1

Introduction

Groups of women manipulating and producing media constitute active and widespread movements at the community level. These groups use video, radio or theater for communicating among themselves for lobbying and rights advocacy, restoration of their group and personal history, or for promoting community organization.

Pilar Riaño (1991)

Scholarly developments reflect the wider world. The emergence of feminist scholarship during the 1970s was an academic response to women's liberation movements in both local and global contexts. After two world wars and a series of national liberation movements in the first half of the century, women had begun to find their own voices and seek a more active role in public and academic life. Modern-day women's movements began to take shape during the early 1960s in both developed and developing nations, in part through the work of United Nations committees concerned with improving women's status. A network of women's independent non-governmental organizations – some of them growing out of women's peace-action and opposition to war – also provided entry points for women's cross-cultural collaboration. To be sure, women's impetus to become involved in movements for self-determination varied from place to place and person to person. In some cases, they had been inspired by national development in which women desired to participate more actively. In other cases, inspiration came from having had a taste of public life, and from the ability to develop a vision for their own and other women's

leadership. Feminist historians in a number of nations have chronicled and examined the events and personal motives that led to both local and global feminist movements by the early 1970s. For example, Amrita Basu's (1995) *The Challenge of Local Feminisms*, Elise Boulding's (1992) *The Underside of History*, and Maitrayee Chaudhuri's (2004) edited volume *Feminism in India* document the evolution of women's movements around the world, pointing out that activists from all cultures and social classes have been involved and that feminist progress is likely to endure, even as the backlash of patriarchy appears predictably everywhere to hold it back.

What is clear to us, as feminist media scholars, is that the media have played a central but not yet fully examined role in these events. The present text seeks to reveal more about the interconnections between the media and feminist movements, and, in turn, the ways in which women's communication through media extended beyond those movements into the larger societies. Thus, the title of this book, *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction*, signals the book's dual goals of taking stock of the existing (and expansive) literature on women and media while also moving beyond it. The title also conveys our intent to take a critical approach to our subject, examining gendered relations of power and both the hegemonic tendencies and emancipatory potentials of media structures. Feminist media scholarship to date has focused primarily on women's representation in the mainstream media; hence, much is known about how the portrayal of women in film, television, news, and other media has changed (or remained the same) within and across nations. Similarly, there is a growing body of work on how female audience members "read" and respond to messages and images of women. A smaller part of the literature includes feminist analyses of media structures, where men's ownership and creative control are still the norm everywhere, and where women have had a tough time gaining access to production, either as trained professionals or citizens.

Still only marginally represented in national and international feminist media studies, however, are analyses of women's own media enterprises, feminist campaigns to reform large-scale media industries, and feminist media networks. We situate our own contribution in the last (and least defined) of these inquiries, but draw heavily on the wider body of women-and-media literature to accomplish our goals. We have looked particularly to the experiences of feminist activists and media professionals for an understanding of women's agency in the use of (many kinds of) media, to develop and disperse social critiques and to spread ideas about women, from a feminist perspective. Women's media activism represents an histori-

cally significant but under-investigated and under-theorized aspect of women's relationship to contemporary media, both those media that are owned and operated by powerful men and those that women have established themselves. Also relatively under-scrutinized are the various support activities, such as community-level media monitoring, academic research, and advocacy groups that mobilize citizen action around specific women-and-media issues. We believe that these aspects of the women-and-media relationship begin to reveal the process of struggle that women have engaged in for use of media to gain a public voice, presence, and influence.

The vision for this project grew out of our respective work as feminist media scholars, whose projects through the years have sought to enlarge our realities as white academics, and to move beyond the borders of our respective Western nations, the United States and the United Kingdom. In both different and overlapping ways, we have tried to examine the perspectives, situations, challenges, and successes of women in both our own and other nations with respect to their media endeavors. In the process, we have gained a growing awareness of how much women have done in their struggles to use media to speak freely, publicly, and forcefully in their respective locales. The work of women media activists, among whom we include many who carry out their daily work in mainstream industries, is ongoing and compelling, and we believe it is central to reshaping societies everywhere. We have tried to provide a glimpse into some of these processes and outcomes in the pages to come.

Expanding Feminisms

The word *feminism* (and its derivative *feminist*), which appears throughout this book, has undergone considerable scrutiny, argument, and transformation in meaning over the years.[2] Third world women, women of color, working-class women, and others have debated the word for several decades, questioning whether a term associated with Western (white, bourgeois) origins can legitimately apply to women of other backgrounds and situations. In the process, the term has come to encompass a wide range of experiences and positionalities. We use the words feminist and feminism to refer to women's liberation movements since the 1970s that have been aimed at securing women's right to participate in their societies, including the ability to enter into public deliberation, institution building, and other processes associated with citizenship. We recognize that women's

movements have varied histories, shaped by culture, economics, political structures, and (in some cases) colonial relations. Maitrayee Chaudhuri (2004: xv–xvi) observes, for instance, that feminism in India has to be "located within the broader framework of an unequal international world," but she also asks whether hesitation to use the term might exclude women "from the feminist heritage." Such questions may arise even within a nation whose traditional feminism has been assumed to be white and European. African American feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) has reminded us that the USA is not free from its own internal colonial history, and that that history has shaped black women's feminism:

> The dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of Black women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, comprises the politics of Black feminist thought. More important, understanding this dialectical relationship is critical in assessing how Black feminist thought – its definitions, core themes, and epistemological significance – is fundamentally embedded in a political context that has challenged its very right to exist. (Hill Collins 1990: 5–6)

In addition, both white feminist scholars (e.g., Linda K. Kerber & Jane Sherron De Hart 2000) and black feminist scholars (e.g., Angela Y. Davis 1981) have explored American feminism's birth in the nineteenth-century anti-slavery movement, a moment that joined their activism in a common cause and that gives testimony to a complex multiracial US feminist history. Similarly, American feminist historian Sally Roesch Wagner (1996) has acknowledged her own cultural blindness in overlooking the deeply significant ways in which Native American women's experiences intertwine with modern US feminism. Wagner's collaborative research with women of the Iroquois nation, a confederacy of six Native American tribes in upstate New York, suggests that women's rights leaders who formed the nucleus of the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention[3] (and the work that grew out of it) took their vision for egalitarianism in male–female relationships, women's right to own property, and notions of freedom from men's violence from the Iroquois people who lived around them.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991) sought to construct a definition of *third world feminism*, but she had to begin with questions such as: "What is the third world?" "Do third world women make up a real constituency?" and "Are women's political struggles in the third world necessarily 'feminist'?" She traced the term's meaning through a number of writers from

former colonial states who showed ways in which colonial histories, social class, race, and other signifiers of power become embedded in contemporary understandings of third world feminism. Mohanty's thoughtful, comprehensive book reminds us of what she calls "the urgency and necessity to rethink feminist praxis and theory within a cross-cultural, international framework and to discuss (a) the assumption of third world women as a social category in feminist work, and (b) definitions and contests over feminism among third world women" (Mohanty 1991: 39). Some African and African American women have preferred to call themselves *womanists* instead of feminists, adopting the term popularized by US author Alice Walker in the 1980s to signify a woman who is committed to the survival of her whole people, men and woman (Walker 1981). Cheryl Johnson-Odim (1991) acknowledges that the coining of new terms (such as "womanist") demonstrates a commitment to connect feminists' struggles to those of black and third world communities that are fighting racism, economic exploitation, and other oppression. At the same time, she acknowledges that some white radical women have also understood these connections and worked for broader liberation. Johnson-Odim, who adopts a feminist identity, believes that in the process of building an international feminist movement, third world women have wrestled with both the meaning of feminism and its agenda, thereby integrating class, race, and anti-imperialism concerns into its meaning structure.

Recent writings by third world women reveal the comprehensive understanding – that is, the overlap of gender and other concerns – that Johnson-Odim refers to. For example, South African scholars Amanda Kemp, Nozizwe Madlala, Asha Moodley, and Elaine Salo (1995) found that as women have sought to constitute themselves as participants in the emerging pluralistic South African society, since the 1990s, they shaped their understanding that "ideologies of womanhood had as much to do with race as they do with sex" (p. 133). These authors also factor in concerns about national development, which they assert is bound up with women's advancement and hence their work as social activists. Thus, in articulating a politics of equality and advancement for women, black South African feminists, they say, also must raise issues such as access to clean water and housing – things not specifically defined as "feminist" (ibid.).

In this book, we take the position that such consciousness and inclusivity must inform feminist theory and the research that flows from it, regardless of national boundaries. Therefore, we have tried to inform own our text with the knowledge and lessons shared by these and other feminist scholars,

realizing with some humility that that we are still evolving and that our work may still contain blind spots. Similarly, while we have tried to make spaces in the text for women of widely ranging cultural and national contexts to speak, we make no pretense at claiming that these informants speak for all women of their respective nations or cultures. Limitations of time and space constrained our investigation and writing. Thus, what we hope to offer is groundwork for others to build on in years to come. In addition, while we make the space for others to speak, we have tried to avoid speaking for them. Throughout the book, we try to distinguish our own voices from those of the participants in our cross-cultural research, reported in Chapters 7–10. Our analysis of those participants' information was undertaken with scholarly rigor and (we hope) fairness, although we recognize that scholarship is always fraught with certain risks of error in interpretation.

An Overview of the Chapters

The book is divided into two parts. Part I reviews the existing literature on women and media, emphasizing research and theoretical work undertaken since 1970. One goal of these chapters is to point out the dialectical nature of women's relationship to media industries over these decades. The term "dialectical process" is a Hegelian concept that Marx and later critical theorists borrowed to refer to patterns of upheaval by opposing forces within any hegemonic system such as capitalism.[4] Feminist applications have focused on seeing women's emergence from subjugation in patriarchal systems as such a process, drawing particularly on Marx and Engels's understanding of history as "a natural flux of action and reaction, of opposites yet inseparable and interpenetrating" (Firestone 1970: 2–3). In earlier work (Byerly 1999), we have explained women's relationship to media as uneven and contradictory, characterized by feminism becoming deeply embedded in media messages and the industries that produce them but, at the same time, women as subject remaining marginalized and misrepresented in media content, and women professionals remaining outside production apparatuses. A second goal of Part I is to consider the ways in which feminist media scholars from cultural and media studies and political-economy positions have theorized the women-and-media relationship.

Inasmuch as feminist media scholarship has (as previously noted) focused heavily on women's representation in popular media, we dedicate Chapters 2 and 3 to a synthesis of this work. As Part I reveals, most feminist

media scholarship has been framed by what we have characterized elsewhere as a paradigm of the misogynist media (Byerly 1999). The central concerns in this paradigm are women's exclusion and misrepresentation in media content, professions, and policies. Documenting and analyzing the historical patterns of exclusion and misrepresentation that women have endured in the larger print and broadcast media (in spite of active and enormously effective women's liberation movements) has been essential in order to reveal the causes of these problems and to advance strategies for change. Even research that brings to light the ways in which women have progressed – for example, advancing in media professions or increasing news attention for women's achievements – inevitably acknowledges the still overwhelming amount to be done in order to redress what Gallagher (1995) has deemed women's "unfinished story."

Chapter 2 focuses on women's representation in film and television, considering entertainment and fiction-based media, predominantly film and television. In this chapter, we take a genre approach, which includes crime, soaps, and fantasy narratives, to signal the primary issues that have concerned feminist media scholars. A significant amount of the work on representation has been done within a feminist cultural studies framework, focusing specifically on commercially made films, and foregrounding considerations of ways in which audiences negotiate meanings in texts. What we attempt to show in this chapter is the endurance of gendered stereotyping, even as more contemporary renditions of women and femininity are finally providing a little more diversity in the media landscape. There is no doubt that the roles available to women have changed considerably over the past few decades, and that images and plotlines that are now routine would simply have been inconceivable 30 years ago. To a large extent, this really is a case of art following life, since women's progress must eventually be mirrored on the large and small screen. While women's representation today is certainly "better," in many ways, than ever before, women still experience actual prejudice and discrimination in terms of unequal treatment, unequal pay, and unequal value in real life. So too do these themes continue to occur in media portraits.

Chapter 3 looks at the representation of women in fact-based programming, especially news, together with an analysis of women's magazines, discussing the ways in which feminist media scholars have endeavored to expose the patriarchal ideology lying beneath these texts. The first part of the chapter focuses on news media, and we explore the key tropes associated with women's subject positions in relation to journalistic narratives, as well

as the ways in which women's voices, both elite and public, are allowed (or not) to speak. The chapter considers women and/in advertising, in particular focusing on women's magazines. What our discussion demonstrates is that the media's framing (in every sense of the word) of women in highly restricted and mostly negative ways is not simply the consequence of the idiosyncrasies of this newspaper or that TV channel or that radio station but, rather, is a *global* phenomenon that has endured over time and media form, and continues to do so. The type of story that most frequently features woman as a victim, usually of male sexual violence, says something profound about the role of women in society. Where are the stories of women's success in business, in politics, in education, in science? What we hope to show in these two chapters is the uneven nature of women's progress on both the large and small screen. We argue here for women's greater control over the representations of their and our lives, so that the wonderful diversity of all our experiences becomes incorporated in the popular media landscape.

Chapter 4 explores the ways in which women as an audience have been addressed, and it begins with a sustained discussion of research on women audiences for soap opera, before moving on to consider research on other aspects of women's audiencehood, including film going, crime genres, news, and magazines. The history of feminist engagement with the female audience is, in some ways, exemplified by the overdetermination of research studies on soaps which, as we will see later, is itself a product of feminist scholars' recognition of what women watched and enjoyed. The last section of the chapter concentrates on women's use of and relationship to new technologies, since the rise of technologies such as the Internet is forcing a new (re)consideration of the ways in which we function as an audience. Importantly, the level of interactivity that is enabled by technologies such as the Internet or digital television means that the viewer really can exert control over how she watches, listens, and reads popular media: finally, there is a reality to the rhetoric of audience power. In this chapter, we show the different ways in which women use, make sense of, understand, and interact with media products such as television, films, magazines, and the Internet. It is through the exploration of social context and women's lived experience, and the tensions between the two, that we can better comprehend how women negotiate their position as audience against the reality of their own lives.

Chapter 5 uses a feminist political-economy framework of analysis to consider the ways in which ownership of media industries by wealthy (mostly white) men have served to limit women's involvement in creative ranks, affecting women of color in particular. The chapter also critiques

media productions (particularly films) by women, questioning whether progress is really achieved when liberal feminist media producers work within the narrow confines of topics and messages intended for conventional audiences so as to maintain their profits.

The second part of the book discusses and analyzes the empirical data that we collected for this book, and thus provides an elaboration of the various ways in which women activists and media workers have contributed to en-gendering the media and the broader public sphere. From our own earlier research, as well as our connections to feminists engaged in various kinds of media activism in different nations, we knew that a parallel world of women's communicative action had long lived alongside the "common" discourse. Women's movements (both within and across nations) have placed media reform and support for women's alternative media high on their agendas and, as a result, there has been measurable progress as well as recalcitrance in relation to changes within media structures. An additional outcome has been an explosion of women's initiatives to establish book publishing, radio and television production, news, magazine, documentary film, Internet, and other enterprises, in order to create new channels for women to speak publicly about their lives and concerns about the world – in their own voices.

Part II presents new research on women's media activism, and poses the Model of Women's Media Action, toward gaining a more comprehensive understanding of how women have tried to use media in order to enter more fully into democratic processes. Chapter 6 explains how women's media activism has shaped a feminist public sphere that overlaps and spreads feminist discourse into the dominant public sphere. In Chapter 6, we offer a new Model of Women's Media Action, reframing the women-and-media relationship from the 1970s to the present and identifying the ways in which feminist agency has manifested itself through the work of women media activists. Succeeding chapters further develop the Model of Women's Media Action as we interpret our empirical research with feminist journalists, filmmakers, researchers, and a range of other women in 20 nations. Women's media activism, we show, can be organized into four main paths, or approaches, and in Chapters 7–10 we develop those four paths through the personal narratives of participants in the study. Chapter 7 is concerned with the work of women media activists who have learned to "do" media as a part of their feminist political work. Chapter 8 discusses the work of women media professionals who decided to take a feminist approach to their work after they began their careers. Chapter 9 discusses

the work of women who have worked outside media structures to conduct media monitoring and research, or to wage campaigns for media reform of some kind. Chapter 10 focuses on the work of women who have established a range of women's media enterprises. Chapter 11 summarizes what is known about women's treatment by and relationship to media industries, and identifies contributions that media activism has made in these last decades in advancing women's public participation and feminist movements' impact on their societies. In addition, we explore new strands of research that might grow out of our own project and the Model of Women's Media Action that it has produced.

Real Women, Real Lives

Central to this book is the work of women who have critiqued, monitored, shaped the content of, and otherwise sought to place media at the greater service of all women in gaining a bigger public voice and political role in their societies. The stories of 90 informants in 20 nations, who shared their experiences as women media activists with us in a two-year cross-cultural study, are at the heart of the book. Their work expands what we know of women's struggle to gain media access and to speak in their own voices, often against great odds, and two brief stories drawn from our interviews illustrate this well.

Preeti Mehra, journalist, New Delhi. January mornings are cold in New Delhi, India, when the fog settles in, sending dampness into unheated homes and chilling the bones of the inhabitants. Preeti Mehra, a veteran journalist in her forties, pulled her wool tunic closer around her to ward off the dampness and leaned back in her chair to talk about her years working for major English-language Indian newspapers in India. The autonomous women's movement, which had emerged in India by the mid-1970s, had drawn women such as Preeti Mehra, who saw close links between the movement's goals and her work as a reporter. She began to find ways to get women into news stories, both routine events and more dramatic coverage of riots, earthquakes, and disasters. "Women were so marginalized," she remembers, and helping them gain visibility became part of her daily challenge. In the late 1980s, she joined Women in the Media in Bombay, a group of about thirty women journalists. Members organized public events to focus on sexist media images and then strategized among themselves about how to overcome a lack of news coverage of women. They

also protested about discrimination against women journalists. Mehra was among those who joined *dharnas* (sit-ins) outside newspaper offices to protest against sexual harassment and other problems. She participated in filing a complaint with the Bombay police to stop publication of a Marathi-language magazine titled "How do you rape?" – a manual whose pseudo-medical language barely masked its titillating subtext. The legal case went on for years, she said, generating a public discussion about violence against women and helping to mobilize other women around media issues.

Although Women in the Media disbanded around 1993, several of its members – including some who had become high profile and powerful in the news business – would go on to found the national-level Network of Women in Media in India, in 2002. With 13 chapters, NWMI members continue to find ways to combat sexism in the profession at the local level, and they speak out on broader issues such as media globalization, which they believe affect women across India.

Ramesh Sepehrrad, political activist, Washington, DC. On another continent, on a humid June afternoon, 35-year-old Ramesh Sepehrrad pushed up her glasses and explained how she came to women's media activism through advocating for women's human rights in Iran. In the 1990s, Sepehrrad and a small group of Iranian feminist exiles living in the USA founded the National Committee of Women for a Democratic Iran (NCWDI), based in Washington, DC. The group immediately established an English-language website to raise general awareness about the widespread discrimination, official abuse, and murder of women in Iran under the Islamic fundamentalist regime that had ruled since 1979. The NCWDI posted articles containing details about women's imprisonment, hanging, and stoning to death, gathered from Farsi-language Iranian Internet sites, Amnesty International and other reports, and informants living in Iran. The goals were to mobilize opposition to women's treatment, but also "to make sure that the political voice of women was heard in the dialogue about democratization in Iran," Sepehrrad said. The website also had the effect of drawing interest among women living inside Iran, who provided additional details of day-to-day life for women under the regime. In 2004, the NCWDI merged with the Women's Forum Against Fundamentalism in Iran (WFAFI), a broad-based international organization, headquartered in Boston, which advocates for women's rights and religious pluralism in Iran and other nations with fundamentalist governments.

The WFAFI is affiliated with groups in Europe, such as the European Organization Against Fundamentalism, in Germany, and the Revolutionary

Association of Women in Afghanistan, based in Pakistan. The WFAFI represents an interesting study in women's media activism, through which it conducts nearly all of its work. The organization seeks both female and male followers within the Iranian diaspora (whose members live all over the world), as well as from feminist, human rights, religious-pluralist, and other communities through a sophisticated website (www.wfafi.org), a monthly electronic newsletter called *E-Zan* (the Farsi word for woman is *zan*), and, since late 2004, a weekly Farsi-language radio program called *Voice of Women*. VOW, a 30-minute program on women's rights, broadcasts into Iran via shortwave radio on Saturday evenings, when women's listenership is highest. VOW broadcasts are produced in the USA and transmitted through a network of booster systems located in Europe. Sepehrrad, a specialist in information technology who is pursuing a doctorate in political science, pointed out the amount of cooperation-building that took place among women's and other groups internationally to bring the details of this project together. Feminist media activism fits within a larger scope of political work for Sepehrrad, who hopes one day to return to Iran and live under a secular, democratic government.

These stories exemplify the complexity of women's media activism internationally. In each case, a feminist has worked individually and collectively using media to inform, motivate, and mobilize some kind of political action on women's behalf. Preeti Mehra has followed the second path associated with the integration of media activism into her career as a journalist. Ramesh Sepehrrad has followed a different path – that of an outside advocate using a multimedia approach on behalf of women's organizations concerned with women's human rights in Iran.

The Longer View of Women and Media

As we said at the beginning of this introduction, the feminist scholarship whose goal is to assess women's relationship to both mainstream and other media forms has a deep connection to women's status in the real world. No one has made this connection clearer than Noeleen Hayzer, executive director of the UN Fund for Women (UNIFEM), on International Women's Day, March 8, 2004:

> As a result of constant advocacy by women's rights groups over the last 20 years, more and more countries have some type of legislation concerning

violence against women. At least 45 nations have specific laws against domestic violence, 21 more are drafting new laws, and many others have amended criminal laws to include domestic violence. To make a real difference, we have to transform words into action and results. This requires governments and the international community at large to stand by their commitments and to allocate resources to translate them into action . . . I call on the world community to pay close attention to what women are telling us about the situation they live in their needs, hopes and visions of a better future. It is our responsibility to amplify their voices and to use them to guide our work and policies. Only then can we hope to achieve a world in which both men and women are able to lead the best lives they can.[5]

Notes

1 The Indian freedom movement led to India's independence from Great Britain in 1947. Similar independence movements in African and Asian nations that were seeking independence from their European colonial rulers followed in the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

2 Throughout the book, we use the term *feminism* interchangeably with *women's movement(s)* and *women's liberation movement(s)*.

3 The Seneca Falls Convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1948, marked the beginning of the nineteenth-century American women's rights movement. Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and other convention planners had been active in the anti-slavery movement. A year before, during their attendance at a world anti-slavery convention in England, they had been barred from sitting on the main floor of that meeting or speaking. They vowed to initiate their own movement to address women's status in American society upon their return. The Seneca Falls Convention was the result.

4 For a useful description of the development of dialectics, see Kellner (1989).

5 See www.unifem.org/speeches.php?f_page_pid=77&f_pritem_pid=161 (accessed October 17, 2004).