need to remember that in the final analysis, they are just tools and, just like in any technological transformation, the decisive factors regarding their impact include who has access and control of the technology, the way it is being introduced and the institutional or organisational conditions under which it is being used and organised. In other words, gender and socio-economic equality have to be ensured before women (and the poor) can be empowered to use ICTs effectively for their own advancement. (Cecilia Ng and Veena N)[2]

We live in a mediated world. Even remote geographic areas are infiltrated by advertising, newspapers, magazines, radio, television, music, films, and other print and broadcast media. The computerization of most of the world since the early 1990s further guarantees that mediated images and messages will continue to construct the very fabric of our daily lives, knowledge, and frameworks of reality, and that individuals will be linked across language and cultural borders. Less obvious to most of us are the gendered structures and relationships between human beings on the inside of media industries who control the resources and determine the images, words, and sounds that we consume. Equally obscure perhaps are the ways that media technology, messages, and the varied individuals involved in production, distribution, and consumption influence each other and, in turn, the world around them. Exposing these issues is the work of scholars.

The broader academic study of media has burgeoned over the last century but especially so in the last few years, when media research finally

took its own roomy place in the newly recognized discipline of communication.[3] This dynamic discipline has evolved quickly and voluminously, particularly with regard to research on the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual and national identity enter into the construction and consumption of media messages. Also in question are the implications that such messages hold for the political realities of those they represent. These aspects of media research emerged by way of feminist, gay and lesbian, racial justice, and postcolonial social movements in the 1970s in Europe, the United States, South Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other parts of the world. Concerned about the dual ability of the media to reinforce unequal status quo relationships, as well as to circulate new ideas and help to set political agendas leading to change, liberation movements have given significant attention to the role of the media in social processes.

The 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s were noisy years, especially in the academy, as feminist and other activist scholars from diverse class, ethnic, and national backgrounds challenged dominant intellectual paradigms, bringing into being critical, cultural, and postcolonial studies. These approaches more easily accommodated radical inquiries into gender (and other) relations of power in society, including the role of media in establishing (or changing) social hierarchies. Karl Marx's concepts and theories, for all of their shortcomings – and as ample numbers of writers have shown, there are many – offered a basic framework of analysis and social action useful to the development of new radical theories, particularly those today associated with the family of *critical theories*. Feminists following this thinking adopted Marx's conceptualization of *consciousness* about one's own predicament as arising from the context of one's life determined by the social relations one is subjected to. *Social relations* in this instance came to mean *gender* relations, referring to the underlying causes of unequal status that men and women hold in society. Critical feminists understood that women would have to move from a place of *unconsciousness* (what Marx called "false consciousness") to one of *consciousness* about their circumstances. Thus, feminist grassroots organizing has typically involved methods of *consciousness-raising*, whereby women learn to critique their own experience within the *patriarchal* (male-dominated) society. This process motivated women toward political activism, which Marx called *praxis* and feminists would later call *feminist praxis*. The outcome of praxis is *feminist struggle*, an intentional challenge to the status quo power structure of male dominance. Such struggle would take the form of a *dialectical process* that

evolves over time and produces multiple (not always foreseeable) outcomes, but presumably ones that advance women's power. These basic tenets of Marx's work provided many feminists with a language, a model for organizing, and a vision for social change. However, it was most specifically Marx's *critique of capitalism* that resonated with groups of feminists who wanted to locate women's oppression in the larger structures of ownership of industries (and control of wealth), production, and consumption in society. Feminist media theorists today who follow this intellectual lineage use a feminist political economy analytical framework to examine male-owned media industries' exploitation of women's bodies and talents to increase their own profits and the social power flowing from them.

Critical and cultural feminist scholars alike adapted Antonio Gramsci's concept of *hegemony* to help explain the ways in which media and other cultural products aid in securing men's dominance in society. Hegemony describes a process by which the dominant group (in this case powerful men) maintains its power over social institutions and those in them (in this case women) by actively seeking the consent of those in society who wish to fit the established norms and practices. The appeal of the hegemony concept to feminists has been that it offers an analysis of how both men and women come to participate in a social system that is inherently unequal, and therefore undemocratic. For example, feminist media scholars have been able to consider ways that women are engaged at both the *structural level* (for example, in media professions and other aspects of the industries) and the *meaning levels* (for example, the making and consumption of media images and messages that affirm men's superiority over women) in giving their consent to men's dominant place in society. Feminist scholars who interrogate cultural issues also consider the ways in which aspects of culture, such as national or regional history, ethnic identity, religious affiliation, and sexual identity, enter into the making and consumption of media messages and social relations associated with this process.

Postcolonial feminist theorists emerged by way of national liberation movements beginning in the 1960s. This diverse group of scholars, coming from India and other regions of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific, assumes a complex task of identifying and examining multiple ways that both they, as citizens, and their nations were affected by years of domination by foreign governments. The particular work of feminist postcolonial scholars has been to locate women in the historical colonial and liberation processes, considering the specific role of media and other cultural products.

They point out that colonial domination, far from being over, continues in today's era of globalization, which brings a proliferation of magazines, television, films, advertising, fashion, and other media and cultural forms from the powerful European and North American nations into the rest of the world.

The present volume inhabits the analytical terrain carved out by these complex, energetic new intellectual developments of the last decades – decades in which women have been major forces and players. Far from being finished, these developments continue to evolve in response to a rapidly changing world. As editors, we wanted this book to convey the dynamism of what is taking place in the realm of women-and-media today, in relation both to media enterprises and to the world to which they are integral. We recognized from the outset that limitations of space would require that the book be indicative rather than comprehensive in its contents. In addition, we wanted to ensure that it contained both the big picture, in terms of research and theoretical developments, as well as discrete local examples, geographically, in relation to women's media activism. Underlying the work of assembling this collection of authors and chapters was an abiding understanding on our parts that women's efforts to better understand and to discipline the media have always been wrapped up with women's right to self-determination, one aspect of that being women's right to communicate. Our work therefore is intellectual and political, but also deeply personal.

In this book, eight scholars representing four regions of the world take up some of these issues in relation to women's experience, both in their own nations and internationally. The recognition that runs through their writings – and serves to unify these otherwise diverse chapters – is that media have the potential not only to reinforce the status quo in power arrangements in society but also to contribute to new, more egalitarian ones. In tracking progress, all the authors acknowledge that media enterprises are not in the same place they were back in the 1970s, when women first charged the media with ignoring or stereotyping them, and with blocking their access to media message-making in various ways. On the other hand, the authors do not believe that mass media, including new media, presently serve women's interests as they might – and should. Using a range of feminist theories and methodologies, the contributors demonstrate the ways in which an understanding of gender issues in the media necessarily intersects with identity and status concerns related to social class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, and nationality. In addition, the

contributors report on the multiple ways that women have struggled to gain greater control over media in order to communicate and thereby participate in the public sphere. "Struggle" here is understood to be a long, continuous, dialectical process involving many and with various outcomes, some of which are in women's favor, others not. In recognizing the uneven and sometimes unpredictable nature of such historical processes, they identify the work still to be done in bringing commercial and alternative media alike more fully into the service of women.

In part I, "Representing and Consuming Women," four chapters look at the ways in which mainstream media continue to commodify and sexualize women in their routine reporting and representation strategies. Jenny Kitzinger's chapter uses complex methodology in examining the coverage of sexual violence, including child abuse, in Britain and the United States. Looking first at the evolution of such news, she then compares news accounts with the testimonies of women and children who have lived through such abuse, pointing out the discrepancies between the media's reporting of sex crimes and the lived reality. Dafna Lemish and Karen Ross both critique women and news, with Lemish looking at the way in which the Israeli media continue to exclude women from serious debates in the public spheres of Israeli society on matters such as religion and war, and instead construct the female subject as principally Madonna or whore, living almost exclusively in the private sphere. Ross interrogates the news media of Britain, Australia, and Ireland in their construction of women politicians, who, despite being elected leaders operating fully within the public sphere, are nonetheless reduced to little more than their body parts in stories by male journalists. Ellen Riordan's chapter provides a feminist political economic analysis of the international film industry's construction of what she calls "girl power feminism," arguing that this so-called feisty feminism is merely another way for large movie corporations to make money.

In part II, "Women's Agency in Media Production," the emphasis is on the ways that women have gained at least some control of news messages and images, provoking a shift in both content and context. Carolyn M. Byerly uses an historical approach to understand the contemporary situation, arguing that changes in US news are the result of both internal newsroom campaigns by women journalists and external campaigns waged by community-based women's groups making specific demands for change. In addition, she explores the tactics that women in other nations have approached in reforming the media. Ammu Joseph's chapter considers

the case of India and the ways in which women in newsrooms there have had a positive impact on media culture. She suggests a number of strategies that could be employed to speed up progress. The last two chapters look at media that are specifically gendered. Caroline Mitchell traces the historical development of women's radio practice around the world, using a series of case studies to elaborate the unique characteristics of "women's radio." Gillian Youngs discusses the internet as an empowering space for women's voices, arguing that, like other media, it can provide substantial benefits to women in terms of reach and information, but that access and safety continue to be real concerns.

We believe that there is considerable wisdom in this collection of writings about where women are today in their relationship with both traditional and new media. The authors present an honest, sometimes stark look at the ambiguities, problems, frustrations, and even failures that women have encountered in their efforts to speak more publicly through the media. The contributors also inspire confidence with the many examples of women's success in accessing the mainstream media in different nations, in developing women-controlled media, and in making extensive use of new computer technologies. Grasping a working knowledge of these events, and the theoretical frameworks within which they are analyzed, is important in order to gain a full appreciation of women's self-determination in communicating within and across nations. We live in a mediated world, but scrutinized through a gendered lens, the picture is perhaps a little clearer and perhaps a little more hopeful.

Notes

1   ICTs are information communication technologies, a term mostly used in relation to new media such as cable, satellite, and digital technologies, as well as electronic media such as email and the internet.
2   Contribution to a forum discussion published in the journal *Gender and Media Monitor* (2002) August, 4–9.
3   Until recently, the study of various forms of communication, including mediated communication, was conducted by scholars in sociology, political science, psychology, rhetoric, journalism, and other social science and humanities fields. By the early 1990s, there had emerged a recognizable body of communication research, theories, and theorists focused specifically on communications phenomena. From this time, scholars began to refer to such

scholarship as the *discipline of communication* (or sometimes in the plural, *communications*). True to its roots, communication scholarship remains eclectic and highly interdisciplinary. For a more complete discussion of the field's development, and feminist theory's place within it, see Katherine Miller's *Communication Theories* (2002).

Reference

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PART I

Representing and Consuming Women

Researching the ways in which women have been routinely portrayed by mainstream media has been a continuing preoccupation for many media scholars over the past decades. Sadly, most contemporary studies suggest that despite the incursions which women have made into the media industry and the success of the women's movement in challenging some of the wider gender inequalities in society, the media seem stuck in a very traditional and stereotypical groove. As we will see from the chapters in the second part of this book, women *have* made and *continue* to make a difference to what we see, read, and hear in the media, but there still remain too many examples of sexist reporting in news media, and of stereotypical and sexualized characterizations in entertainment media, for the claim that we are "post-equality" to be seen as anything other than decidedly hollow.

Jenny Kitzinger, in chapter 2, charts the debate about the role of the media in representing sexual violence, a key political issue for feminist theory and intervention. She begins by presenting a broad overview of critiques of media coverage of sexual violence, in the context of feminist activism to transform such representation and incorporating critiques about definition and frameworks. The chapter goes on to present findings from an empirical study of how one form of sexual violence – child sexual abuse – came to be "discovered" by the media and how this intersected with women's experiences and social actions. This leads into a theoretical discussion about the interaction between proliferating media discourses and women's personal abuse narratives, which are themselves now subject to feminist critique.

Chapters 3 and 4 both look at news media. Dafna Lemish casts her critical eye over the way in which women in Israeli media are routinely portrayed. As Lemish points out, there are several very complicated characteristics of Israeli society, such as being deeply divided and dominated by issues of nationalism and military conflicts, which mean that the context in which the media function is quite volatile. Using a case-study approach, Lemish's chapter illuminates the complicated relationships that exist between representations of women in the media and their diverse lived realities, as well as analyzing the impact of more women in the media industry, the so-called "feminization" of the newsroom. Through her discursive and semiotic analyses, she argues that women are portrayed in a familiar range of stereotypes, mostly confined to traditional roles in the private sphere or in volunteering, education, health, welfare, and the like in their public sphere outings. Women are also seen as absolutely, and naturally, different to men, being less logical, ambitious, active, independent, heroic, and dominant and most commonly depicted either as "Madonna" or as "whore." As Madonna, "woman" is the "mother" who gives birth, nurtures, sacrifices herself, and mourns her dead son. As whore, she is sex personified, whose fate it is to be punished as a victim of violence and exploitation.

The complicated relationships between women, politics, and media are the focus of chapter 4. Karen Ross argues that it is only in recent decades that these relationships have begun to figure as a research focus, since it was only in the 1990s that women began to be elected to parliaments in sufficient numbers to make it possible to explore their representation in their regional and national media. Ross considers the ways in which women politicians are routinely portrayed in mass media, principally newspapers, as well as exploring the strategies which women themselves have developed to try and maximize their publicity – the oxygen of any politician – whilst at the same time minimizing intrusions into their personal and family lives. Drawing on content analysis as well as interview data collected from women politicians in the UK (Westminster), Northern Ireland, Australia, and South Africa, she suggests that the normative patriarchal structures that exist in the wider society masquerade in the newsroom as neutral journalist "practice" in ways that undermine not only our elected women members but also the wider democratic project.

The last chapter in this part moves away from news and provides the logical bridge between "fact" and fiction in the commodification of women's bodies and experiences. If news media rarely position women

outside the narrow frame of victim, mother, partner, or second-class professional, then entertainment media have been equally assiduous in creating women-as-hero roles. The problem, though, as Ellen Riordan makes clear, is that too many of these so-called "positive" roles, such as the main characters in *Xena: Warrior Princess* or *Buffy the Vampire-Slayer*, reveal themselves to be little more than a marketing grab, with leading women wearing skin-tight leather and T-shirts as they brandish a variety of lethal weapons. Riordan examines how media organizations produce, construct, and commodify feminism, focusing specifically on the cultural construction of "girl power" by media corporations. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, women and girls have been portrayed in strong roles in popular shows, but these powerful female characters have sparked considerable debate: is ass-kicking Lara Croft a role model for twenty-first-century women or simply a male-ordered fantasy of the dominatrix who really wants to be daddy's girl? Riordan uses Ang Lee's film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* as a specific case study in which to interrogate the contradictions and complexities that surround "girl-power feminism," where women can be not just strong and forceful but also beautiful and sexy. But Riordan questions whether this "new" form really represents progress for women or is simply a new way of making money by creating dedicated female consumers, while simultaneously promoting a hegemonic ideology that sustains both capitalism and patriarchy.