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Introduction

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There is a lot of hype about the wonders of ICTs¹ 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

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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

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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

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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

Miller, K. (2002) *Communication Theories: Perspectives, Processes and Contexts*. McGraw-Hill, New York.

