

# Introduction

## IAMCR and the scholarly agenda for the Global Alliance on Media and Gender

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The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action proposed strategies that would enable women's human rights to find allies in media and information technologies. 'Chapter J' identified core areas for the gender and media agenda.

The Platform was a catalyst for feminist research. Since then feminist scholars from all regions of the world have acted – at times individually, at other times collectively and together with feminist activists, advocates and with women media workers - on three levels: providing knowledge, setting the public agenda on gender and communication debates and formulating policy.

At present international core initiatives are taking place to prompt review of the main advances and remaining challenges in the areas identified by the Platform. One of these initiatives is the UNESCO campaign 'Global Alliance on Media and Gender (GAMG)'.

IAMCR was invited to take part in this initiative. We considered this an opportunity to act collectively, by contributing as a community of scholars to the development of the debates on Media and Gender.

Some action has been taken since. The first was related to collecting thoughts and proposals from members to define priority themes that the GAMG should address. Some ideas surfaced during the Special Session on this issue was held at the 2013 IAMCR Conference in Dublin. This session was fruitful, proposing strategies on how to act collectively – and wisely – and making the knowledge scholars produce useful, particularly for debating with those actors that play a key role in this area – international organisations, governments, media organisations, advocates and NGOs.

The result, ahead of the Global Forum on Media and Gender, to be held in Bangkok, Thailand in December 2013, is this book prepared by IAMCR, with the support of UNESCO. The aim of this publication is to show some of the most significant scholarly contributions related to both knowledge and action towards expanding women's human right to communicate. It is to apply the political weight of feminist theory toward the real-life practical advancement of women in society. As a community of scholars, we expect this publication will serve to make a statement about the role UNESCO has to play to firmly advance the improvement of gender and communication at global, regional and national levels.

Three of the main topics we initially chose to address through the GAMG initiative were violence against women and media, women's access to media and gender media policy.

A fourth emerged during the discussions in Dublin: gender, media and information literacy strategies and the role of feminist media and communication scholars as educators.

Thus, this volume is divided into four main sections:

1. Violence of gender, media and information
2. Women's access to media
3. Gender media policy and strategies
4. Gender, education and media and information literacy

As experts on the issues listed in this book, and coming from different regions of the world, the authors have been involved in both scholarly and political actions that have had an impact at global, regional and national levels, on the advancement of gender equality. Their contributions will no doubt make this initiative a historical precedent for how to act together with intelligence and wisdom.

We expect this publication to constitute the contribution of the IAMCR community to the core debate fostered by UNESCO. At the same time, we hope this project promotes a feminist politics of sorority among scholars, based on respect, recognition and collective accountability.

# Feminist scholarship and the debates on gender and communication

Margaret Gallagher

## Theory, research and activism

The push and pull between theorising, research and activism has always been a feature of feminist approaches to the media. Since its beginnings, a good deal of feminist scholarship has been motivated by a desire for political and social change. One of the earliest, celebrated essays in the field ended with two questions: 'How can the media be changed? How can we free women from the tyranny of media messages limiting their lives to hearth and home?' (Tuchman, 1978, p.38). If today these questions seem naïve, they are an embryonic formulation of the concerns that drive much feminist media analysis almost four decades later. Since the 1970s we have developed more sophisticated approaches to media analysis and theorising, but the fundamental issues at the heart of feminist media scholarship remain the same: power, rights, values and representation. Of course our approach to the study of these issues has vastly changed. The scope of much early research was limited to small-scale analyses of media content, employment structures and audiences. But small-scale analysis could result – at best – in no more than small-scale change. Over the past 15 years in particular, there has been a growing body of feminist work on globalisation, media policy, technology development and political economy. This work has been developed by feminist scholars whose focus is on macro-level change, who have argued that media representations and gender discourses take shape within particular socio-economic formations – buttressed and underpinned by specific political ideologies – which must themselves be analysed and understood before change can be effectively advocated.

The challenges facing feminist media scholarship today are formidable. Women's experience of inequality has changed worldwide since the 1970s. However, it remains unequivocal and substantial. Over the same period, media and communication systems have been transformed. The 'tyranny of media messages' against which pioneers of feminist criticism railed, has given way to something infinitely more complex and sophisticated. Commercial imperatives demand that the media reflect some of the changes in women's position in society. Yet media response to the critique of scholars and activists has been in many ways extrinsic rather than organic. For instance, contemporary media content frequently draws on and invokes feminism itself, and feminist vocabulary, in a conservative narrative that relies heavily on notions of women's individual choice, 'empowerment' and personal freedom. To pinpoint the paradox this presents for critical feminist practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, social theorist Nancy Fraser distinguishes between feminism as a social movement and feminism as discourse. The second is an offspring of the first but, Fraser argues, it has gradually 'gone rogue'. As a result, today's feminist movement is 'increasingly confronted with a strange shadowy version of itself, an uncanny double that it can neither simply embrace nor wholly disavow' (Fraser, 2013, p.224). Feminist discourse has been incorporated in various ways across all media genres – from advertising to newspapers to television. Analysing those global patterns of incorporation is central to a large body of contemporary feminist scholarship (for example Ball, 2012; Bucciferro, 2012; Mendes, 2012).

The lesson of several decades of feminist activism and scholarship is that gender justice' in the media – and in society as a whole – depends on wide-scale social transformation, in which women's rights – and women's right to communicate – are respected and implemented (see Gallagher, 2014, for a fuller discussion). As feminist scholar Rosalind Gill puts it, we need to think of sexism and sexist exploitation as an 'agile, dynamic, changing and diverse set of malleable representations and practices of power', and part of the project of feminist media studies must be to understand and illuminate 'the varied ways in which sexism (and its intersections with other axes of power) operates through the media' (Gill, 2011, p.62). The feminist media critique, therefore, cannot be static. Nor can it be one-dimensional. To be successful in its quest for change, it must link particular local experiences and struggles to the pursuit of global norms and ethics that promise social and gender justice. These linkages between scholarship and activism are fundamental to the wider feminist project, though opinions differ as to how fully they have been realised thus far. Carolyn Byerly argues that feminist media scholars have not sufficiently explored 'the process of struggle represented by women's media activism' (Byerly, 2012, p.15), and that this undermines the