

# Gender and Media

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Academic work focusing on the multiple interactions between gender and media has an extensive history. Interestingly, developments in gender and media research run parallel to feminist activism. From their earliest beginnings, mass media have inspired academic investigation. However, it was not until the early 1960s, the start of the second-wave feminist movement in the United States, that gender awareness began to be incorporated into studies on gender and media. The male bias of academic themes and theory and the underrepresentation of women in universities were major points of criticism (Van Zoonen, 1994). The principal areas of investigation concerned gender stereotypes, construction of gendered social roles, gender ideology, and pornography and its (social) consequences. These themes were and still are scrutinized in all aspects of media: production, content, and consumption. Different fields of research have developed, each marked by a specific epistemological and ontological viewpoint on understanding gender and its relation to media.

Ontologically, gender is understood in a number of ways, each with its repercussions for the type of research conducted on a certain topic. Views range from an essentialist perspective that presents a dichotomous understanding of an individual's physical sex (male versus female) as a biological fact that determines their gender (masculine or feminine), to a postmodern view that presents gender and sex as fluid, non-dichotomous social constructs (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015).

Epistemologically, we find studies ranging from purely data driven to theory driven. The first approach produces valuable, often numeric, insight into the relationship between gender and media, while the second approach offers advancements in theory. Studies in gender and media often combine empiric and theoretical approaches, resulting in work that nuances and/or advances theoretical insight.

Clearly, over half a century later, ideas on the relations between gender and media have evolved tremendously. This is partly due to almost 60 years of academic research in gender and media. Additionally, both social and technological developments have changed the context of research with its repercussions on the study of media and gender. More specifically, the rise of social media and globalization (which is a major consequence of technological developments) complicates traditional understandings of gender and media.

In this entry, the dynamic relationship between gender and media is discussed in the light of digitization and globalization. First, the traditional categories in the study of media and gender—production, content, and consumption—are briefly

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summarized. Current research on media and gender questions these vantage points. Three cases—SheDecides, the Gender Pay Gap, and #MeToo—are used to illustrate current critical inquiries into the study of gender and media.

## **Production, Content, and Consumption of Media**

Investigating media production and its relations to gender is rooted in the belief that the number of women working in media production has an effect on how many and in which way women are represented in media content. In 1976, Gerbner and Gross (p. 182) stated that “representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation.” Gaye Tuchman (1978) related this term to gender and media and carefully described how mass media consistently underrepresent and misrepresent women. Women are either portrayed in stereotypical roles as victims or consumers or they are ignored by mass media. Hence, mass media deny the social existence of women, or rather symbolically annihilate them. Next to instigating research on social roles and gender—the representation of women in mass media—Tuchman’s work also raised the question of production. Why are women symbolically annihilated in mass media? Who produces these images and why? The main research focus in media production and gender lies with the news genre. Without exception, studies show that women are underrepresented in decision-making positions in news production. This lack is believed to result in the underrepresentation of women in media content. When women more often hold decision-making positions, underrepresentation of women in the news decreases (Ross & Byerly, 2004).

A similar relation between gender and media production is assumed for other media types as well. But this relationship is rarely studied. When it is, however, such a relation seems to exist (Lauzen & Dozier, 2004), though a direct correlation between the number of women in media production and the representation of women in media content might be hard to prove.

In addition to research on media production, research into media content and gender representation took flight in the 1970s. We can distinguish two strands of research. The first is related to symbolic annihilation and is closely intertwined with sex role theory. With regard to symbolic annihilation, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) 2015 report showed that only 24% of subjects of a news story are female. Even when the topic is closely related to gender, such as sexual violence, the male voice dominates the news media (GMMP, 2015). Next to numeric analysis of the presence of women, this strand is embedded in media psychology and focuses on gendered social roles. These studies are generally of a quantitative nature and show how women in the media are often still presented in the domestic sphere, as mothers or sisters, occupied with family, love, and friendship. Conversely, men are presented in the public sphere as the breadwinner, and occupying themselves with politics and technology. Though lately there have been some positive changes, the general pattern remains similar to that detected in the 1970s (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015).

Qualitative approaches on gender representations mark the second strand of research, rooted in sociology and cultural studies. Stuart Hall’s work on discursive

representations of masculinity and femininity, or Erving Goffman's work on advertising are often taken as a starting point. Both Hall's and Goffman's work enable researchers to investigate the rich visual materials offered by mass media. Work on advertising often shows a striking continuation of the gender displays as defined by Goffman in 1979. Women are frequently still portrayed in more submissive positions compared to men, reemphasizing the slow pace of changing societal structures on gender. Studies informed by Hall's work often show the discursive constructions of femininity and masculinity to be broadly the same as his original analysis, replicating routine stereotypes and the maintenance of patriarchy. Matters of representation are vital for one's identity, as not being represented not only means symbolic annihilation from society as Gerbner and Gross argued, but also that the construction of an individual's identity is more complex or even disrupted (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015).

However, both quantitative and qualitative content analyses show increasing complexities. Oftentimes patterns are described as similar to those of a few decades ago, but simultaneously gender is more often accompanied by words such as heterosexual, White, affluent. Indicating that the patterns are more complex than stated earlier and also that the theoretical frameworks are dynamic. For example, it is not all men who are in positions of power, but mostly men who are White, heterosexual, and wealthy. These complexities have given rise to theoretical advances in terms of intersectionality and queer theory.

## **Challenging “Gender” and “Media”**

As previously discussed, earlier theoretical perspectives on media production, content, and consumption still have value for contemporary research. However, technological developments and globalization pose a number of challenging questions. The year 2017 presented us with three important events that illustrate the increasing complexity of gender issues: the foundation of SheDecides, attention to the Gender Pay Gap, and #MeToo. SheDecides was founded as a response to Trump's reinstatement of the global gag rule, cutting US government financing of NGOs outside the United States if they provide information on abortion or safe abortion. The aims of SheDecides are “to promote, provide, protect and enhance the fundamental rights of every girl and woman” (<https://www.shedecides.com/>), by raising money to revoke the gag rule (400 million euros). Public awareness of the Gender Pay Gap grew, culminating in the resignation of a senior editor for BBC News, Carrie Gracie, who quit her position as China Editor to protest against pay inequality. Since January 2018, it is illegal for Icelandic organizations to pay women less than men. Other European countries are discussing the issue. Last but certainly not least, the #MeToo campaign, initiated by Tarana Burke in 2006, gained momentum in 2017 when Alyssa Milano forwarded the phrase in a tweet. The campaign originally aimed to empower women through empathy, especially young and vulnerable women of color. However, at the time of writing, #MeToo has set in motion a global discussion on sexual assault and power relations that encompasses more than the empowerment of sexual

abuse victims. These three events illustrate how these theoretical perspectives are challenged.

Media production is not exclusively in the hands of large media organizations anymore, but also in the hands of individuals (#MeToo). Nor are media organizations located in particular regions or countries any longer, diffusing their origins and local production (SheDecides and the Gender Pay Gap). Audiences are more fragmented, but also more active than ever before. The concepts “gender” and “media” are both challenged by the developments outlined above, with appealing, but provocative, consequences for the study of gender and media. While the meaning of media, and media studies in particular, is mostly challenged by globalization and digitization, the meaning of gender is challenged by post-feminism(s), intersectional approaches, and queer theory.

### *Globalizing Media*

Globalization as a concept worthy of academic study has taken flight since the late 1980s and has since been studied in a large variety of academic disciplines. For the study of media and gender, these developments have resulted in calls for “de-Westernization.” De-Westernization points toward many things, and goes beyond a simple notion of inclusivity. As Waisbord and Mellado (2014, p. 361) state, de-Westernization means “to invite scholars to reflect upon the broad conditions of intellectual production, and propose an epistemic shift.” Theory has a universal applicability, but is located in experiences and realities in a specific context. Therefore, Iwabuchi (2014) argues, any theory needs a spatiotemporal translation when we want to use it to explain a phenomenon located in a specific context.

De-Westernizing points toward two lines of thought. First, studies should focus on issues that are under-researched in the West. “The West” usually indicates the European American body of theory. Not substitution of theory but a complementary view on what to study is what is at stake here. For example, studies on media production neglect media practices in non-European American contexts. While the United States still has the highest box office revenue worldwide for their film industry, China, India, and Nigeria produce more movies and/or surpass US box office admissions. Nevertheless, outside their own territories, these three industries are rarely the subject of study. Second, phenomena that transcend geopolitical boundaries are of academic interest. Again, it is not the discarding of national boundaries that is meant, but the idea that phenomena that are not geographically contained deserve scholarly attention. The examples discussed in the introduction are illustrative of such phenomena: #MeToo, the Gender Pay Gap, and the SheDecides movement are each a global phenomenon. However, studies on the Gender Pay Gap (in media industries) often rank the pay gap by size per country. The local context of daily working conditions, market, and legislation is often taken into account and reflected upon. Similarly, for the #MeToo campaign, instances and translations to other (than the European American) countries are discussed, while mostly the discussion still takes place in the European American context.

De-Westernization would mean that we start looking into sexual violence as a global phenomenon marked by specific power configurations in which individuals are situated. De Kloet (2008) shows how Judith Butler's ideas on gender performativity assume a Western body and how this poses problems in attempting to adapt Butler's ideas in other contexts (1990/2006). This incompatibility should not be taken as a reason to reject Butler's ideas, rather as a limitation of them and an opportunity to develop them further.

### *Digitizing Media*

Similar to globalization, the development of new technologies adds novel challenges and areas of interest to the study of media and gender. Technological developments disrupt time and place, both materially and immaterially. The advent of mass media, radio, and television marked the blurring of several social boundaries. For the study of gender and media, the blurring of the private and the public spheres (e.g., boyd, 2008; Meyrowitz, 1985) was of importance. Television gave women access, or at least a view on, the public sphere (previously confined to men), raising awareness of issues that were of prime importance to second-wave feminism. Additionally, mass media offered a stage to activist groups. Both functions of media, offering a stage and providing access to knowledge, ideas, and viewpoints, are important when we look into contemporary debates revolving around the three events. The Gender Pay Gap, which at the time of writing is still a topic of heated debate, is mostly an awareness issue. Not only are corporate annual reports accessible via the internet, but the fact that the Gender Pay Gap is a global rather than a local phenomenon, highlights the global discrimination of women in the labour force, raises awareness of the issue, and induces activism. Likewise, the SheDecides movement uses both traditional and social media to raise awareness of the topic, and also serves as an outlet for the outrage caused by the global gag rule.

Importantly, media technology also caused the blurring of another relevant boundary: that between producers and consumers of media. While women are still underrepresented in all areas of media production (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015), their presence in media production has increased over the years. With the advent of digital media, access to media production has become more widely available. Initially, new technologies were hailed as opportunities for democratization of media access. Presumably causing a power shift from producer to consumer (Jenkins, 2006), previously marginalized groups of people were positioned as active producers of new media content. This content, it has been suggested, was less biased and served the interests of media owners less than ever before. Though scholars generally acknowledge that media industries still have more power than their audiences, ignoring consumers or situating them as passive audiences is impossible. This development is illustrated by the #MeToo movement. Starting with Tarana Burke's tweet, meant to provide a safe space for women to share their stories, the amplification of the movement set in motion by Alyssa Milano caused an outing of perpetrators in the media industries. Additionally, #MeToo also functioned as an agenda-setting tool for current affair programmes and news outlets in

various forms. Though the democratizing potential of digital media, enabled by technological advances, should not be overemphasized, the increasing societal attention for, and awareness of gender issues is sustained and reinforced by social media.

Yet, the aforementioned democratization and power shift can be seriously questioned with regard to gender and media (Sundet & Ytreberg, 2009; Van Dijck, 2009). Especially the potential of active media consumers turning into producers is overestimated. Van Dijck (2009) shows convincingly how only 1% of media consumers are truly active, other consumers take up more traditional roles as consumers by not participating, contributing, or producing. Likewise, Sundet and Ytreberg (2009) analyzed media production discourses and laid bare the incorporation of the notion of “active audiences” by media organizations themselves. This, they argue, results in notions of audience activity functioning as strategic “working notions” for the industry’s executives. Hence, instead of a power shift, media industries have found a way to discipline audience activities.

These mechanisms are illustrated by the #MeToo campaign and the Gender Pay Gap. Originally aiming to empower victims of sexual violence, traditional structures of media seem to dominate. Mostly powerful, White, affluent celebrities have their voices heard. Instead of empowering women globally, in the European American context, #MeToo has partly turned into what might be called the blame game: sexual violence has evolved into a mediated spectacle in which audiences are asked to judge who is the victim and who is the abuser. Some of these mediatized debates focus on men’s fear of accidentally sexually assaulting women, hence reappropriating sexual violence issues into safe territory in which men discuss what is sexual assault. Professional areas in which employees are at risk of falling victim to sexual assault, for example, hotel cleaners, retail workers, and waitresses/waiters, are ignored in favor of attention to media industries and academia. Burke’s intent: to provide a space for women of color to share experiences, is unacknowledged in or removed from many discussions. However, despite the downside, #MeToo has nonetheless contributed to opening up a much needed discussion on sexual violence in the work space.

Another reason to not overestimate media technology’s democratic and gender-empowering potential is the fact that new media technologies are neither accessible to all people nor available in all locations. The digital divide—the economic and social inequality in the access to, use of, or impact of information and communication technologies—forms the most striking example. There are significant differences in media access in terms of gender, class, and racial groups. For example, while in Western countries the ratio of female/male users of digital media technologies is close to 50/50, in other countries male users dominate (sometimes as much as 75% of users being affluent males) (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). In other words, technological developments also reveal differences in the power configurations that shape gender and media. Partly, these ideas have resulted in calls for de-Westernizing media studies.

### *De-Essentializing Gender*

The study of gender and media, and more specifically feminist media studies, is rooted in second-wave feminism. Though international in character, second-wave feminism was primarily situated in Western countries (which is of importance for



the development of the study of gender and media). The second feminist wave is not marked by a clear ending, but the 1990s are usually seen as the turning point (McRobbie, 2004). Self-criticism on epistemological viewpoints provided room for intersectionality and queer studies to develop. Questions focused on what “femininity” actually entails; intersections with class, color, and sexuality were framed with an emphasis on Foucault’s micropolitics and embodiment. This development undermined the collective base necessary for political activism. Simultaneously, popular media successfully propelled debates on topics such as domestic violence while depoliticizing these issues by suggesting that (gender) equality is achieved and it is up to the individual to undertake action when finding his or herself in an unjust situation. Hence, popular media amplify neoliberal discourses on the gendered subject. Nevertheless, important concepts arose from the turning point.

#MeToo, SheDecides, and the Gender Pay Gap are each marked by intersectionality. While #MeToo was started by a Black female grassroots activist, the faces that now represent #MeToo are primarily White, elite women (some would argue #MeToo has been whitewashed). The Gender Pay Gap indeed shows salary discrimination on the basis of gender, but when we look into other demographics, pay gaps exist for people from various ethnic backgrounds. The aim of SheDecides, as stated on their website, is “to support the rights of girls and women to decide freely and for themselves about their sexual lives, including whether, when, with whom and how many children they have ... A new normal where girls and women decide about their bodies, their lives, their futures. Without question” (<https://www.shedecides.com/our-story/>). The movement is truly global, in the sense that people, organizations, politicians, from all regions are involved, but the local initiatives to help are mainly located in developing countries.

Intersectional approaches are incredibly useful to nuance the thinking about these phenomena, about the intersections of gender and other markers. Originally formulated as a critique on essentialism, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) coined the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality critiqued the tendency to treat gender and race as two separate categories of experience. White middle-class female experiences, Black feminists in the United States argued, are not to be equated with those of African American middle-class female experiences. Basically, intersectionality claims that the concept gender should be understood in relation to other concepts such as class, age, (dis)ability, sexuality, and ethnicity. Though this might seem to be stating the obvious, it is not. As mentioned, #MeToo was initiated by a Black civil rights activist from the Bronx as a support tool for sexual assault survivors and aimed to help young women of color. After the re-tweeting by Alyssa Milano, some 10 years later, #MeToo now focuses on (media) industries and assault and harassment in the workplace.

The relationship between gender and media is a complex one. Multiple aspects construct a field of power configurations in which and through which this relationship is articulated. For approximately half a century gender and media have been the focus of scholarly attention, sometimes with a clear feminist motivation, sometimes without one. While the former, invested in theorizing how gender(s) take shape, are discursive praxes, the latter have been invaluable in making manifest the inequalities between genders. Digitalization and globalization have posed new challenges to scholars in the field,

on one hand opening space for diverging viewpoints enriching the study of gender and media, and on the other, emphasizing the limitations of theoretical viewpoints.

To engage with global phenomena such as #SheDecides, the Gender Pay Gap, and #MeToo, is to actively engage with insights generated beyond the familiar European American ones, listening to experiences, theorizations on these power configurations and experience, and reflecting on how they enrich but also challenge the canonical concepts and theories used in research.

SEE ALSO: Gender and Technology; Social Media: Complexities and Contradictions; Women's Activism

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