During the 2008 American Presidential election, the Democratic Party mobilized the word “change” beginning with their campaign slogan, “change we can believe in.” In this context, change came to represent, I think, the hopes and fears of a national and international public. In Minding the Gap: Feminist Interventions in International Communication, editors Katharine Sarikakis and Leslie Regan Shade amalgamate a group of feminist scholars around the question: “where are the women and where are women’s theorizations and perspectives in our field” (p. 4)? Much like the Democratic Party, the voices within this anthology uniformly signal the necessity for change within international communication (IC). Revisiting the field vis-à-vis feminist political economy and policy analysis, and post-colonial and cultural theory, the anthology advocates the stance of the Curious Feminist; an inquisitive figure attentive to everyday social and political life, particularly those issues that are neglected or dismissed by mainstream media, and overlooked by feminists themselves.

One of the many strengths of this anthology is its introductory chapter in which Sarikakis and Shade revisit and map the current climate of international communication studies and outline the scope of the text in unclouded terms. In their bid for change, the editors are cognizant to the fact that intervention is a process that entails, among many things, a sober examination of the factors shaping the global mediascape and the hurdles women face to ensure democratic participation. These issues, which Sarikakis and Shade delineate in their introduction, include transnational and international policy, women’s employment in transnational media industries and the global production and consumption of media content.

The anthology consists of twenty chapters organized into five parts. These sections include: 1) Revisiting International Communication Studies; 2) Gendering Policy Regimes; 3) Mediating Meanings, Mediating Regimes of Power; 4) Labouring International Communications; and 5) Glocalizing Media and Technologies. This configuration underscores the multifarious issues within international communication and the creative approaches available to the Curious Feminist when addressing these issues. Moreover, it speaks to the feminist politics advocated within the pages, which involve embracing “difference while seeking inclusivity,” and strengthening “theory and practice in international communication studies” (Gallagher p. 28). Finally, while the text convenes around and offers critical insight into the neglected areas of IC, the anthology is in many ways a toolkit to arm the Curious Feminist.

In lieu of changing communication infrastructures within global media systems, part one attests to the exigency of feminist work within international communication. Although dominant models of democracy and participation are challenged and undermined by the rhetoric surrounding the information society, notably the erasure of space, democracy and participation are very much rooted in the concreteness of
place, just as our relationship to larger social structures are materialized through space and time (Huws). In this respect, identifying the manner in which certain realities are conceived and perceived as universal truths (Youngs) is part of a larger feminist politic, which is not only involved in examining the place of information and communication technologies within the global mediascape; it is also a means of making sense of one's place and critical role in the world.

In Gendering Policy Regimes, the focus turns towards the manifold ways in which gender and policy intertwine at the level of culture. International cultural policy is weighed by a gender consciousness, which is not necessarily in the interests of equity or emancipation (Beale) and in turn, ignores the social and structural inequalities in gender relations (Prasad). While these omissions render women as passive agents, such instances demand that if feminists are to apprehend what is at stake politically, they must also identify what is at stake technologically (Crow & Sawchuk). In part, this necessitates acquiring basic technical knowledge; however, it also involves challenging mainstream policy and alternative organizations to consider the politics of gender. It also demands a reconfiguration of the modes of analysis within international Communication (Sarikakis and Shaukat) that parallel prevailing policy regimes. Policy is political and personal.

The third section, Mediating Meanings, Mediating Regimes of Power, appraises the not so visible regimes of power that influence and shape the visibility of women in the public sphere and, more often than not, misrepresent their experiences in the real/social/private sphere (Al-Mahadin). Given the interdependent and interconnected nature of the global mediascape, images circulate extensively and repetitively. In many instances, this has proven to be a valuable means of exposing injustices. Be that as it may, the propagation of imagery reinforcing and reproducing racial and gendered stereotypes (Jiwani) contributes to systemic and intimate forms of violence, especially in the lives of indigenous and racialized minority women (Jiwani). Ushering in alternative media, however, does not guarantee neutrality (Rodgers) just as speaking on behalf of an individual or group does not grant agency. While it is impossible to offer a solution, the authors within this section provide the Curious Feminist with critical insights and queries with which she can begin working through the discrepancies between visibility in the media and lived experience.

Another consequence of the rhetoric of the information society as effacing physical space is the conflation between spaces of work and home (Mosco et al). Within the global economy, the convergence between these spaces thrives on the transnational sexual division of labor (Mosco et al). The majority of individuals involved in at home “IT” work are immigrant women. These women work production jobs out of their homes, often assembling computer components that may also involve handling harmful chemicals. They are paid extremely low “at piece” rates, for long hours and always with a looming fear of layoff (Mosco et al). While there is interest in defining and targeting women as information workers, more attention is needed to the way in which women are integrated into the IT development process (McLaughlin). Assembling a computer is not the same as working with a computer, nor is knowing how to use a computer equivalent to being trained to use one for highly skilled labour.
practices with comfortable working conditions for rewarding pay. Within the global media- scape, the endorsement of disconnected (global) labour effectuates the continued empowerment of a few and disempowerment of many others (Shade and Porter). Perhaps then, part of the task of the Curious Feminist is to intellectualize the invisibility of inequitable labour practices, in order that the real and material consequences of the digital are made apparent.

The fifth and final part, Globalizing Media and Technologies, turns towards the manner in which localized issues are defined and dealt with in relation to the larger global circumstances. These issues, while not separate from a global context (“thinking globally”) are circumscribed within a specific local context (“acting locally”). For instance, in New Zealand the religious and moral right, although lead by a local assembly of traditionally conservative individuals and groups, are nonetheless influenced by inter-national discourses of morality and are pushing their views on intra-national processes of nation building and the parameters of citizenship (Griffiths). The problem with this particular scenario is that the moral right, while belonging to a larger movement of global fundamentalism, have not taken the particular socio-political, economic, or historical context of New Zealand into account. Conversely, feminist print cultures, despite the stronghold of multinational corporations on the book publishing industry, have continued to succeed by implementing digital technologies, including the internet and print on demand, to meet their localized needs (Murray). In this scenario, feminists successfully implemented global technological trends to support disparate and local communities. These issues, although disparate, involve the intersections of globalization, gender issues and media. Therefore, even when influenced by global processes, issues concerning gender need to contextualize the local, in order that distinct realities inform feminist practices. This is only but one step towards ensuring that certain realities are not taken as universals (Marinescu).

When the Democratic Party demanded change, people listened and listened intensely. Granted, it was part of a campaign for the American Presidency, nevertheless, gender issues and more appropriately women, were expedient (Huws) in rejuvenating hope in the American Dream. In this sense, issues concerning gender became non-issues in political terms, despite the fact that the most visible women candidates came to represent two of the most toxic and sexist stereotypes applied to women: the “bitch’ and the “ditz” (Fortini, 2008). Thus, while Minding the Gap has very little to do with the 2008 Presidential election per se, it has absolutely everything to do with the impetus for change, reminding us that our demands for it are far from over.

Reference

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