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Feminist scholarship in communication: Problems and potential

Margaret Gallagher

When in 1986 Brenda Dervin devoted her ICA (International Communication Association) presidential address to the subject of feminist scholarship and communication, it was a courageous and daring departure from tradition. The conventional topics of presidential addresses – variations on the grand themes of communication theory, method or structure – were considered weighty and worthy of these occasions. But feminism? At best, surely this was a minority interest, with no claim to be awarded the gravitas naturally accorded to the canonical issues of communication. It was precisely this assumption that Dervin set out to question in her presidential lecture.

The first woman to be elected president of the ICA, Dervin did not consider herself a feminist scholar. However, as a critical media researcher, she was both open to the insights she found in the work of feminist colleagues and aware that this work was consistently ignored in the 'authoritative' communication literature. Something of a *cause celèbre* among feminist media scholars at that time was the absence of any feminist scholarship in the 1983 special issue of the *Journal of Communication* entitled 'Ferment in the Field'. It brought together 35 essays from leading scholars in 10 countries to 'address critical issues and research tasks of the discipline'.

However, none of the essays engaged with the need for a feminist perspective on communication issues or research. Even Gaye Tuchman, one of the few female authors included, whose study of media 'framing' of the U.S. women's movement was one of the first to show how feminist analysis can illuminate communication theory and process (in this case the role of the news media in constructing reality: Tuchman, 1978), referred to that study merely in parenthesis in her essay on critical approaches to the production of culture (Tuchman, 1983: 335).

The invisibility of feminist scholarship in 'Ferment in the Field' was, said Dervin in her ICA presidential address, illustrative of the 'de-centering' of this work within communication, where in some quarters it was 'devalued, seen as trivial'. As a result, despite its transformative potential, the question 'what has feminist scholarship contributed to the field of communication research' could only produce the answer 'very little' (Dervin, 1987: 111).

To some extent Dervin's ICA address was a symbolic gesture – an insistence that feminist scholarship merited the level and degree of consideration given to other approaches to the study of communication. In other ways it was a critique of communication as a discipline – a view that feminist work, with its self-reflexive method, its interdisciplinary approach, its emphasis on gender as the fundamental organising category in human experience, could contribute to a more complete theoretical basis for understanding communication structures, processes and practices. At the time, both the gesture and the critique must have seemed incomprehensible to some, implausible to others.

Limited acknowledgement

A quarter of a century later, things have changed. Probably most communication scholars are now aware that feminist perspectives have expanded the fields of study within the discipline, though some may be under the impression that this contribution has amounted to

'a trend in "softer" topics being researched' (Thussu, 2009: 2). Although Thussu does not elaborate on this comment, it presumably refers to feminist work in the cultural studies tradition, which has focused on gender representation, audience reception, and textual analysis. There is certainly a substantial body of feminist research in these areas, and it is important to recognise both its innovatory nature and its historical specificity. For by giving legitimacy to the academic study of previously ignored questions, especially within popular culture, feminists as far back as the 1970s were actually addressing the issue of hierarchy within media research itself – a hierarchy which persists to this day, for example, in the labelling of certain topics as 'soft'.

It is of course quite wrong to equate feminist scholarship solely with the study of representation in, and reception of, media texts. A concern with power, rights and democracy has been at the heart of feminist media analysis since its earliest days; and, particularly over the past 15 years, there has been a growing body of feminist work on globalization, media policy, technology development, and political economy. Yet authoritative communication textbooks – if they acknowledge feminism at all – continue to ignore these dimensions of the feminist contribution.

For instance, the highly influential *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, now in its sixth edition, situates feminist theory and scholarship exclusively in the context of culture, representation, texts and audiences. There is no consideration of feminism in relation to theories of media and society, media freedom and accountability, media economics and governance, global media issues, or political communication. Thus readers are left with the impression that feminism is unconnected with these core matters in the communication curriculum, and that its concerns are limited to the sphere of gender identity and its construction. In this interpretation feminist media scholarship is seen as a *specialisation* within communication, rather than as a *perspective* to be applied to the field as a whole.

The presentation of feminism as a 'specialism within' rather than an 'approach to' communication is prevalent in key texts in the field, and is one of the reasons for the continued marginalisation of feminist media scholarship. One of the ways in which this happens is through the inclusion of the feminist chapter in anthologies or collections. This chapter is usually expected to set out an overall feminist analysis of the topic in question, while the other chapters provide more conventional perspectives. A typical recent example is the *Handbook of Journalism Studies*, which 'sets out to comprehensively chart the field and define the agenda for future research in an international context' (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch, 2009: xi).

In one chapter Linda Steiner ably sets out the feminist position on key issues in journalism. There are very brief references to feminist work in four other chapters – on news sources, journalism history, ethics, and news discourse. But 25 of the chapters (from a total of 30) show no awareness of relevant feminist research, which could actually illuminate almost all of the volume's topics – on journalism education, agenda setting, gatekeepers, news values and selection, alternative journalism, news framing, development journalism, news routines, audience reception, coverage of war and peace, to mention just the most obvious.

Here we face the question posed by the customary inclusion of 'the feminist chapter': who actually reads it? The same question applies to feminist media research in general. The complete absence of reference to feminist work in the accounts of leading scholars in the *Handbook* – and this volume is just one example among many – suggests that feminist scholarship continues to be seen as a minority interest positioned at the periphery of the

communication field, rather than as an approach with the potential to inform the core concerns of the field as a whole and thus deserving a wide readership.

The 'outsider' position ascribed to feminist media research can mean that it is literally written out of the history of the field. In James Curran's account of the Westminster tradition of communication research in the United Kingdom, for instance, the school's limited but pioneering feminist scholarship is consigned to a footnote. Though Curran disarmingly confesses that its omission from his chronicle is 'unforgivable', the perception of this work as being 'outside the Westminster tradition' (2004: 36) precludes it from consideration in the main narrative.

Unrealised potential

In some ways the failure of scholars in established communication areas to read and relate feminist research to their work may be simply an aspect of the general inertia that imprisons some specialists within their particular versions of the ivory tower. As John Downing has trenchantly put it, learning about new subjects and making sense of the untidy complexities they introduce into one's own discipline, 'sounds like hard work. And what is the tenure and promotion pay-off?' (2003: 508).

A decade ago, Graham Murdock pointed out that, despite the wealth of feminist writing on class and gender, most class analysts appear unwilling – or unable – to assimilate these insights within their existing models and theories (2000: 20). Yet as Murdock went on to show, by integrating feminist perspectives into his 'reconstruction' of a class analysis of communication and culture in emerging capitalist formations, such assimilations can be rewarding and illuminating.

Other 'revisionist' exercises of this sort have produced equally fruitful results. Eileen Meehan's reworking (2002) of her early gender-neutral research into the commodity audience, Phillip Tomkins and colleagues' revision (2009) of their study of organisational dynamics, Ellen Balka's retelling (2002) of the gender-blind history of changes in the Canadian telecommunications industry – these examples show what a feminist-inspired approach can add to our grasp of complex communication processes and practices. Frequently this is achieved by moving away from a purely abstract level of analysis to a point of entry that recognises the actions and experience of the people who exist within these processes and practices.

How then should we respond today to the question 'what has feminist scholarship contributed to the field of communication research?' For some, the answer will still be an emphatic 'very little'. Marie-Joseph Bertini, for instance, claims that the marginalisation of gender studies in French communication sciences is not even a matter of blindness or indifference, but of outright and persistent rejection (2009: 170). But wherever we look, the answer must surely be 'not enough'.

Certainly we can now find scholars in diverse communication disciplines who engage seriously with feminist work. Nick Couldry (2010) draws on a range of feminist theorists in his study of the crisis in 'voice' within neoliberalism. Vincent Mosco (2009) integrates feminist standpoint theory and theories of gender in the most recent edition of his political economy of communication. James Curran (2002) includes a 'feminist narrative' in his exposition of six competing narratives of British media history. Developments like these are crucial not just because they help to legitimise feminist scholarship, but because they allow feminists to engage in peer-to-peer dialogue – and sometimes disagreement (DiCenzo, 2004) – with scholars outside the feminist tradition. For feminist media researchers, this is an enormously refreshing experience. It is also a rare one.

A quarter of a century after 'Ferment in the Field', three leading communication scholars came together at Columbia University, New York, to discuss the publication's impact on media and communication research, 'the relevance today of the debates it stirred, and the state of the field now, 26 years later' (Sjøvaag and Moe, 2009: 130). The discussion was of course impressive and wide-ranging. But, just as in 'Ferment in the Field', feminist scholarship did not feature within it.

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