

# The Geography of Women and Media Scholarship

Carolyn M. Byerly

*Knowledge work is full of complexities. Knowledge workers deal with the ideas that can free minds or shackle them. Knowledge workers are individuals, each with his or her own story, but all live their lives within networks of power and control.*

(Mosco and McKercher, 2008, p. ix)

## Mapping the Terrain

The goal of this chapter is to revisit what is usually referred to as the ‘women and media’ literature, not to comprehensively review all that has been done to date – that would be too big a task for the space allotted – but rather to map it, historically and currently. The discussion will seek to define what might be called the international geography of the women and media literature, to scope out some of the strands (or paths) that its scholars have followed, and to point out some of the major promontories (or developments) along the way. In the process, I will situate the collection of new articles in the present section of this book, calling attention to the ways they move women’s media scholarship forward. The discussion will also identify some of the roads less traveled by feminist media scholars, including those needing further exploration. The main media that I will be concerned with throughout the discussion is news media, though the Internet, advertising, music, film, and entertainment television will occasionally also be mentioned.

## Early Formations

The women and media research landscape took shape in the 1970s as issues moved from popular political fronts into the academies of Europe, the US, Canada, Latin America, India, and elsewhere. The issues had erupted locally as smaller-scale

skirmishes that led to larger campaigns. The most vigorous attention was generated by women's opposition to certain imagery of females. Women in locales as far apart as Bombay, India and Los Angeles, California, for example, were protesting publishers' use of graphics featuring over-sexualized and abused women in their advertisements (Ellis, 1990; Byerly and Ross, 2006). Simultaneously, women across Europe and the US were holding 'take back the night' marches to protest the explosion of hardcore pornography in mainstream media. They demanded that media companies stop showing bruised, bleeding, and dismembered females in films, advertisements, magazines, and other forms of popular culture. In the process, they were also calling for an end to the exploitation of real-life women who worked as pornography models by an increasingly visible and lucrative industry. These activities served to advance a feminist analysis of sexual violence as a primary instrument of women's subjugation by men, a forerunner to media effects research on the impact of hardcore pornography on users (Lederer, 1980; Ellis, 1990).

On a different front, women's organizations were seeking to increase visibility in the news for women's political campaigns to achieve equality through legislative reforms related to rape and domestic violence, equal pay, job discrimination, and other civil rights (Barker-Plummer, 2010). To be sure, those engaged in women's rights movements since the nineteenth century had recognized that their political success required getting into the mainstream news of the day if they were to succeed (Kielbowicz and Scherer, 1986). As Barker-Plummer (2010) has observed more recently, the news has historically played a critical role in the circulation and mediation of ideas that challenge the status quo, ultimately helping to legitimize social movements and set new policy agendas (p. 145). Addressing the news coverage of women's activities, therefore, has been an indispensable part of feminist strategies for change.

The global context for women's advancement had been set in motion by a series of earlier events, among them the United Nations' establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1947. The commission was given the role of setting standards for women's rights and encouraging governments to remove obstacles to women's education and participation in their societies (United Nations, 1995, pp. 14–15). The advancement of women proceeded slowly through the post-World-War-II years of the 1950s, but mobilization built rapidly during the 1960s, according to Boulding (1992, p. 317). In the industrialized nations, women were seeking to enter paid workforces in ever greater numbers in the midst of mobilizing feminist movements. In the emerging independent states that either just had or were still in the process of throwing off their colonial yokes, women were finding their own political ground. Energized by participation in liberation movements, women in India and across Africa, for example, had begun to take a more active part in public life through the process of nation building. Women gained increased political sophistication through these activities, one aspect of which was to set forth specific agendas for gender equality within their nations. By the 1970s, women had formed loose networks across nations through anti-war movements, national development, women's business, and other activities.

As the United Nations Decade for Women (1976–1985) began, women in most nations had established non-governmental organizations aimed at empowering and advancing women's social, economic, and political agendas (Boulding, 1992, pp. 314–316). The program for action that emerged from the first meeting of the United Nations Decade for Women, held in Mexico City in summer 1976, set forth a feminist media critique that would define practical remedies as well as scholarly agendas for years to come. First, it noted, women were ignored by the serious media (i.e. news). Second, when women were included in media content, their experiences and images were often stereotyped or distorted. Third, women were blocked from entry into media professions and thereby unable to affect the production of content with regard to gender (Byerly, 1995). The essential three-part critique (i.e. absence, representation, employment/production) came to include a fourth – consumption – when feminist media scholars in the 1970s began to ask how women engage with and respond to what they see and hear in the media.

## **Major Strands**

### **Representation**

Inquiry into women's media representation has come to form the broad avenue down which the majority of feminist media scholars have taken their work. There is a kind of logic operating in this tendency. Content is, after all, what establishes the fundamental media–audience relationship – it is what is seen and heard that communicates facts, ideas, values, and meanings. Objectionable content was what motivated grassroots women's groups to protest and take action several decades ago, and it remains a major impetus for both popular and academic feminist responses today.

Most research on women's media representation is concerned with stereotypes of women that have pervaded the imagery of popular culture for decades. It is conducted mainly using an interpretive (qualitative) approach associated with cultural studies, as pioneered by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the UK in the 1970s. Textual analysis, framing analysis, semiotics, ethnography, and social critique are among the most common methodologies in representational research. These approaches, according to Kellner (2011), enable scholars to 'show how media articulate the dominant values, political ideologies, and social developments and novelties of the era' (p. 8).

Concern about masculine ideology, which in various ways manifests itself in image or story to reinforce longstanding values of men's superiority over (and dominance of) women, is central to representational research. Masculine ideology references patriarchy (i.e. hegemonic masculinity), something that has seemed to perpetuate itself in cultural products through the years in spite of active women's popular movements that challenge it and feminist scholarship that lays bare its presence.

One line of such research focuses on what more recently has been called the ‘pornographication of women’; that is, everyday erotic depictions of women being sexually subordinated and denigrated, depictions that have increased in their prevalence on television, in advertising and video games, and in other popular genres (Caputi, 2008; Meyers, 2008). Caputi’s (2008) cross-cultural examination of sex and violence in media revealed there is no shortage of these objectionable images, some of which are both sexist and racist. Collins (2004) similarly problematizes the sexualized images of black and Latina women, which she says

persist through a disconnected mélange of animal skins, sexually explicit lyrics, breast worship, and focus on the booty. [Hip-hop group] Destiny’s Child may entertain and titillate; yet, their self-definitions as ‘survivors’ and ‘independent women’ express female power and celebration of the body and booty. (2004, p. 29)

Collins’ work is particularly important to contemporary interpretive analyses of gender and race in women’s media stereotypes in that she examines these in relation to the economic interests of a wealthy, nearly all-white male class. She recognizes, for instance, that ‘the women in Destiny’s Child are also wealthy,’ and she asks, ‘Just who is being “controlled” in these arenas? For what purpose?’ (p. 29). Collins likens today’s popular images of black female sexuality to the historical images of slave women dominated by their white male owners – familiar images in the Americas, Africa, and elsewhere that can still be marketed today. While recognizing that ‘black popular culture is indicative of larger political and economic forces on the macro level that in turn influence the micro level of everyday behavior among African Americans’ (p. 17), Collins avoids offering a political economic analysis, relying instead on discourse analysis to engage a study of black sexual politics in today’s mass media (p. 17).

In studying the representation of women in media, Parameswaran (2002) and Riordan (2004) are among the feminist postcolonial and Marxist scholars, respectively, who *do* factor in the continued colonization of women of color by white men through film and other cultural products today. What they bring to their research on women’s representation in media is a useful, complex methodology that moves beyond the interpretive methods of cultural studies to place colonial relations and capitalist economic structures centrally in their examinations. Parameswaran and Riordan are part of an emerging group of feminist media scholars who consider both micro-level (i.e. content) and macro-level (i.e. structural) aspects of problems associated with women’s media representation. For example, in their separate, complementary critiques of the internationally acclaimed film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), both authors, in their own ways, take film companies to task for subverting strong female characters by making them ultimately familiar stereotypes of feminine prowess, while at the same time packaging Asian culture as exotic, oriental – a western hegemonic representation. Riordan’s political economy analysis calls attention to the power of today’s media conglomerates that finance and distribute such films to ‘put forth a particular world view [...] one that

minimizes the achievements of feminism [...] and creates women as desirable objects for men.’ (2004, p. 99).

A significant amount of representational research has concerned women as the subjects of news, a media genre long considered to confer legitimacy on women’s issues and political goals. One oft-quoted study is Rakow and Kranich’s (1991) investigation of television news in the late 1980s to determine both the number of women used as sources in news stories and the ways that women function within story narratives. Their semiotic analysis of more than 1200 television programs drew from conceptual work in anthropology, psychoanalysis, and film studies that had already posed the notion that women serve ‘as signifier for the male other’ within a symbolic system in which men are permitted to live out their fantasies of domination both linguistically and through images they create. Rakow and Kranich found that women were most likely to appear as private (not public) individuals, serving as ‘signs of the times’ or as ‘signs of support’ (i.e. for new public policies) but seldom as experts or leaders in public roles.

One of the more ambitious undertakings aiming to determine the representation of women in news about a woman-related event – the annual celebration of International Women’s Day on March 8 – was the 10-nation study coordinated by French sociologists Bonnafeous and Coulomb-Gully (2007). Using critical discourse analysis, their collaborators in European and North American nations found that the amount, as well as the type, of coverage the event received relied on a range of variables that included the status of women’s rights in a given nation and the relationship that the nation had to socialism. International Women’s Day was originally posed as a day of celebration by the Second Socialist International in 1910 and subsequently proclaimed by the United Nations in 1977. In some cases, as in the former Eastern European state of Romania, for example, Beciu (2007) noted that the news coverage of International Women’s Day would, before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, ‘annex the day to the communist propaganda machine’ (p. 122). By contrast, in this postcommunist era, she found the coverage shifted its propaganda function toward capitalism, restructuring March 8 ‘as a real advertising concept’ (Beciu, 2007, p. 122).

Similarly interested in news coverage of women’s movement events, Claudia Bucciferro’s *CHILEAN WOMEN IN CHANGING TIMES* considers news relating to Chilean women at a time of cultural change, focusing on the social understandings of mainstream media images. The study comes on the heels of Michelle Bachelet’s election as Chile’s first female president, an event the author says brought the feminist movement into prominence in that South American nation. Her research questions whether and how newspaper, magazine, and other media representations convey the realities that women across social classes encounter daily. One of the study’s major contributions to the research on women’s media representation is methodological, via gendered adaptations of historical analysis to track the ways in which news reported women leaders and ordinary women through years when the nation was undergoing political and economic upheavals. At the same time, the research helps to situate Chile, a nation in the global South, within the larger framework of economic globalization as it relates to women.

News representation of women political leaders is also the subject of Ibrosheva and Stover's *THE GIRLS OF PARLIAMENT*, an analysis of the press coverage of female politicians in Bulgaria. The study takes a historical approach in its textual analysis of the news about women political leaders over a period of years, dating from 1945, when the nation became communist, up to 2009, some 20 years after this Eastern European nation rejected communism. Ibrosheva and Stover compare news during and after communism, asking whether and how representations of women in politics changed. Like Bucciferro, Ibrosheva and Stover also consider women's social class in their analysis, but within two unique contexts – one in which state manipulation of the print media was common, the other in which a newly independent commercial press determined news focus.

Though emerging from nations across the globe from each other, the studies of Bucciferro and of Ibrosheva and Stover share a commonality in their research goals and in their findings. In both cases, their work shows that media coverage still conforms to a deeply engrained patriarchal ideology of women in both elective office and within the broader public sphere.

### Absence

A substantial amount of women and media research has concerned the problem of invisibility – that is, women's absence in news and in lead television roles. Gallagher's (1981) review of the early literature on women and media found that 'perhaps the most important image is, in fact, a "non-image": it is the absence of women in the media output which becomes the most striking, once it has been highlighted' (p. 72). She noted that research from all regions of the world, particularly in radio and television, grossly ignored women. Tuchman (1978a) characterized such absence as the 'symbolic annihilation' of women by the media. Reporters have typically preferred women celebrities or those connected to powerful male figures as the focus for stories. Lang (1978) was an early researcher to note that, for women to become newsworthy in the 1970s, they had to have 'mothered, married, or been sired by a man of achievement' (p. 148).

Determining the extent to which women, their interests, and their perspectives have been incorporated into news and other media genres has typically required quantitative approaches. The most common methods have been content analysis, thematic analysis, and framing analysis (when the last of these includes a quantitative aspect). All of these require sampling procedures to first define a data set from a larger universe of stories or programs. Next, researchers perform systematic procedures in order to quantify certain aspects of the content, for example, sources, story themes, length, and other variables. The statistical findings that these studies produce reveal, for example, how many characters in prime-time television are females, how many news sources are female, and the extent to which issues raised by women's movements are incorporated into news or programming content.

Media monitoring organizations have shouldered much of the longitudinal research since the 1990s that has aimed to trace patterns in the news' incorporation of women's interests, issues, and voices in reporting. Among these, the Global Media Monitoring

Project (GMMP) is the longest running and most extensive. Sponsored by the Toronto-based World Association for Christian Communication, GMMP uses volunteer (mostly university-based) researchers, who employ a standard coding instrument to examine a single day's news in television, radio, Internet, and newspaper sources in nations across the world. The third round, conducted in 2009, had participation from 105 nations. The study found that 'women are still significantly under-represented and misrepresented in news media coverage,' with women mentioned in only 24 percent of the approximately 1400 stories examined – up from 17 percent in 1995, when the GMMP's first round was conducted. Similarly to Rakow and Kranich (1991)'s findings nearly two decades earlier, the 2010 GMMP report stated that 'expert commentary is overwhelmingly male' with only one in five experts quoted being female.

Vanessa de M. Higgins et al. (2008), who reviewed research on women and news in Latin America and the Caribbean, concluded that reporting in those nations is still performed through a 'patriarchal lens.' In other words, the news largely finds little of newsworthiness in women's lives or contributions. This longstanding, cross-cultural pattern was noted decades ago by researchers such as Sprafkin and Liebert (1978), who found that reporters not only generally ignored women but also, when they did cover issues relating to women, showed a proclivity for those who fitted the stereotype of 'ideal woman' – that is, a caring wife and mother rather than one of the upstart feminists who were challenging social norms (Tuchman, 1978b).

In my own work (Byerly, 2008) I have observed that feminist journalists working in newsrooms have sometimes been able to bring their male editors and colleagues to gender consciousness, resulting in increased coverage of women from a pro-movement perspective. But such advances have been uneven and fewer than they might have been given the strength of women's movements globally. Even high-profile feminist events have received minimal or questionable coverage. For example, in reviewing research on the scant news coverage that United Nations-sponsored conferences relating to the status of women have received since 1975, Barker-Plummer (2010) concluded that 'it seems that women's issues are still not "real news" even at a global conference about women.' In addition, she stated, complex issues about women tended to be oversimplified and reduced to 'pro' or 'con' positions instead of explained in greater detail and complexity (p. 189). Illustrating Barker-Plummer's conclusions are studies such as Danner and Walsh's (1998) comparison of the coverage for the Beijing +10 United Nations women's meeting, held in 1995, which found major US dailies emphasized conflict, protest, and women leaders' unfeminine manners – emphases that the authors found to constitute a backlash frame, trivializing feminism's goals and achievements.

### Employment/production

Women seeking to enter media professions in the last few decades of the twentieth century saw an important role for themselves in enlarging women's public sphere. Their push to enter media professions in greater numbers in the 1970s was driven, in part, by their presumption that becoming a greater part of this particular workforce would help to expand both the amount and quality of visibility for women – in

news, television, and elsewhere (Gallagher, 1981, p. 79). Women's hope to reshape news and other media content via employment may be understood as one aspect of gaining greater control over the means of media production and the content that would result from that production.

Scholarship on women's place in the production aspects of media has been conducted using both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The former has included the collection of statistical data on employment by gender in the various media genres; the latter has included a range of methodologies, including ethnography, interviews, surveys, and other forms of data collection and analysis.

By the 1970s, women were entering the paid labor force in substantial numbers. Citing figures from the International Labor Organization at the beginning of this trend, Gallagher (1981) noted that most women were finding jobs in service industries. Far fewer – a quarter or less in most nations – were able to secure employment in news and other media. Those who did gain access met with significantly lower pay than men. Gallagher noted that they also encountered job segregation, landing very few media jobs that had any managerial or creative authority to determine content decisions (pp. 87–89).

A significant amount of the women's media employment research has been conducted by independent researchers and non-academic organizations over the years. For example, Ammu Joseph (2005), a journalist and media monitor, conducted the most comprehensive examination of women in journalism in India, a nation where women began moving into mainstream reporting in the 1940s and 1950s, after the nation's liberation from the UK (p. 20). Joseph's face-to-face interviews with 200 Indian women journalists revealed widespread frustration with job conditions that included sexual harassment, segregation into jobs with less challenge and pay, and glass ceilings (i.e. blocks to advancement based on gender), among other things. Independent researcher Margaret Gallagher, whose work has contributed substantially to the building of an international literature on women and media since the 1970s, was the first to conduct a global investigation of women's employment in media industries (Gallagher, 1995). With UNESCO sponsorship, Gallagher surveyed 239 companies (both news and other forms of media) in 43 nations. Among other things, she found a pattern of stratification by gender in media employment in which women occupied on average only 12 percent of the top management positions and around a third of the jobs in production. Women were also seriously under-represented at other levels of the company hierarchy in most regions of the world, with exceptions found in Nordic and Eastern Europe.

The Johannesburg-based Gender Links organization has conducted two studies on the location of women in newsroom hierarchies in the southern Africa region since 2005. The group's Glass Ceilings study found that men significantly outnumbered women in most of the 15 nations surveyed, that women hit the glass ceiling at senior management, that men are more likely to be assigned bigger stories in hard news (e.g. politics, investigative), and that men are more likely to be employed in full-time regular jobs than women (Made and Morna, 2010).



My own recent (2011) research, under the sponsorship of the International Women's Media Foundation, updates and expands on Gallagher's 1995 work by surveying 522 news companies in 59 nations.<sup>1</sup> For instance, there remains a pattern of gender segregation in newsrooms across most regions, particularly in governance and management. Like Gallagher, I found the exception to this to be in Scandinavian countries and parts of Eastern Europe, where women are nearly at parity with or have surpassed men in almost all job categories. Among the 522 companies, there were three major employment patterns that emerged along gender lines. The most common (44 percent) was women's under-representation in all or most job categories in companies; the second most common (34 percent) was the glass ceiling; and the third most common (22 percent) was women's relative parity with men, particularly in the occupations most directly associated with news reporting.

Some smaller-scale academic studies have focused on women's media employment by nation or across several nations. Lafky (1993) examined the US journalism workforce by gender and race over a period of 10 years, finding a consistent pattern of low representation for both. Froelich (2007) compared employment patterns by gender across 10 European and North American nations, finding that women occupied between 26 and 39 percent of the journalism jobs, except for in Finland, where the figure was 51 percent (p. 165). Robinson (2005) compared employment patterns in Canada and US broadcast and newspaper newsrooms, finding, among other things, that harassment and stereotyping by male peers and supervisors contributed to a glass ceiling that blocked women's advancement (p. 112). Robinson's inclusion of a sound and lengthy critique of other (mostly male) scholars' neglect of gender relations in even the most widely acclaimed news studies, as well as her insistence that future studies of women's media employment must be examined within globalized industry structures, make this book a particularly valuable contribution to the literature.

Mosco and McKercher (2008) situate women's (and men's) media employment within the knowledge industries, which they observe are increasingly converged technologically, financially, and through their ownership. Their research concerns are mainly with the ways in which labor is affected by these changes at the macro level and how jobs are stratified along gender lines within a range of communication industries, including wireless, telecommunications, film, publishing, and so on. The authors question whether and how trade unions might intervene on the workers' behalf, to prevent job loss through outsourcing and other manifestations of globalizing media industries.

### Consumption

While the research on women media audiences remains one of the understudied aspects of the women-media relationship, its small literature forms an important strand. Moreover, new developments in media technology, which engage the audience in innovative ways, suggest the audience as exciting terrain for future research. Audiences have always been difficult for scholars to study; as Bird (2003) observes, 'Audiences are both everywhere and nowhere' (p. 3). Media audiences

are what she calls ‘firmly anchored in the web of culture,’ difficult to separate out and study in relation to how they interact with media and how the media affect them when so many forms of media images and messages overlap other sources of information and imagery. Ross (2004) emphasizes that the media audience is also difficult to study for reasons of time and cost (p. 60). Audience research tends to engage qualitative methods – interviews, ethnography (using participant observation and interview), and focus groups. Such research requires lead time for planning and development of instruments, often a budget for travel or hiring assistants, and additional time to transcribe and code interviews or other data.

Research on media audiences dates from the 1940s, and began with studies on the nearly all-female audience of radio soap operas (Ross, 2004, p. 57). A feminist analysis did not really enter audience research until much later, in large part through the development of ethnographic audience work at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which has had a far-reaching impact. Radway’s (1984) ethnographic study of US women who read romance novels suggested that, while women’s consumption of romantic fiction might be seen as a way of reinforcing patriarchal norms, it was the very act of reading that situated their consumption as a resistant practice. Time for reading is time for oneself, an act of independence and self-sought pleasure, Radway concluded. Parameswaran (2002) would later build on Radway’s work on the other side of the world, exploring the implications of young Indian women’s reading of Western romances. Parameswaran’s contribution was a more complex ethnographic approach, factoring in a feminist Marxist postcolonial analysis of how the fictional content contributed to young readers’ identities with regard to sexuality, consumerism, and nation.

Karen Ross’ empirical work on the woman audience is extensive, spanning several nations and focusing on a range of issues with women of varied social class and occupational levels. Ross’ (1995) study of the British female news audience, for example, showed that, contrary to other scholars’ views, her participants did watch the news, and they were able to respond to the ways the news did – and did not – reflect their own interests, including political interests. Ross (2004) also interviewed women elected officials in numerous nations about their relationships with media, repeatedly hearing that these leaders believe reporters to be more interested in their physical appearance and dress, sex appeal, family life, and personality traits than in their views or performance in office.

In this emerging age of digital communication, women have found a new feminist public sphere through the Internet, creating news sites, blogs, and informational websites for their organizations. In addition, email transfers an enormous amount of information within and across nations round the clock. The extent to which women participate in, control, and benefit from these new digital formats – spaces where public and private selves find their outlet in the cyber world – offers new conceptual and empirical ground for research on women media audiences. There was even a moment, around 2002, when women in some nations (e.g. Canada and the US) were outnumbering men in Internet usage (Weiss, 2008, p. 120). Data since have suggested a widening gender gap in cyberspace, however. Meraz’s

(2008) study of the most-visited blog sites for the years 2002–2005 show that most were written by men, with women authoring 25 percent or less of the items posted. Men dominate particularly in online reporting on war, politics, and other traditional ‘hard news’ topics. The data are less definitive as to whether women are on par with or surpass men in other subject areas; however, some research suggests that well over a third (37 percent) of blogs today are created for ‘personal writing’ of various kinds (p. 129).

Three chapters in the present volume engage with women’s use of – and concerns about – the Internet in terms of the relationship between its female consumers and the messages and images it presents of them. Erin A. Meyers’ *GOSSIP BLOGS AND ‘BABY BUMPS,’* on gossip blogs concerned with celebrity pregnancy – ‘baby bumps’ – questions whether celebrity blogs give audiences access to the truthful, authentic lives of celebrities or whether they use celebrity to reinforce ideologies of the self that circulate in modern society. Meyers’ study is centrally concerned with a private event (i.e. pregnancy) that is projected into the celebrities’ public personae via the media (in this case, a blog site). She examined several popular blog sites that carried a series of stories speculating on which female celebrities were pregnant (i.e. ‘the baby bump watch’). Meyers casts this story genre as a particular symptom of gendered discourse arising from celebrity culture that treats women’s bodies as a site of social meaning. Her analysis shows that the baby bump watch is about much more than blog authors’ concerns about motherhood or biological reproduction in celebrity lives, and is rather a way of reinforcing norms for proper female celebrity behavior. While stopping short of asking how consumers of celebrity blogs respond, her research opens the door for a future (audience) study on just that.

Online discourse about women’s bodies and selves is also addressed by Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish’s *VIRTUALLY BLONDE*, on blonde jokes now circulating globally, in multiple languages, on the Internet. The authors located more than 400,000 – many more than for ethnic jokes or lawyer jokes, two categories with many similarities – on the Internet. As part of a communications network encircling the Earth, the Internet user (i.e. audience member) assumes the role of both consumer and producer of content. While the authors focus mainly on the history, structure, and possible meanings of blonde jokes, they also engage in a useful discussion on the social uses of these genderized, politicized forms of humor. This last point brings the Internet audience into view as having multiple roles that function centrally in the proliferation and continual revision of these jokes.

The female Internet user who doubles as a content producer is specifically taken up in Ilana Eleá’s ethnographic chapter, *FANFICTION AND WEBNOVELAS*, on adolescent girls, a rarely studied media audience. Eleá’s chapter follows and examines the communication among members of four digital communities in which those who join assume fake identities and engage in storytelling through ‘webnovelas’ that they create. The author notes that Internet use is particularly high in Brazil, including among young users, something that makes her research both timely and useful in better understanding an understudied Internet audience who, in this

instance, use their webnovelas for both immediate gratification (e.g. to shape their emerging sexual identities) and to advance their future aspirations as writers.

## Exploring the Roads Less Traveled

The preceding discussion has, admittedly, barely touched the surface of the vast amount of women and media research conducted from a feminist perspective. The literature formed by this research has grown before my own eyes over the late twentieth and early twenty-first century as books and articles have appeared in English and many other languages. This has been an energetic, exciting process in which to assume the multiple roles of observer, participant, and critic. The critic bears the responsibility of showing not just what is lacking, poorly done, or otherwise imperfect about her field, but also encouraging new scholarship to fill the gaps.

### Finance, policy, and ownership

Feminist media scholars have barely paid attention to the macro-level aspects of the media that form the structures within which media operate and content is produced. To leave these ‘big picture’ dimensions of media unexamined means that content is alienated from that which gives it life. Examination of content as a disembodied phenomenon means that any analysis will always be partial, incomplete, and, some might argue, flawed. Similarly, any study of women’s occupational status in media industries that fails to consider the larger framework of men’s economic and professional power in those industries means that women’s labor will only be partially explained and understood. Leaving such gaping chasms of knowledge unattended also means that those working on the front lines of social change will lack the information needed to craft practical, achievable strategies for change.

In this regard, it bears noting that the macro-level dimensions of money and control are masculine domains, dominated by wealthy men who possess immeasurable power to control not just media content, hiring, and firing, but also public policy and other aspects of institutional life in the larger society. Further feminist analyses of the concentration of media ownership (i.e. the conglomeration of companies resulting from deregulation), globalization, and the public and corporate policies that lead to them are needed to reveal where women are situated, how they benefit and/or are harmed, and how they can enter more actively to intervene as change agents. I am not alone in calling for scholarly attention to these issues by feminist media researchers. Meehan and Riordan (2002), Joseph (2005), and Robinson (2005) are among those who have also called for greater attention to macro issues and made their own works an example of how to proceed.

### Struggle and its progeny

Women's longstanding struggles to change mainstream media companies or media content similarly remain under-investigated phenomena. The kind of skirmishes referenced at the beginning of this chapter have been innumerable through recent decades across the world, yet most have not been remarked upon by feminist scholars, let alone examined. The scholarly ground they offer up is rich and compelling. For example, few know that the three-year boycott of Warner-Elektra-Asylum Records waged by Women Against Violence Against Women in the US between 1976 and 1979 resulted in the company's adoption of a corporate policy to stop using images of violence perpetrated against women.<sup>2</sup> What has become of that policy? Have other media companies established similar ground rules for visual communication? What other substantive social changes have women's strategies and campaigns for media reform produced?

Until the process of struggle represented by women's media activism against large media corporations is more fully examined and theorized, the dialectical nature of gender relations with respect to media cannot be fully understood. Such knowledge is needed to provide a more accurate assessment of what feminism's impact has been over time with respect to the women-and-media relationship. I have criticized feminist research that remains trapped in the 'paradigm of the misogynist media,' showing only that media representation and relations continue to stereotype, exclude, or otherwise marginalize women without seeking to show how feminism has also served to imbed itself in media content, media policies, or other aspects of media industries (Byerly 2008). A mature feminist media scholarship that now, in the 2010s, enters its fourth decade, and that has soundly established itself as an interdisciplinary practice, is ready to consider not just women's marginalization but also the ways women have come into their own power through historical process. Women's relationship with the media industries (and the popular culture they serve up) is in the end a dynamic – not static – one that begs to be examined in all of its stages and manifestations.

### Theory building

Theories are overarching explanations for specific phenomena. Feminist theory has typically been built in one of two ways: by adapting existing general theories (most developed by male scholars) to build in a gender dimension or by posing a new theory to specifically explain an existing or new woman-related problem. Feminist political economy, as advanced by Meehan and Riordan (2002), factors gender into the existing political economy theory, thereby expanding the ontological and epistemological ground for examining women's relationship to media industries. The case made by these authors is that 'all media structures, agents, processes, and expressions find their *raison d'être* in relationships shaped by sex and money' (p. x).

In my work with Karen Ross (Byerly and Ross, 2006), we combined these two methods by extending Habermas' conceptual framework for the democratic public sphere to create the concept of a 'feminist public sphere,' and we then placed the feminist public sphere as central to our 'model of women's media action.' The model's purpose is to show both the structure of women's media activism and how such activism has operated within women's liberation movements over time. Models fall short of being full-fledged theories; rather, they show relationships between aspects of a process that work together to produce an outcome. Because models are incomplete, the model of women's media action challenges feminist media scholars to pose a more complete theory to explain the dialectical process formed by women's challenges to the androcentric media industries that operated without women's interests in mind.

Feminist communication scholars Rakow and Kranich (1991), as previously discussed, are credited with giving the construct 'woman as sign' a place in feminist media theory by using it to investigate specific ways in which women function as 'sign' with specific symbolic meanings in television news. Rakow and Wackwitz (2004) have recently challenged feminist media scholars to work with concepts such as 'voice' and 'representation' to engage in the making of feminist media theory.

Looking broadly across disciplines offers much material to draw from. For example, feminist media scholars might well consider extending the important theory building of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2000), whose black feminist thought places both gender and race at the center of the dialectic of African American women's oppression and activism in intellectual, academic, and public life. Collins' (2004) later work takes the concept to a global dimension. Her work overlaps the concerns of media scholars when she applies black feminist thought to an analysis of cultural products, particularly music, to show how racialized (e.g. white-owned) media industries exploit black men's and women's images to institute what she theorizes as a 'new racism.' The new racism recognizes that the large amount of money paid to men and women video and hip hop artists (among others) is part of a globalized pattern of white racial dominance. Collins says, 'The new racism also relies more heavily on mass media to reproduce and disseminate the ideologies needed to justify racism' and she recognizes that

[T]he films, music, magazines, music videos and television shows of global entertainment, advertising, and news industries that produce superstars like Jennifer Lopez help manufacture the consent that makes the new racism appear to be natural, normal and inevitable. (2004, p. 35)

The task of feminist media scholars is ultimately to bring deeper understandings of the gendered dimensions of media products and the industries that produce them. Empirical research, as well as social critique and theory building, will better enable both intellectuals and others to engage in some form of praxis – meaningful engagement with the world. University-based feminist and other critical scholars often

ignore the women and men active in popular political fronts who continue to work for more egalitarian societies. Feminist and other critical scholars' work would benefit from taking keener note of the political activities that feminist front-line workers in media reform, media-related union advocacy, and other efforts are engaged in so that they can better place their intellectual work in the service of social change.

## Notes

- 1 Through a partnership between IWMF and Gender Links, this research incorporates data from nine nations in southern Africa into its findings.
- 2 I was an active participant in that campaign, which began in Los Angeles after the record company launched its 'I'm black and blue by the rolling stones and I love it' advertisement. Led by feminists who organized more than a dozen chapters of Women Against Violence Against Women across the country, grassroots activism focused on educating parents and others about the potential harms of such cover art and on picketing local music stores that carried the posters advertising the Rolling Stones album. Women Against Violence Against Women leaders eventually ended the campaign when the CEO of Warner-Elektra-Asylum records agreed to withdraw record covers depicting violence against women and to adopt a corporate policy against such graphics.

## References

- Barker-Plummer, B. (2010). News and feminism: A historic dialog. *Journalism & Communication Monographs*, 12(3 & 4), 143–203.
- Beciu, C. (2007). Le 8 mars roumain: Un concept publicitaire. *Science de la Société* (Femme et medias: Le 8 mars à la 'une': Une comparaison internationale), 70, 122–137.
- Bird, S. E. (2003). *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Mediated World*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Bonnafous, S. and Coulomb-Gully, M. (2007). La journée internationale des femmes en France. Entre marronnier et foulard islamique. *Science de la Société* (Femme et medias: Le 8 mars à la 'une': Une comparaison internationale), 70, 81–96.
- Boulding, E. (1992). *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time*, Vol. 2 (revised ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Byerly, C. M. (1995). News, consciousness and social participation. In A. N. Valdivia (Ed.), *Feminism, Multiculturalism and the Media* (pp. 105–122). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Byerly, C. M. (2008). The dialectical relationship of women and media. In M. Meyers (Ed.), *Women in Popular Culture: Representation and Meaning* (pp. 257–276). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Byerly, C. M. (2011). *Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media*. Washington, DC: International Women's Media Foundation.
- Byerly, C. M. and Ross, K. (2006). *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction*. New Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Caputi, J. (2008). A (bad) habit of thinking challenging and changing the pornographic worldview. In M. Meyers (Ed.), *Women in Popular Culture: Representation and Meaning* (pp. 29–56). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York and London: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2004). *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender and the New Racism*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Coulomb-Gully, M. (2007). Aux 'une' citoyennes! Introduction à une comparaison internationale de la médiatisation du 8 mars. *Science de la Société (Femme et medias: Le 8 mars à la 'une': Une comparaison internationale)*, 70, 3–18.
- Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. (2000). Film. A. Lee (Dir.). Taiwan, Hong Kong, United States, and China: EDKO Film and Sony Pictures Classics.
- Danner, L. and Walsh, L. (1998). Backlash in the U.S. media. In A. Anand and G. Salvi (Eds.), *Beijing! U. N. Fourth World Conference on Women* (pp. 215–226). New Delhi: Women's Feature Service.
- Ellis, K. (1990). I'm black and blue from the Rolling Stones and I'm not sure how I feel about it: Pornography and the feminist imagination. In K. V. Hansen and I. J. Philipson (Eds.), *Women, Class and the Feminist Imagination* (pp. 431–450). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Froelich, R. (2007). Three steps forward and two steps back? Women journalists in the Western world between progress, standstill and retreat. In P. J. Creedon and J. Cramer (Eds.), *Women in Mass Communication* (3rd ed.) (pp. 161–176). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Gallagher, M. (1981). *Unequal Opportunities: The Case of Women and the Media*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Global Media Monitoring Project. (2010). Women see modest gains in world news media portrayal, coverage still betrays significant gender bias. Toronto: Global Media Monitoring Project. Retrieved from <http://www.whomakesthenews.org/news/press-release-gmmp-2010-report-released.html>
- Higgins, V. de M., Correa, T., Flores, M., and Meraz, S. (2008). Women and the news: Latin America and the Caribbean. In P. Poindexter, S. Meraz, and A. Schmitz Weiss (Eds.), *Women, Men and News: Divided and Disconnected in the News Media Landscape* (pp. 239–266). New York: Routledge.
- Joseph, A. (2005). *Making News: Women in Journalism*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Kellner, D. (2011). Cultural studies, multiculturalism, and media culture. In G. Dines and J. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* (pp. 7–18). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Kielbowicz, R. and Scherer, C. (1986). The role of the press in the dynamics of social movements. *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change*, 9, 71–96.
- Lang, G. E. (1978). The most admired woman: Image-making in the news. In G. Tuchman, A. K. Daniels, and J. Benét (Eds.), *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media* (pp. 147–160). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lafky, S. A. (1993). The progress of women and people of color in the U.S. journalism workforce: A long, slow journey. In P. J. Creedon (Ed.), *Women in Mass Communication* (2nd ed.) (pp. 87–103). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lederer, L. (Ed.) (1980). *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Made, P. and Morna, C. L. (Eds.) (2010). *Glass Ceilings: Women and Men in Southern Africa Media*. Johannesburg, South Africa: Gender Links.
- Meehan, E. R. and Riordan, E. (2002). *Sex & Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.



- Meraz, S. (2008). The blogosphere's gender gap. In P. Poindexter, S. Meraz, and A. S. Weiss (Eds.), *Women, Men and News: Divided and Disconnected in the News Media Landscape* (pp. 129–151). New York and London: Routledge.
- Meyers, M. (Ed.) (2008). *Women in Popular Culture: Representation and Meaning*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Mosco, V. and McKercher, C. (2008). *The Laboring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Parameswaran, R. (2002). Reading fictions of romance: Gender, sexuality and nationalism in postcolonial India. *Journal of Communication*, 52(4), 832–852.
- Radway, J. (1984). *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rakow, L. F. and Kranich, K. (1991). Woman as sign in television news. *Journal of Communication*, 41(1), 8–23.
- Rakow, L. F. and Wackwitz, L. (2004). *Feminist Communication Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Riordan, E. (2004). The woman warrior: A feminist political economic analysis of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. In K. Ross and C. M. Byerly (Eds.), *Women and Media: International Perspectives* (pp. 81–103). New Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Robinson, G. J. (2005). *Gender, Journalism and Equity: Canadian, U.S. and European Perspectives*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Ross, K. (1995). Gender and party politics: How the press reported the Labour leadership campaign, 1994. *Media, Culture & Society*, 17(3), 499–509.
- Ross, K. (2004). Women framed: The gendered turn in mediated politics. In K. Ross and C. M. Byerly (Eds.), *Women and Media: International Perspectives* (pp. 60–80). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publications.
- Sprafkin, J. N. and Liebert, R. M. (1978). Sex-typing and children's television preferences. In G. Tuchman, A. K. Daniels, and J. Benét (Eds.), *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media* (pp. 228–239). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tuchman, G. (1978a). The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media. In G. Tuchman, A. K. Daniels, and J. Benét (Eds.), *Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media* (pp. 3–38). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tuchman, G. (1978b). *Making News: A Study in the Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Free Press.
- United Nations. (1995). *United Nations and the Advancement of Women, 1945–1995*. New York: United Nations, Department of Public Information.
- Weiss, A. S. (2008). Online news: Factors influencing the divide between women and men. In P. Poindexter, S. Meraz, and A. S. Weiss (Eds.), *Women, Men and News: Divided and Disconnected in the News Media Landscape* (pp. 117–128). New York and London: Routledge.