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Current perspectives and future challenges in feminism and media studies

ABSTRACT

This contribution gives an overview of the historical analysis, current assessment and future prospects of feminism. The challenges of future feminist media studies are presented in the context of the appeal by Nancy Fraser, who assumes that the fundamental claims of second-wave feminism are still of central relevance. These observations are based on the contributions that were compiled by Lisa McLaughlin and Cynthia Carter on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the international journal 'Feminist Media Studies'.

FEMINISM AND ITS RESIGNIFICATION

Feminism is among the most significant and most advanced currents of thought of the intellectual and academic culture of western capitalist democracies, as Seyla Benhabib wrote two decades ago (Benhabib 1993: 9). We see the spread of feminist ideas today in social institutions, in the media or in everyday practice, so there is little reason to doubt that feminism has achieved many of its goals. On the other hand, the current academic discourse

problematizes a number of facets of the governmental and economic appropriation of feminist ideas.

In what follows, we address the questions of how feminism has changed in recent decades and what challenges it has to face. Furthermore, we address the question of how feminist media studies reflects this change and what future issues they consider to be relevant.

From a philosophical point of view, the term 'feminism' generally designates a mindset that is not limited to women or to gender in its definition. Rather, the core of the definition of feminism is in discrimination on the basis of gender (Nagel-Docekal 1999: 8). Gender must be understood comprehensively (sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity) alongside the other axes of difference (race, class, ethnicity, religion, age, etc.) that feminist thinking encompasses.

The main intention of feminism, understood as the overcoming of a specific form of discrimination and injustice, also means that the discussion of asymmetries should be of concern to all democratically minded thinkers (cf. hooks 2000). Furthermore, in its double meaning, feminism implies both an academic theory and a political dimension (Becker-Schmidt and Knapp 2000: 7).

The first phase of second-wave feminism, according to Fraser (2009: 100), was characterized by a democratic and emancipatory perspective of feminism that turned against the state-organized capitalism of the post-war period. Fundamentally, it was about the protest against the androcentrism and the struggle for justice in society, with vertices of redistribution, recognition and representation against the backdrop of the welfare state and Keynesianism. It concerned gender justice and therefore the transformation of the passive objects of welfare and development policy into active subjects. Feminism was a part of a larger social project in a coalition with other social movements that fought against racism and imperialism, homophobia and class differences (Fraser 2009: 107). On the one hand, in practice, the feminist movement acted nationally and directed itself against state instances, while on the other hand, in its global theory, it was referred to as an internationally conceived 'sisterhood'. The emphasis on justice and the consolidation of the dimensions of economics, culture and politics were the central premises in the thinking of second-wave feminism.

According to Fraser (2009: 107), this orientation changed in a second phase (beginning in the 1980s) with the displacement of state capitalism by the emerging neo-liberalism, with its well-known manifestations of deregulation, privatization, competition, reduction of state benefits, individualization and personal responsibility. In the Third World, this development began even earlier than in the so-called western countries, with the debt system and the restructuring programs of the International Monetary Fund. At the same time, feminism evolved from a radical countercultural movement into a broad mass phenomenon that gradually permeated all areas of life. In the course of this development, feminist goals were reinterpreted or resignified (in the sense of Judith Butler): The critique of androcentrism mutated into the idea of equality in teamwork, in flat hierarchies and in networks. At the same time, the success of feminism – the increase of the number of women in the working world – was accompanied by lower wages and precarious jobs. The participation of women in the labour market led to Third World debt through micro-credit and low wages that were not enough to live on. The feminist goals of self-empowerment and social justice were suddenly serving the legitimacy of market power, privatization and the reduction of state services.

The critique of economism coincides with the general change in the political culture. Rather than redistribution, the recognition of identity and cultural difference had become important. According to Fraser, this meant that the women's movement had become an identity movement. In addition, in academia, the theorizing and problematizing of identity politics has gained the upper hand over political economy. This coincides with the (de)constructivist turn in feminist discourse (cf. Benhabib et al. 1993; Butler 1990; Nagel-Docekal 1999) and with the development of queer theories (cf. Halberstam 2012; Jagose 1997).

What had been a mostly theoretically and rhetorically proclaimed global solidarity gained a practical basis through new communication technologies: Transnational protests led to a broad, global public, though it was mostly reduced to issues of sexual violence and questions of reproduction – without addressing at the same time global injustice and women's poverty. The focusing of primarily Anglo-American elites on global events (UN conferences from Nairobi and Vienna to Beijing) resulted in a schism between professionals and local groups. Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, who, in addition to her academic activities in the United States, regularly works with underprivileged women's groups in India, is one of the few women who continuously maintains this connection in their work. At the same time that neo-liberalism seized upon the liberation of markets, feminism became focused on recognition, neglecting the topic of redistribution.

The third phase identified by Fraser (2009: 113) began with the onset of the global financial crisis in 2007, which she sees in conjunction with the crisis of US hegemony as a possible switching point for a major transformation. This moment, according to Fraser, also offers the chance for a re-orientation of feminism: The original conjunction of the economic, cultural and political dimensions that characterized second-wave feminism needs to be revisited, because only through their isolation could neo-liberalism co-opt the feminist idea. Fraser's plea echoes the positions of young feminists who see themselves as 'third wave', such as Rebecca Walker, who, with the admonishment 'the fight is far from over' (Walker 1992: 41), argues that it is up to feminists to keep fighting the fight under the present conditions. Specifically, Fraser proposes not to prioritise paid work in the critique of androcentrism, but rather unpaid social work in particular. Questions like these are currently discussed through references to precarity and precarization (see, for example, Lorey 2012). In the critique of economism, according to Fraser, feminism must once again consider the dimensions of redistribution, recognition and representation together in order to be able to incorporate them into a critique of capitalism. For Fraser, the critique of statism includes the struggle for new democratic ways of organizing political power and, with respect to globalization, the struggle for a new, just political world order should be on feminism's agenda.

In summary, Fraser (2009: 116) proposes conceiving of injustice three-dimensionally: as a problem of redistribution, recognition and representation. Currently, Fraser sees a resurgence of a radical, rebellious women's movement, which is linked to the visionary potential of the early women's movement and, together with other egalitarian movements, fights for democratic control of the unleashed economy.

As an anti-capitalist critique, feminism should seize the opportunity to reorient the structures of transformation towards justice – and not just in terms of gender equality.

CORNERSTONES OF FEMINIST MEDIA RESEARCH

In her astute analysis, Fraser provides us with the cornerstones for future media research. When we look back at the results of the research in feminist media studies over the past few years and think about the direction in which research should go in the future, some important aspects can be formulated:

Macroeconomic processes and the economic effects of globalization should be considered in conjunction with one another by media studies, which examines the identity formations of media users. A good example here is Angela McRobbie's study 'Aftermath of Feminism' (2008), which shows how feminist ideas are transformed in the popular media and media formats into neo-liberal ideology, including practices of consumer culture. Accompanied by a series of self-disciplining measures utilizing physical and emotional practices, all of the successes of the women's movement are perverted into their opposite in this manner.

Even though feminist media studies operates in a global context, it is not sufficient to identify and analyse cultural differences; micro- and macroeconomic processes must also be included in the analysis.

Practicing feminist media studies from a global perspective includes, on the one hand, taking up media issues in the so-called non-western countries and letting researchers from those countries speak for themselves. This also means carrying out translation work, and not giving preferential treatment to the academic discourse in English. At the same time, it is important not to conduct this discourse in isolation, but to establish a connection with the media issues and media systems of the so-called western world and to work out the hegemonic relationship.

Feminist practice should also be more involved once again; local women's groups and new social movements (NGOs) should play a role that is just as important as academic discourse. On the other hand, however, an intensified return to the history of feminist theories is needed, as well as a stronger theoretical foundation for feminist media studies. This provides a good opportunity for increased cooperation among different generations of feminists, as is practiced, for example, in the book *Doing Gender in Media, Art and Culture*, edited by Rosemarie Buikema and Iris van der Tuin. Also 'non-western' feminist approaches (such as the various forms of Arab feminism) should be discussed.

Another important cornerstone for feminist media studies is the historical dimension. Too often in our media studies the historical view of things is forgotten. Simply referring back to history or embedding an issue in a historical context allows many findings to appear in a new light.

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES IN FEMINIST MEDIA STUDIES

Lisa McLaughlin and Cynthia Carter are the founders of what has become one of the most important forums for feminist media research: the international journal *Feminist Media Studies*. With their edited book *Current Perspectives in Feminist Media Studies*, they have made the tenth anniversary issue of the journal (vol. 11, no. 1, 2011) more accessible to a broader audience. The journal is defined by its commitment to a transdisciplinary and transnational approach and its intention 'to break down the dominance of mostly white, First World dialogues and debates that have tended to define feminist media studies' (McLaughlin and Carter 2013: 1). To pursue this intention, Carter and McLaughlin asked seventeen internationally renowned feminist scholars from

around the world to map what they see as the current status and future directions of feminist media studies. The result is a groundbreaking and inspiring collection of insights and voices that illustrates the depth of feminist scholarship in media studies.

It does not really matter where the reader starts to read this book, since each individual chapter stands on its own and is extremely informative in its dense analysis of the state of the art in its respective contexts and localizations and in its account of the contemporary and future challenges for feminist media studies.

The editors' introductory chapter provides an instructive overview by laying out six broad themes that they see the different authors addressing. 'Political economy' seems to be the most pressing topic, since more than half of the articles deal in one way or another with the interrelations of the market, neo-liberalism and consumer culture in the context of gender relations. Often, however, these are mere suggestions that pay greater attention to political economy; rarely will the reader find a thorough examination of the topic itself. The new possibilities and pitfalls of the 'new ICTS, cybercultures and digital media policies' is another theme that shows up in many of the articles, followed by the broader questions of 'media and identity', and what has always been one of the key issues in feminist scholarship, 'sexuality and sexualization'. The contemporary challenges of 'post-feminism' and, finally, 'the need for more theoretical and methodological nuance and rigor' are two more topics McLaughlin and Carter (2013: 2–4) found throughout the book.

What makes this book so outstanding is the richness and the diversity that it presents. Carter and McLaughlin have taken their responsibility for knowledge production and representation seriously; they succeeded in collecting voices and issues that one would not easily find assembled in any other book.

The authors are presented in alphabetical order, thus avoiding any other kind of hierarchical structure. This leads to the coincidental but striking effect of an unexpected opening: the collection starts with Salam Al-Mahadin's 'Arab Feminist Media Studies: Towards a poetics of diversity'. Al-Mahadin (2013) introduces the reader to the complex structures of feelings that are in place in the Arab world as defined, on the one hand, by a culture in which the woman is the 'ultimate signifier', in particular through the integrity of the female body, which functions as the anchorage of male subjectivity and honour. On the other hand, the sexually provocative representations of women on Arab satellite television and the contradictory social practices in the Turkish soap operas that are so highly acclaimed by Arab female viewers compel Al-Mahadin to call for psychoanalytic concepts that would help her to explore the complexities of fantasy building at work.

The central role of fantasies, affects and bodies is repeatedly mentioned throughout the book. Gargi Bhattacharyya (2013), for example, makes the argument that we need to explore the ways in which media-produced fantasies of gendered identity guide us in our technologies of our selves, including our ways of acting in the workplace. In her discussion of the politics of mobility, Audrey Yue (2013) refers to queer scholarship, which produces new affects and new subjectivities. Meenakshi Gigi Durham (2013) reminds the reader of the central role of the corporeal when it comes to media use. In particular, this is the case with digital media and virtual identities, because, as she points out, 'engagement with media is always a physical engagement'.

From the many detailed theoretical and methodological discussions we will pick just a few to illustrate the breadth of the arguments made in the book. One

example is Catharine Lumby's (2013) warning, directed to feminist scholars to avoid essentialist terms and oppositions when it comes to defining one's own feminism. The call for large-scale comparative analyses to get a better understanding of how media functions as a 'difference-engine' comes from Monika Djerf-Pierre (2013). Mary Beltrán (2013) suggests that generational tensions can be overcome by collaborative projects, whereas Robin Means Coleman (2013) asks, 'what constitutes a Black feminist media studies in the twenty-first century?'

The overall goal of feminist scholarship, as explicitly argued by Katharine Sarikakis, is to precipitate towards social justice, equality and inclusion. On the one hand, this requires a thorough analysis of the 'political and institutional dimensions of media and culture as they are shaped by the superstructures of state, international organizations, corporations, and civil society' (Sarikakis 2013: 109). On the other hand, it also requires research in the opposite direction, as Melissa Gregg's (2013) studies on women's technologically mediated work illustrate. They make us aware of the new and, at the same time, well-known forms in which women contribute to the market economy through a combination of paid and unpaid labour.

Current Perspectives in Feminist Media Studies lives up to the promise to foster an international, transnational exchange of ideas among feminists. It is politically correct in the sense that the dialogues and debates of the white 'First World' that usually dominate academic publications take a back seat. Taken together, the articles draw a cartography of a global feminist media studies in which the global South has a strong presence.

There are still gaps missing, but this does not detract from the huge accomplishments of this edited volume. This collection of essays is a must-read for anyone who is interested in the contemporary questions and challenges of feminist media studies, and it might inspire novices to join the field. It is the very first broad overview and examination of its kind.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD WE TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION?

Feminist media studies, which use the term 'post-feminism' in the context of describing and analysing media texts, should undertake a critical examination of the concept. Drawing on Fraser's analysis, it is obvious that the term 'post-feminism' generates a discourse that promotes the appropriation of feminist ideas by neo-liberalism, while an alternative term (such as pseudo-feminism) would resist this appropriation.

Herta Nagel-Docekal (1999: 11) also criticizes the dual use of the term 'post-feminism': On the one hand, the term celebrates the triumph of feminism in the popular discourse, especially in the mainstream media. On the other hand, the philosophical discourse surrounding this concept does not express the increasing differentiation in the reasoning of feminist ideas, but rather evokes the image of a departure.

What is almost entirely absent from the future prospects of feminist media studies is the rediscovery of a historical dimension. Not only has the feminist movement changed, but the media system itself has undergone the greatest changes, both nationally and internationally. Feminist media studies should increasingly take this fact into account and make a retrospective comparison with current developments.

New insights into feminist media studies can also be expected from comparative transnational analyses. Even in the so-called western countries, the media situation can be viewed as non-homogeneous. The media system, media

content and the feminist movement in Italy, for example, are completely different than in Eastern European countries. Here, too, not only the cultural dimension but also historical and political developments in particular play a role. A comparative transnational analysis can lead to interesting new insights.

Fraser (2013: 241) also reminds us to include in our analysis those unintended effects that emancipation can bring. Comparative media analyses, whether they are historically oriented, nationally oriented or even local-global comparatively oriented, make it easier to recognize the inherent ambivalence of empowerment and emancipation. In comparative analyses, we can better analyse such feminist goals as empowerment and emancipation for their unintended outcomes.

Last but not least, Fraser admonishes us in her concluding remarks to make the concept of justice important and three-dimensional once again, and to connect all three dimensions – redistribution, recognition and representation – with one another in a balanced way. That does not mean renouncing the studies that deal with identity construction and the media, which have been rapidly increasing in recent years. But it does mean taking into account the socio-economic dimension much more than before. If we examine the question of media use or the appropriation of the social web, we should at the same time analyse which powerful industries, which capital investments and which shareholder networks are behind these media.

Feminist media studies have already addressed many of these important aspects, and have assembled the initial results in a program for the tenth anniversary of the journal that could not be more extensive. We want to come to terms with this program, so it could be that the *Feminist Media Studies* journal will have to increase in volume and frequency in the future.

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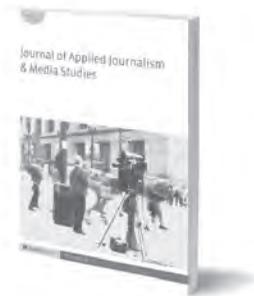
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The journal has a particular focus on and interest in contemporary issues and practices of media firms as they are experienced by their actors journalists, executives, publishers and proprietors, among others. Besides scholarly submissions, the editors are interested in articles written by media actors focusing on topics including their activities, problems, strategies, guidelines, management and editorial issues, organization, ethical codes, coverage, distribution, marketing, handling of user-generated material, etc. The journal is the first scholarly publication giving due consideration in publishing to material by media actors. Practitioners, for the first time, will have their articles printed alongside academic papers within the pages of the same journal.

The journal's main purpose is to test and apply media and communication theories to day-to-day affairs of media outlets to help executives, editors and journalists solve the issues they confront. It is interested in research and studies that help media actors journalists, proprietors and publishers improve their output.



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