Reviews


I have to confess that I have ambivalent feelings about Karen Ross and Carolyn Byerly’s Women and Media: International Perspectives. As a university instructor who has taught an undergraduate media and gender course for several years, I find many of the articles thoughtful, engaging, and relevant. Particularly useful for the careful articulation of male hegemony in newsrooms and the effects of such hegemony on news content, this edited collection has much to recommend it. But as a scholar interested in the role of feminist theory in the development of media and communication studies, I find that the book does not sufficiently expand the debate beyond what Carolyn Byerly herself refers to as “the paradigm of misogynist media” (p. 112).

Since the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, “liberal” feminist critiques of the media have tended to revolve around three central themes: (1) women’s under-representation in the media; (2) the media’s stereotypical portrayals of women; and (3) women’s underemployment in media industries, especially in key decision-making positions. The essays in this collection each address these various concerns within a political economic perspective. Focusing specifically on male dominance and masculine hegemony in the media, these feminist scholars are concerned to uncover the means by which systemic sexism and discrimination take on the appearance of media “common sense.”

Women and Media: International Perspectives intervenes in this analytical and political terrain with an eye to reflecting the “dynamism” of contemporary research on women and media. A legitimate question arising out of this book is how well does this collection live up to this goal? The answer: Not as well as I had hoped. The individual contributions are well-written and serve to illustrate not only the media’s sins against women, but also how women and feminists have transformed some of the media’s representational practices. However, the collection as a whole requires a deeper grounding in the historical and theoretical terrain that has given rise to such scholarship.

In their very brief introduction to the book, Ross and Byerly attempt to provide the reader with a snapshot of the book’s intellectual and theoretical roots.

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Lasting only six pages, two of which are devoted to descriptions of the articles, the introduction provides a cursory discussion of Marxism, feminism, political economy, hegemony, and postcolonial theory. Although these are significant theoretical legacies that continue to shape the discipline of communication studies, their inclusion in an introduction that offers no sustained analysis of their import or application serves only to frustrate the reader. Perhaps it is an unrealistic expectation, but I believe that the editors of such a collection have an intellectual responsibility to provide a thorough and thoughtful interrogation of these themes. I would also expect that Ross & Byerly would relish the opportunity to map the domain of a feminist political economy of the media. Alas, they have chosen to leave this responsibility to their contributors.

Fortunately for the readers, the contributions to this collection do explicate and demonstrate the media’s hegemonic processes. Divided into two parts, “Representing and Consuming Women” and “Women’s Agency in Media Production,” the collection as a whole discusses how mainstream media serves to reinforce the hegemony of patriarchal capitalism through the proliferation of sexualized discourses on women’s roles in contemporary society. Sensitive to the criticisms that political economy neglects consideration of the processes of resistance and agency, the articles also discuss how feminist activism and consciousness-raising has influenced how the media cover issues of relevance to women.

The essays in Part 1, “Representing and Consuming Women,” generally focus on the characteristics of women’s misrepresentation in media texts. Jenny Kitzinger’s essay on media coverage of sexual violence makes the important argument that feminist consciousness-raising in the 1970s, and media treatments of sexual assault, provided survivors of sexual assault with a vocabulary to discuss their experiences. Through focus-group discussions with sexual assault survivors, Kitzinger thoughtfully articulates the relationship between women’s experiences and their representation in media texts. Karen Ross’ essay on the media’s representation of female politicians discusses not only the gains made by women in the public sphere, but also the media practices that construct female politicians as a deviation from the norm and serve to reassert politics as a masculine domain. Discussing the representation of women in Israeli media, Dafna Lemish draws attention to the ways that women’s relegation to the domestic sphere continues to limit and shape their representation in the public sphere. In the only chapter to address popular culture, Ellen Riordan provides a feminist political economic analysis of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, focusing on the appropriation of “girl power” feminism in the service of a patriarchal narrative structure that rewards female complicity with patriarchy and encourages competition between women.

On the whole, the chapters in the first section attempt to establish the dialectical process of feminist engagement with and critiques of the media and the media’s response to such criticism. While each chapter is careful to acknowledge specific gains made, they also seek to demonstrate that as long as men maintain positions of power within the media, women will always struggle for equal treatment and equal time.

The essays in Part 2, “Women’s Agency in Media Production,” are more specifically concerned with women’s and feminist interventions in the media.
Carolyn Byerly's discussion notes how women's activism in newsrooms, particularly during the 1970s and 1980s, politicized and publicized women's issues. Additionally, the activism of feminist organizations such as the National Organization of Women raised public awareness of systemic sexism and harassment in newsrooms, and in society at large. Ammu Joseph's essay on women and media in India catalogues women's exclusion from key decision-making positions in both print and broadcast journalism. Acknowledging that some progress has been made, she argues that possible strategies for encouraging greater equality include gender-sensitivity training, mentoring programs for female journalists, and the inclusion of media and gender courses in journalism programs. Providing a contrast to the other articles that stress the media's male domination, Caroline Mitchell's analysis of women's alternative radio acknowledges radio's special status as an "accessible medium for women," which "helps to meet their needs for information, education and pleasure" (pp. 157, 158). The value of collective action and international organizing underpins Gillian Youngs' essay on the promise of cyberspace for feminists. While admitting the problems of online harassment and intimidation, Youngs asserts that new technologies offer the promise of a global, collective feminist movement.

Taken together, the book's essays collectively illustrate the problems and the promises of feminist media interventions. As the editors note, "Media have the potential not only to reinforce the status quo in power arrangements in society but also to contribute to new, more egalitarian ones" (p. 4). The collection offers a useful and accessible introduction to some of the issues characterizing the ongoing debates on media and gender. The inclusion of key terms and questions for discussion at the end of each chapter suggests that this collection is intended for students not previously exposed to feminist theory in media and communication studies.

For those of us already familiar with the now standard critique that women are misrepresented and sexualized by the media, this collection does not sufficiently expand the debate beyond an analysis of the male ownership of media industries. As a volume containing only eight original articles that focus almost exclusively on print and broadcast journalism, the book would have benefited from discussions of popular culture, television, music, audience reception, and women's pleasure in consuming media. Although Riordan's discussion of *Crouching Tiger* and the marketing of "girl power" feminism comes closest to an analysis of the female audience, she ultimately dismisses such marketing as co-option and manipulation. An equally interesting aspect of this analysis would be a consideration of the processes by which young female and male audiences negotiate and reconcile these conflicting discourses.

Several of the articles discuss concepts such as the public/private dichotomy, women's historic "confinement" to the domestic sphere, and the necessity of women's participation in the public sphere. But what is surprising, and unfortunate, is the lack of sustained discussion about the concept of the public sphere and the debate among feminist scholars on the utility of the concept for feminist analysis (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1992; McLaughlin, 1993). Indeed, the articles suggest the existence of a significant tension between mainstream and alternative media and their possibilities for women, but this tension is not sufficiently addressed by the
editors or the individual contributors. While each of the chapters acknowledges the necessity of feminist intervention in the media, the collection ends with two articles that praise the virtues of “alternative” media. Invoking the concept of the “feminist counter public” articulated by Felski, and expanded by Fraser and McLaughlin, Youngs’ final chapter argues that cyberspace provides for collective feminist organizing and international attention to issues such as violence against women. Although the collection ends on this positive note, it also informs the perception that it is only through non-traditional or alternative media forms that women can make significant change. Missing from this analysis is a discussion of the relationship between these organized pockets of resistance and larger, presumably more powerful, interests in the public sphere. Again, it seems that the editors could have addressed this shortcoming with a concluding chapter that grounded the disparate themes in the book in a consideration of the relationship between feminist critique, women’s media production, and the circulation of counter discourses in the public sphere.

While *Women and Media: International Perspectives* does fall short on its claim to “convey the dynamism of what is taking place in the realm of women-and-media today” (p. 4), it is, nevertheless, a valuable, well-written, and accessible introduction to these issues.

**References**


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