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GENDER, JUSTICE AND THE MEDIA: SHIFTING OUR AGENDAS TO MEDIA OWNERSHIP[1]

Carolyn M. Byerly*

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CORREOS ELECTRÓNICOS: cbyerly@howard.edu

* Carolyn M. Byerly es profesora del Departamento de Periodismo de la JHJ Escuela de Comunicaciones de la Universidad de Howard.

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PALABRAS CLAVE | género, mujer, medios de comunicación, propiedad mediática.

KEYWORDS | gender, women, media, media ownership.

Resumen

No es extraño que las preocupaciones feministas sobre la imagen de la mujer en los medios de comunicación sigan dominando en el discurso de los movimientos populares y los círculos académicos feministas. Finalmente se ha entendido que para lograr la igualdad de género y la justicia debe permitirse el acceso de las mujeres a los medios de comunicación y trabajar desde allí en la representación mediática de las mujeres, para lograr una mayor calidad en los contenidos.

Abstract

Not surprisingly, feminist concerns about the portrayal of women in the media continue to dominate the discourse of popular movements and feminist academics. Finally it is understood that to achieve gender equality and justice should be allowed access of women to the media and work from there in the media representation of women, to achieve higher quality content.

The image we see is typically the entry point in our relationship with the media. Next is the spoken message. Then, the written message. As the media audience, that is typically how we engage with media content: visual image, spoken message, written message. What we *see* is typically more powerful and memorable than what we hear or read, but of course, the written and spoken texts of media content matter, too (Crisp & Sweiry, 2006; Foss, 1992). For this, it is not surprising that feminist concerns about *the image of women in the media* continue to dominate in the discourse of popular feminist movements and academic feminist circles alike. After all, women ask, how could it be that after several decades of global feminist activism, women are still so largely absent, silent, stereotyped and misrepresented in so much of the mainstream media?

These are enduring, well-grounded questions first asked collectively by women from around the world 34 years ago in Mexico City at the first of three UN Decade for Women meetings (Byerly, 1995). In 1976, delegates from across the globe attending that official UN women's meeting established what would become the foundational women-and-media critique. Reflecting on issues and criticisms raised by women in popular feminist movements, they constructed a three-part critique. First, delegates observed, women were absent from the serious news and information of the day. Indeed, they were correct. One global news study of the time showed that women were mentioned in only 2 per cent of the major stories (Gallagher, 1980). Second, delegates said, women were stereotyped and misrepresented in the media. Early research was already showing that women were most often portrayed as sex objects, victims, mothers, and appendages to men –not as fully functioning members of their societies, or as people who served in many social roles (Byerly, 1995). The third element of the women and media critique focused on women's exclusion from the media professions. Women journalists, producers, filmmakers and other professionals were few in number in all nations except the Nordic nations of Europe where they have had strong professional standing for many the years (Gallagher, 1980).

In posing these concerns and beginning to shape a theory of women's relationship to media, the earlier feminist leaders understood that achieving gender equality and justice were bound up with access to and representation in the mass media. The industries comprising the mass media –news, television, film, advertising, magazines, etcetera– circulate messages and images about women's identity, experience, ideas, and problems. Delegates at that Mexico City meeting more than three decades ago adopted a Program for Action that generated significant steps toward addressing the points of the critique. Some of the results are worth noting

- Seeking to increase the news flow on women, UNESCO and the UN Fund for Population, in 1978, sponsored five Women's Feature Service programs, all under

the control of women. These were sponsored by established regional news agencies, all located in the developing nations. The purpose of Women's Feature Service programs was to cover issues, events and contributions of women, from a progressive women's perspective. It bears noting that two of those services have survived; they are the Women's Feature Service in New Delhi, and Depth News Women's Service in Manila (Rush & Ogan, 1989; Byerly, 1995).

- In an effort to document the ways that women were represented in other media, UNESCO sponsored numerous studies that together created the earliest global literature on women and media. Among those were Margaret Gallagher's (1981) *Unequal*.
- *Opportunities: The case of women and the media*; and Ceulemans and Fauconnier's (1979) *Mass Media: The Role and Social Conditions of Women*.
- With the goal of expanding women's job opportunities in media, the UN Development Program, beginning in the late 1970s, provided funds to train women journalists and other media professionals around the world, particularly in developing nations.

In the three decades since, women's –and in some cases, men's– leadership has tried to improve both the quantity and quality of news and other media content about women. The task of assessing whether and how feminist media activism succeeded has fallen to feminist media scholars. My collaborator Karen Ross and I (Byerly & Ross, 2006) posed the Model for Women's Media Action in 2006 after interviewing 90 women in 20 nations about the range of ways they had sought to expand women's access to media. Conceptualizing the range of activities –e.g., advocacy campaigns, working inside the media as reporters (and in other roles), establishing feminist publishing houses, etcetera– as "feminist media activism", they considered the ways that this activism has shaped a significant feminist public sphere. The notion of a feminist public sphere extends and genderizes Habermas's concept of the bourgeois public sphere, an imagined space where the public deliberates on matters of common interest, free of political and economic influence. A feminist public sphere, as Ross and I reframed it, would be a communicative space in which women may articulate a politics in line with their own gendered interest (Byerly & Ross, 2006). Our study found that some women had learned to write news, make films, or "do" other media in the course of their feminist political work so they could get information about women into public discourse. Some women, already employed with news or other media industries, developed a feminist consciousness in the course of their lives and tried to find ways to express it in their professional work within the media. Other women acted as outside agitators, writing letters or demonstrating on the sidewalks outside newspapers, for example, to demand that media change the way it portrayed women. A fourth group of women's media activists established their own media companies –filmmaking enterprises, radio programs, publishing houses, newsletters– to best control what was said and shown of women's lives.

From this cross-cultural study, Ross and I defined the ways that activism had fulfilled key functions within feminist movements. Three of these are worth noting within the context of the present discussion.

- First is the *ritualistic function* of women's media activism, which is concerned with the naming of women's reality and announcing feminist political agendas to tackle address problems in that reality. For example, feminists have effectively used the media to circulate new terminology to name and analyze women's oppression, terms like "sexual harassment", "domestic violence", and "woman's double day (*el doble día*)". These terms, which did not exist before the 1970s, have led to new laws across the world and changed the language that reporters use in crime stories.
- Second is *the social alignment function* of women's media activism, which is concerned with using the media to articulate the ways that gender oppression coincides with racial oppression, class oppression, and sexual oppression, among other things. Researcher Sonia Muñoz (1994) found, for example, that women in rural Colombia used radio to strengthen solidarity between women's rights groups and groups trying to get health care into indigenous communities. In my own research in India, I learned from filmmaker Gargi Sen how her films on prostitution bring together issues of poverty, gender, and caste oppression (Byerly & Ross, 2006).
- Third is *the regulatory function of women's media activism,* which is concerned with increasing the amount of information about women that enters the news flow. Research shows there have been mixed results in this effort. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2006), which is conducted in 70-100 countries every 5 years, shows that women-related content has increased steadily over the last 20 years. However, the disheartening finding is that women still only represent about a fourth of the sources in stories. They are mentioned stories about economics and politics less than a fifth of the time. In addition, the number of women's bylines on stories fell from 45 per cent in 2005 to only 27 per cent in 2009 (GMMP, 2010).

Women's continued marginalization in the content of media brings me to the proposition that I want to end with. Both popular and academic feminist agendas have too long been consumed with micro-level matter of media content, which has made very slow progress over many years. In the process, they have almost completely ignored the macro-level issues of media ownership and control that *determine content*. Together, we must now enter that forbidden terrain of power relationships at the top of media industries, in national regulatory mechanisms, and in legislatures where national laws are made. We must also enter economic landscapes where women have been absent. How should these be accomplished?

- *First, deregulation must be reversed*. In many nations, the deregulation of media industries under neo-liberalism these last 20 years has led to conglomeration among media companies. Conglomeration has consolidated economic power and ownership in fewer and fewer men's hands. As a result in the United States, women have not been able to hold onto the radio and television stations they owned because they are squeezed out of the markets by larger corporations. As a result, women own less than 6 per cent of all stations in the U.S. (Turner, 2006; Turner & Cooper, 2006; Byerly, 2006). These impacts are being felt in other nations, too. Popular feminist movements must organize around legislative agendas to pass new laws, and feminist scholars must engage in applied scholarship to reveal the details of how national policies on media ownership have affected women.
- *Second, access to capital must be expanded for women wanting to enter the media marketplace*. Banking institutions tend to see women as less secure than men when making large loans, even when they have a responsible track record for securing and managing funds. These sexist practices must be challenged by women's organizations and by media advocacy groups. In addition, women must begin to find ways to pool their resources and form parent companies with the idea of entering into larger-scale corporations with more media properties. The day of big business is not going to go away for a long time, and women must be more astute in finding ways of joining up economically if they are to serve the informational needs of their own gendered class.
- *Third, feminist media scholars must work collaboratively to generate and track basic information about women's relationship to media structures*. The two-year study that I recently concluded for International Women's Media Foundation is one such effort. The *Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media* surveyed 522 news companies in 59 nations to determine the numbers of women serving on boards of directors, in management, in news reporting, and in other levels of news production. The study also compares men's and women's salaries, and looks at company policies on gender. This was a global project engaging approximately 160 researchers, including participants like Juana Gallego from Spain.

The results of the *Global Report* show that glass ceilings exist in a third of the 59 nations whose media we surveyed. All but one of the regions –Nordic Europe– showed evidence of glass ceilings for women in newsrooms. A more common trend was women's underrepresentation in all levels of reporting, supervision and governance. Examples of underrepresentation were seen, for instance, in Japan and Democratic Republic of Congo, where men outnumber women 7-to-1; in Bangladesh and Jordan, where men outnumber women 5-to-1; and in India and Egypt, where men outnumber women 4-to-1.

As someone who has followed women's relationship to news media with growing interest and concern in control over news production, I was especially discouraged by the study's findings on women in governance and top management, where we learned that

women occupy only 25 per cent and 27 per cent, respectively, of the seats in these highest levels of policy making and supervision. To be sure, there was variation among nations and regions of the world. Of particular note is the greater parity between men and women in news companies in both Eastern and Nordic Europe. In Russia, for example, women are 41 per cent of those in governance at the media we surveyed, and 58 per cent of those in top management. In Sweden, women are 34 per cent and 39 per cent of those in governance and top management, respectively. And, it was gratifying to find some surprises. Consider, for example, Uganda, a small nation in East Africa, where women occupy nearly half of the positions in both governance and top management, and are nearing parity with men at all other levels of the newsroom, as well! Women's status in these nations nearly always reflects the presence of equality in the workplace laws, the integration of women into the paid employment sector, and the ability of women's movements in that nation to put these laws and policies in place (see the *Global Report* at www.iwmf.org).

All the evidence suggests that women must be strategic in seeking to own more media and to seek higher levels of responsibility associated with policy making within news and other media industries. This means pursuing the steps that I just outlined, something that is best accomplished through organized efforts by women-led initiatives within guilds, unions, and professional women's organizations. In the meantime, we must keep in mind that simply making more women players in the spheres of media governance and ownership will not be enough – these must be women who hold commitments to speak for women, to help women gain a louder public voice through the media, and to represent women in all the images they purvey as strong, intelligent human beings fully capable of doing all the things that we actually perform each day in our communities.

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