

Editorial

Contemporary Research on Gender and Media: It's All Political

Sofie Van Bauwel ^{1,*} and Tonny Krijnen ²

¹ Department of Communication Sciences, Centre for Cinema and Media Studies, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium, E-Mail: sofie.vanbauwel@ugent.be

² Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 3000 Rotterdam, The Netherlands, E-Mail: krijnen@eshcc.eur.nl

* Corresponding author

Submitted: 5 January 2021 | Published: 23 March 2021

Abstract

Recent global social changes and phenomena like #MeToo and Time's Up Movement, the visibility of feminism in popular media (e.g., Beyonce or the TV series *Orange is the New Black*), the increase of datafication and fake news have not only put pressure on the media and entertainment industry and the content produced, but also generated critique, change and questions in the public debate on gender in general and (the backlash on) gender studies around the world. But are these phenomena also game changers for research on media and gender? In this thematic issue we want to provide insight in recent developments and trends in research on gender and media. What are the dominant ideas and debates in this research field and how do they deal with all of the changes in the media scape (e.g., platformization, the dominance of algorithms and datafication, slacktivism, and gender inequalities in media production). Moreover, how do current debates, theoretical insights and methods communicate with those in the past? The research field has changed rapidly over the last 10 years with repercussions on the conceptualisation of gender, its intersections with other identities markers (e.g., age, ethnicity, class, disabilities, sexualities, etc.), and media audiences' responses to these developments. We welcome contributions within the scope of gender and media and which are topical in the way they introduce new concepts, theoretical insights, new methods or new research subjects.

Keywords

#MeToo; gender; gender politics; media; post-feminism; representation

Issue

This editorial is part of the issue "Gender and Media: Recent Trends in Theory, Methodology and Research Subjects" edited by Sofie Van Bauwel (Ghent University, Belgium) and Tonny Krijnen (Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands).

© 2021 by the authors; licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

Recent global social changes and phenomena like #MeToo and the Time's Up movement, the visibility of feminism and/or post-feminism in popular media, the increase of datafication and the concept of fake news have not only put pressure on the media, the entertainment industry and the content produced, but have also generated critique, change and questions in the public debate on gender in general and (the backlash on) gender studies around the world. But are these phenomena also game changers for research on media and gender? In this thematic issue, we aim to provide some insight in recent debates within contemporary research on gen-

der and media. What are the dominant ideas and disputes, and how do they relate to all of the changes in the media scape (Appadurai, 1990)? This issues' contributions deal with different aspects of these debates and trends. Each article examines an issue from a specific geopolitical context while including contemporary conceptualisations and thought about gender in the new media scape. Mostly empirical data deepen the knowledge and questions on the new (and not so new) topics that are typically explored by media scholars studying gender. How do we study gender in our media-saturated world and how does gender relate to the digital turn

and media's platformisation (Harvey, 2020)? We aim to shed light on the novelties within research on gender and media, which obviously encompass the lasting issues that have dominated the field for more than 40 years. In the afterthoughts of our book *Gender and Media: Representing, Producing, Consuming* (Krijnen, & Van Bauwel, 2015), we stated that studies often conclude that nothing has changed in over 40 years of studying gender and media and that the same gender inequalities remain in place. However, media are in flux, and recently content, media technologies, and the way that we, as audiences, use media have changed. In tandem with movements of social change (including fluid gender identities, hashtag activism, post-feminisms, post-colonialism, etc.), these changes may lead to a different answer: Nothing is the same and there are new routes in research.

The varying origins of the articles reflect the diversity in contemporary research and cover a wide range of themes. We distinguish the following categories, relevant to our contemporary media scape: the political, post-feminism, and representation. The articles range from studies on the representation of #MeToo in more traditional media to research on the online representation of feminism. Most research deals with feminism or post-feminism, the potential for social change or its incorporation and backlash. In comparison with previous special issues on gender and media over the years (Araüna, Dhaenens, & Van Bauwel, 2017; Krijnen, Van Bauwel, & Alvares, 2010; Tortajada & Van Bauwel, 2012), we can say that some concepts that have been introduced are here to stay. For example, the idea of post-feminist sensibilities (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004) made room for post-feminism without the polarised debate on the existence of a new wave of feminism. That is, debates on which feminist wave actually exists and is current is not part of these studies. Instead, like in society, the binary gender system is questioned not only by the introduction of non-binary as a gender identity but also by non-essentialist notions of gender as a variable or category in research. Politics and the political (Mouffe, 2005) are again at the foreground of most research, dealing with ideologies and power in grassroots organisations, activism online or offline or traditional political structures. A thorough interrogation of the gender imbalance and gender inequality with explicit attention to genders' intersections is the result. Young people are digital natives, and social media platforms like Instagram are considered to be the place to articulate new femininities (and many other gender identities). Social media platforms are considered the new arena where post-feminism has matured. Hence, the three themes 'the political,' 'representation,' and 'post-feminism' are intimately intertwined in this issue's contributions.

This thematic issue seeks to critically reflect on the past and the present and illustrates the need for constant reflection, rethinking and shaping of ideas, theories and concepts to grasp the complex relationship

between gender and media. In the work of Shari Adlung, Margreth Lünenborg, and Christoph Raetzsch (2021), the political becomes more tangible as their research focuses on recent backlash against gender equality or feminism. In their article "Pitching Gender in a Racist Tune: The Affective Publics of the #120decibel Campaign," the authors question the changing modes of communication in the public sphere in relation to hashtag activism and they take a dive deep into the #120decibel campaign by the German Identitarian Movement in 2018. Their specific case illustrates the incorporation of feminism into nationalistic, misogynistic and xenophobic discourses and considers digital platforms and social media as echo chambers of right-wing whiteness, articulating an anti-migration standpoint with a so-called feminist position. Sofia Caldeira's (2021) article on Instagram as a potential emancipatory forum contradicts this incorporation of feminism and its backlash of emancipation. In her article "'It's Not Just Instagram Models': Exploring the Gendered Political Potential of Young Women's Instagram Use" Caldeira looks into online self-representation and social media's potential in relation to politics and activism. Caldeira's research includes an in-depth analysis of interviews with ordinary users questioning the political potential of this aesthetically oriented platform. Her research illustrates the importance of critically exploring the nuanced ways in which people's everyday experiences of Instagram intersect with broader cultural and political questions of gender representations. In a third article "Gender, Voice and Online Space: Expressions of Feminism on Social Media in Spain," Cilia Willem and Iolanda Tortajada (2021) focus on the current momentum of a series of hashtags like #MeToo to critically examine how feminism is represented on social media in Spain. #MeToo is considered a game changer for feminist action online and offline. In their article, the authors look into more than 20 years of feminist research in Spain that uses post-feminism as an analytical tool. The authors highlight different and even paradoxical movements of which each emphasises the structural struggles of violence against women, including online harassment. Movements range from feminism as an adopted element in the marketing strategies of personal branding to a reactionary backlash against feminism.

In the previous articles on gender and social media, self-representation and representation seem to be at the core of the studies be it in a qualitative way. The field still needs to monitor gender representations in all kinds of media content. The device, platform or media may have changed enormously, but media content is still representing gender. Quantitative analyses show the size of gender inequalities, they visualize how large the power imbalances actually are. In the article "Feminist Stereotypes and Women's Roles in Spanish Radio Ads," Anna Fajula, Mariluz Barbeito, Estrella Barrio, Ana Maria Enrique, and Juan José Perona (2021) use a quantitative approach to look into the representation of gender in

Spanish radio advertisements. This study suggests that the #MeToo movement has not yet had an effect on gender representation in advertising, which often still presents stereotypical gender roles.

A study by Marieke Boschma and Serena Daalmans (2021) challenges this rather pessimistic conclusion. In their thematic analysis of three popular Dutch teenage girl magazines, they find a wide range of post-feminist themes present. In the article “What a Girl Wants, What a Girl Needs: Analyzing Postfeminist Themes in Girls’ Magazines,” we see that media content for girls represents a diverse range of discourses, including a feminist, anti-feminist and post-feminist discourse. Themes like the body, sex, male–female relationships, female empowerment and self-reflexivity constructing a certain girlhood are all articulated. This somewhat optimistic view is also shared in the work of Priscilla Boshoff. Boshoff’s (2021) article “Breaking the Rules: Zodwa Wabantu and Postfeminism in South Africa,” presents an analysis of media representations of a South African celebrity (including social media): Zodwa Wabantu, a fearless, older, working-class woman. Boshoff draws attention to how Zodwa Wabantu embodies a global post-feminist subjectivity and hence the importance of including an intersectional and postcolonial perspective into one’s research.

All of this issues’ contributions conceptualise gender as a social construct, including the importance of bodies and how they are interpreted and labelled. Scholars on gender and media also struggle with this notion of gender and its intersections. Despite serious efforts to not essentialise gender and to adopt an intersectional approach, often we find rather classical and dichotomous gender notions. In the last article in this issue, Joke Hermes and Linda Kopitz (2021) offer a different conceptualisation of gender. In “Casting for Change: Tracing Gender in Discussions of Casting through Feminist Media Ethnography,” the authors tackle the methodological problems in relation to conceptualising and defining gender in audience studies. Employing three types of analyses (a collaborative autoethnography, netnography and a qualitative content analysis), the authors show a way to enrich research on the diversity and complexity of gender identities beyond the gender dichotomy. The authors argue that researchers do have a duty of care, the reinvention of the ethics, subjectivity and reflexivity of the researcher in relation to herself/himself/themself and their diverse relations with media. In their conclusion, Hermes and Kopitz argue for recognition of the different definitions of gender, for building bridges between the different positions, but simultaneously to strongly hold one’s own. Ethnographic research, especially online, is presented as one of the useful methods to understand the way gender is represented by media professionals and media users alike.

This issue’s contributions form a modest overview of the current debates in the dynamics of media and gender research. In addition to qualitative in-depth research

which showed contradictory debates and discursive articulations, quantitative research on gender representations showed how numerically seen, gender inequity is still ubiquitous. We would like to draw attention to one aspect that deserves more attention than it got: Each article shows that the local is important despite the transnationality of the media industry. While analyses from a political economy perspective emphasise the rapidly increasing transnational character of the media industries, local context are shown to be quintessential in understanding media and gender. For example, while in some places and some media outlets, #MeToo has been a game changer, in other contexts it caused a strengthening of traditional gender norms. Though gender inequality remains omnipresent, it takes different shapes, forms. Based on the contributions in this issue, we can truly conclude that not all has stayed the same for the past 40 years and we are curious to find out how current changes in the media industries, technologies, content and audience will affect future gender constellations.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Raquel and all the authors who contributed to this thematic issue.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Adlung, S., Lünenborg, M., & Raetzsch, C. (2021). Pitching gender in a racist tune: The affective publics of the #120decibel campaign. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 16–26.
- Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. *Theory Culture Society*, 7(2), 230–238.
- Araüna, N., Dhaenens, F., & Van Bauwel, S. (2017). Historical, temporal and contemporary trends on gender and media. *Catalan Journal of Communications & Cultural Studies*, 9(2), 177–184.
- Boschma, M., & Daalmans, S. (2021). What a girl wants, what a girl needs: Analyzing postfeminist themes in girls’ magazines. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 27–38.
- Boshoff, P. (2021). Breaking the rules: Zodwa Wabantu and postfeminism in South Africa. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 52–61.
- Caldeira, S. P. (2021). “It’s not just Instagram models”: Exploring the gendered political potential of young women’s Instagram use. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 5–15.
- Fajula, A., Barbeito, M., Barrio, E., Enrique, A. M., & Perona, J. J. (2021). Feminist stereotypes and women’s roles in Spanish radio ads. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 39–51.

- Gill, R. (2007). Post-feminism media culture: Elements of a sensibility. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(2), 147–166.
- Harvey, A. (2020). *Feminist media studies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hermes, J., & Kopitz, L. (2021). Casting for change: Tracing gender in discussions of casting through feminist media ethnography. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 72–85.
- Krijnen, T., & Van Bauwel, S. (2015). *Gender and media: Representing, producing, consuming*. London: Routledge.
- Krijnen, T., Van Bauwel, S., & Alvares, C. (2010). New questions and themes in studying gender and communication. *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 2(3), 171–177.
- McRobbie, A. (2004). Postfeminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(3), 255–264.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political: Thinking in action*. London: Routledge.
- Tortajada, Y., & Van Bauwel, S. (2012). Gender relations in the media: Conflicting pictures and new representational practices. *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies*, 4(2), 143–153.
- Willem, C., & Tortajada, I. (2021). Gender, voice and online space: Expressions of feminism on social media in Spain. *Media and Communication*, 9(2), 62–71.

About the Authors



Sofie Van Bauwel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Ghent University and a Member of the research group Centre for Cinema and Media Studies. She is involved in several projects with a focus on the media as signifying articulations in visual popular culture. Her research activities involve gender, sexuality and media on which she has published. ORCID: 0000–0002-8554-2452



Tonny Krijnen is Assistant Professor at the Erasmus University of Rotterdam, Department of Media and Communication. Her research interests lie with television (production, content and reception), morality, gender and qualitative methods. With Prof. Sofie Van Bauwel she is the Co-Author of *Gender and Media: Representing, Producing, Consuming* (2015) of which the second edition will soon appear with Routledge. ORCID: 0000–0001-5934-6346