

ARRIVING AT A CROSSROADS

Political priorities for a socially relevant feminist media scholarship

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Women's scholarship and activism seem to find themselves at a crossroads quite often, perhaps with a higher frequency than other areas in the academy. The reasons are to be found in the very "nature" of feminism, which requires—indeed demands—to constantly re-evaluate, deconstruct and demystify the world in order to answer the question that a curious feminist¹ asks: *where are the women?* It requires highest attention to the nuanced and profound changes in women's lives and vigilance to protect rights. It also requires a good deal of reflection on one's own personal position and an honest look at the field and its relation to the social, cultural, and political world. I will try to address some of the questions set for us by the editors of *Feminist Media Studies* by first declaring a personal bias: for me, one's intellectual work is vacuous if it is not matched by one's politics. Intellectual work and the production of systematic knowledge cannot be separated from everyday life. As such, the politics of care imposes the obligation to always seek to understand or, as Jean-Francois Lyotard (2002) argues, to "translate" the language that "others" speak. Feminism is certainly about life politics, about changing lives and politics. To me, this constitutes the moral compass for the feminist media scholar to seek out connections that can bridge divides, even if only temporarily. As times change, often violently and rapidly, it is even more pertinent that feminist media scholars ask the difficult and unpopular questions that "post-feminisms" and various "deaths" (of ideology, geography, history) attempt to render passé. By doing so, we find ourselves at a crossroads when important changes must be understood: "languages" must be "translated," and decisions must be made about our scholarly and activist paths. I think that we now are at a crossroads that concerns first, the directions of research we take and, second, the ways in which we turn those into action, not only in terms of feminists' relation to the world of politicism but to "other" feminists too.

Feminist writing in media studies follows closely the feminist movement in its variations and richness, speaking to the important issues that women experience at any historical moment that help us make sense of the media around us (Rosalind Gill 2007; Sue Thornham 2007). As such, it reflects the rifts and connections in feminist thought. Feminist media studies pays attention to women's position *vis-à-vis* mediated and cultural spaces across the domains of production and consumption, across technologies and geographies, practices and values. The dominant paradigm of feminist intervention has concentrated on

two dimensions of media content: representations of women and the construction of femininities, and the ways in which women make sense of cultural and media texts and create their own meanings. Writings on women as subjects and objects within media content and women as an audience have contributed greatly to the breaking down of stereotypical perceptions of women as victims, passive or superficial consumers. They recognized women as creators of meaning symbolically, but also materially, as producers, as subjects with agency and choice. As the media around us are changing through new configurations of technology, feminist media scholars have followed the trail of evidence to investigate the possibilities and practices of emancipatory communications, texts as well as new emerging forms and agents of popular culture. By investigating popular “icons” (Madonna, Lady Gaga) or characters and texts (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Sex and the City*), feminist media studies seeks to understand their role in women’s lives, their potential for counter-hegemonic readings and uses, and the “novelty” of spaces not dominated by hegemonic masculinities.

However, overzealous attention to “polysemy” or the “active audience” often suffers from three interconnected inadequacies. First, there is an assumption that the polysemic text or character is sufficient enough to create spaces for resistance to dominant ideological constructions of femininity or challenge structural inequalities. Second, mainstreaming of the analysis of representations in mainstream popular culture is not matched by the necessary critical analysis of the broader contexts within which mainstream popular cultures are produced. Third, there is a tendency to ascribe “new feminism” credentials to texts or characters, whose ideological function perpetuates the continuation of stereotypes, just because these are performed by “powerful” women.

What I am referring to here is the tendency to glorify popular icons and treat them in isolation, as “unique” cases or cases that herald “new” ways of thinking about women and feminism. So, for example, often cultural texts are heralded as “democratizing” if the “public” is somehow involved—from reality TV and talk shows to (female) music artists’ “expression” of sexuality in their performance. Or, women’s efforts to navigate through and negotiate difficult and odd conditions of existence, such as when “sex entertaining,” sweat-shopping the chips for iPad, or working to death—literally—in the telecoms industry² are taken as the proof that women cannot possibly also be *victims* of odd and dehumanizing conditions. This conviction of being compelled to find empowering, feminist icons/practices in all aspects of modern culture is one that I find misguided and oppressive—misguided, because our standards of assessing the empowering possibilities of culture and media, coupled with “choice” and “agency,” have shifted dramatically from those with a focus on broader societal and communal goals to those based on individualism and consumerism. Oppressive, because as “new” feminisms are proclaimed easily for celebrating individualistic, hedonistic, and consumerist-driven practices, the suggestion that women are harmed, victimized, or marginalized in the process is criticized as one treating women stereotypically. The “need” to focus on “potential,” to be celebratory, embrace the “new” and “shiny” (world of culture, media technologies, etc.) reflects a malaise of “positive thinking,”³ with the effect of marginalizing scholarship critical of the ephemeral and celebratory character of mainstream, commercial and cultures. It silences a great deal of communication about the impact of culture, communications, and mediations on women in terms other than the subjective or different. It brings about an inability to speak of “women” (hence it is replaced with “gender”) as a social class (hence predominantly emphasizing “irreconcilable” differences) and often in a position of

powerlessness (hence the only “acceptable” way to address power is through “agency”). The celebratory focus is also greatly appropriated by corporate language—which often speaks this language despite its diametrically opposite aims and interests. The rise of neo-liberalism and digital/fast/late capitalism seem to be rewriting the scripts of feminist narratives as either lived utopias or commercials; indeed, we are told we *have* achieved it all, *proven* we can have it all, we are OK, so now, we can stop bitching. We can “relax” and enjoy the freedom of being “women”: revert to hypersexualized, mutilated, and abused bodies; accept we are the colourful minorities in politics and the economy; continue playing the role of the primary carer; steer clear of science degrees; be happy with precarious and menial work; and smile.

Against very profound and far-reaching changes in our media and cultural and communicative spaces, there is little by way of a unified voice to critique and demand change. Scholars’ knee-jerk reactions to refuse any suggestion of *negative* links between media and cultural products and their impact on citizens is compatible with the interests of a complex web of inter-industrial alliances among media conglomerates, electronics industries, content providers and telecommunications, and the broader culture industry of fashion and music. These alliances have a long history of systematic lobbying of governments for the withdrawal of regulation over the industry (Paula Chakravartty & Katharine Sarikakis 2006). Lack of regulation of the industry does not equal freedom or choice for citizens, whose everyday lives are increasingly regulated by profit-driven interventions—from work and education to entertainment, from voting to sexuality.⁴ In other places, unified critique against ownership concentration of the media in Britain, against the technologization of our “digital futures,” against the gagging of investigative journalism or against sensationalist press, against invasion of our privacy neither listens to feminist media scholarship, nor are feminist media scholarship interventions anywhere visible in these debates.

I am not suggesting we deny the importance of studying difference, agency, the importance of popular culture’s liberating moments through performance and command of one’s body or the audience as an active producer of meanings. And I am not suggesting that all of us think or must think the same. But there is a very clear divide between our world and “theirs,” where debates about the role of the media in the financial crisis and the defaulting of countries, the role of media in the feudalization of cultural spaces, the relationship between media and the state, and the role of communication technologies in the intrusion of privacy are largely left in the hands of “mainstream” research where feminist voices are absent. They are absent certainly because the world of politics and academe are firmly in the hands of hegemonic masculinized actors, women or men, who view feminist scholarship antagonistically. But it is also because feminists too often view one another antagonistically. And, more importantly, it is because we lack the critical mass and the impetus for a unified front visible enough to make waves.

Rage Against the Machine

As the media world continues to change technologically and politically, women’s lives are affected on personal and individual, communal, and social levels. The media are not only technologies of freedom, expression, entertainment, and information, but also technologies of coercion, control, and exploitation. The political-economic organization of media and media technologies points toward a more concentrated, but globally influential,

ownership structure of and across mass media, digital spaces, and technologies. International regulatory regimes operate in such way that private interests are involved in public policy, while the fundamental principles for political directions are defined by a limited set of actors—even though policy in the field seems to have increased in numbers of initiatives, objects, actors, and locations of debate. Meanwhile, the global industrial complex reorganizes and reshapes the world into zones of primarily production and those of consumption, with a thick layer of enterprises in between that cater for the legitimization of renewed manifestations of a transnational status quo. In these configurations, citizens' and in particular women's interests are not the priority: from illiteracy and extreme poverty to modern day slavery on the production lines of hardware and in sex "entertainment," and from privacy invasions to rampant consumerism, women's lives are profoundly affected by the structures, politics, and products of the media.

Feminist scholarship is at its best when it is enraged about social injustice, economic polarizations, political and cultural enclaves and exclusions. So, as feminist media scholars we must respond to the pressing need to intensify our work on the materiality of the cultural and media(ted) world as it affects women's and children's lives as citizens of a global yet highly fragmented world. We must most urgently seek to connect across our conceptual divides, even if only temporarily and on certain issues. In particular, the central theme around which more work and concerted effort is needed is that of human security, which is not necessarily equivalent to state or market security; there is a pressing need for more scholarship that addresses anew old questions of media and culture and their role in *sexuality, labor, privacy, and security*.

Alongside the focus on the symbolic realm of culture, feminist scholars more forcefully raised questions about structural and institutional intersections with women's lives. We need to continue to investigate "new" media's role in women's active shaping and appropriating of communication technologies within environments that presume a male class of digiterati as their user base. In our work, alongside critique, analysis, and theorization, we also must identify the emancipatory and liberating spaces and practices women create and command for themselves. Especially in the digital era, this is particularly important for the applied project of social change, which in our days cannot be achieved on a national level. The victories in shaping national policies and cultures to become more women-friendly, indeed to embrace feminist principles, of the past thirty years can only with difficulty continue today as there is a wider backlash against the structures that support women, such as public services, social welfare, or equality measures. Feminism has always had an international character as a global movement, but today this character is more urgently needed at the level of activism and scholarship. A great deal of work remains in national and intellectual enclaves while analytical differences among feminist scholars are not creatively utilized. This is particularly important when it becomes urgent for feminists to move the debates further and influence policy.

In the digital media world, *rights* are being defined anew—from what constitutes privacy while socializing on Facebook, to freedom of expression in the climate of securitization, to cultural and social rights for undocumented citizens. Defending sexual rights today is challenged not only by established opponents (political ideologies, churches, or cultural contexts), but also by a rather new dynamic governed by the commercialization of sexual identities and sexual citizenship. Such is the combined action of the phenomenon of mainstreaming of pornography, the sexualization of cultural icons, the dependency of mobile technologies on pornographic content, and religious and other

fundamentalisms. Feminist scholarship is deeply divided across the lines of the anti- and pro-pornography debate that dominated in the past couple of decades. Although there is probably no scope for common ground on the basis of a “comprehensive” analytical treatment and view of pornography, there is space on the grounds of porn as a labor space, by interrogating the degrees and possibilities of agency by women in the organized system of production and political pressure that pornography commands. Curiously, pornography has not been a visible object of study—or activism—for feminist *media* scholars, although it has been of course for feminists. Very few exceptions are noted in British media and cultural studies with work that provides a critique not necessarily to the phenomenon of pornography, but a broader hypersexualization of girls and women, which is part of a broader critique of the “post-feminist” era (Angela McRobbie 2008).⁵

We must interrogate more intensively the institutional and political dimensions of media and culture as they are shaped by the superstructures of state, international organizations, corporations, and civil society. We must defend human rights and the freedom of expression in the face of increased corporate control. From global satellite positioning which allows for the tracking of individuals through the Internet to the systematic violations of privacy and retention of usage data while on the Internet, citizens’ freedoms are eroded and renegotiated. What are the consequences of control and coercion, all under the rhetoric of “security” and “choice” for women’s projects of emancipation, connection, expression, and disobedience? In which ways does corporate and state control over citizens’ relation to the media affect women’s relations to the media and to each other? And while digital communication technologies are used to monitor, deter, control, and expel irregular women on the move, we, as feminist media scholars, must say more about the connections between these technologies, communication, and our mass media in the physical world. We must interrogate in detail the ways in which female detainees’ voices are silenced in the migration process and how silenced migrants and denial of their human rights enslaves “us” in the reception countries. How can we best connect feminist media scholarship to the everyday violent gagging of women’s voices which takes place at a global level and through the harmonious collaboration of the state and the privatized prison complex?

The intersections of structure, culture, politics, and those of “race,” class, age, and sexuality reveal once again, not only the difficulty in naming “women” as a homogenous group, but also the challenge to feminists to adopt what Arendt named “enlarged thought” that is sensitive to difference, yet not relativist. This form of “thought” allows us to transgress ruptures and pay attention to women’s position as laborers in the digital era, across the north-south geopolitics (Ursula Huws 2003; Catherine McKercher & Vincent Mosco 2007; Lisa McLaughlin 2008). The shaping of media and cultural labor markets by policies and practices of corporate actors is an area in which we require more research: how do women’s lives change as a consequence of the labor process? What does it mean for the female musicians to have to maintain a hypersexualized persona in the MTV era; what does it mean for our daughters and sons when confronted with their images? What does it mean for women’s sense of self, but also in practical terms, for their lives as precarious laborers of the culture industries to be continuously contactable, dispensable, and insecure? What are the ways in which media sweatshop workers in China are connected to those in the West and, most importantly, which political processes determine their fates? What turns some laborers’ fates silent (the factory worker in Mexico, the Eastern European “porn star,” the Californian web designer) while *through the media* their lives are glamorized? In which ways

do our consumption habits, our “right to pleasure” or “right to choose,” from consuming sex to iPhones cause disturbance to the lives of thousands whose families are disrupted, selling whatever they own to feed the machine of consumption, demand, accumulation, production? And how do policy regimes normalize these disturbances? How is our labor as academics connected to that of the communication and media industry worker, and how can we expand on an often sidelined strand of research on women in communications more generally (Ramona Rush, Carol Oukrop & Pamela Creedon 2004). The internationalization of feminist media studies is a paramount priority for the next step of our scholarship, despite the prohibitive research funding conditions and hostile and anti-intellectual environments in the corporate university.

Outlook

Feminist media studies is, and should be, more than studying the media *from* a “feminist perspective.” It instead *provides* perspective. Its most important functions are to continuously open up the fields of interrogation and the spaces for construction of knowledges; to support with scholarly evidence and analysis everyday activisms and political claims for social change; and to hold accountable “mainstream” research, that is research that assumes universality based on dominant norms of hegemonic masculinities. In that respect, feminist theory, research, analysis, and action, although still firmly positioned at the center of the question “where are the women?” embraces questions about humanity. Feminist analysis can be found as an integral core axis in many works whose first rank focus may not be women, but which, by following feminist epistemological principles, shape the quality of scholarship as an integral part of a politics of emancipation. Feminist thinking, the kind which requires awareness of the position of the “matrix of domination” (Patricia Hill Collins 1990), allows for the understanding of interlocking and overlapping models of oppression, hence organically integrating “mainstream” scholarship and feminist “perspectives.” To be clear, the aim is not to go “undercover,” nor to divert energy away from feminist research. It is rather to provide recognition for the politics of scholarship that is informed by feminist thought. In that respect, feminist research in media is an epistemological system for the unearthing and articulation of the *right* questions about the conditions under which mediations are governed, constructed, defined, and determined. These questions bring us closer to a more accurate mapping of the human condition that is sensitive to difference and diversity, unruliness and proximity, convergences and divergences.

NOTES

1. The “curious feminist” approach as coined by Cynthia Enloe is the framework which instinctively, systematically, and epistemologically many great feminist media and communication scholars have adopted, asking the central question “where are the women?” even before Enloe’s articulation. See, for example, the original 1972 study into the status of women in media communications by Rush and Oukrop and the thirty-year update (Rush, Oukrop & Creedon 2004).
2. See reports on suicides by France Telecom workers, [Online] Available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,649715,00.html>.

3. See also Barbara Ehrenreich (2009).
4. As an example, the suggestion that *there is* a link between sexualization of everyday culture and mainstreaming of porn to the global sex-trafficking industry and violence against women and girls in everyday life is dismissed as mere “moral panics.” This is despite the evidence around us and despite the industry’s action to monetize sexuality. Reaction to a UK report on sexualization of culture and violence against women from a feminist media scholar and member of the advisory board of this journal was “they treat women as victims again” (Linda Papadopoulos 2010, p. 100) as it were wrong to identify women and girls as victims of a broad context within which sexuality is commercialized, the female body is objectified, and female artists cannot make it to MTV unless they are stripped of any personality traits that do not conform to pornographic clues.
5. In the meantime, feminist activists are adopting clearer positions about the role of pornography in everyday culture with some notable moments, such as the Papadopoulos (2010) report in the UK or the new campaign of the European Women’s Lobby regarding prostitution.

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