

# Feminist Media Theory and Activism: Different Worlds or Possible Cooperation

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- *Our activists feel they don't need theory.*
- *Except for one, girls from Women's Studies don't come to our activities.*

The goal of feminism is a social change of unequal relations between men and women. This is one of the rare statements around which there is a consensus not only amongst feminist theoreticians and activists, but also among the many diverse schools of feminist theory. A multitude of different voices, sometimes in an inspiring discussion and other times in a crude preservation of positions, often begins with the following well-known questions: *What should we do?* What are the possible strategies for change? Where do they lead? What are their possible consequences?

The cited quotes are off-the-cuff comments of a theoretician and an activist from Belgrade. They perhaps don't even remember their quotes but, for some reason, I have. In both cases, I have perceived them as indications of possible disagreements or a lack of cooperation between activist and academic parts of the women's scene in Belgrade. If looked at more closely, these two comments do have one thing in common: they both suggest that the other side does something wrong in their feminism. Activists don't read and so don't have the knowledge that is also required for activism, whereas theoreticians are not committed to 'really' helping women and taking part in protests. The first lack theory, and the second practice. Whether these comments are lone examples or whether they really speak of the relationship between the academic and activist women's scene in Belgrade could be the subject of further research; they are

simply cited here as ‘scenes from life’, as a kind of experience that someone else might relate to.

However, attempts to put academic feminism into activism very often show that contradictions between feminist theory and feminism as a practical policy are much more than individual frustrations. An example of this sort of merger between theory and activism is the so-called action research that entails research in service of social change that will be of use to certain groups discriminated against (Einsiedel, 1996; Steinberg, 1996). Ronnie Steinberg, a feminist sociologist, offers a brilliant overview of the problems that feminist scientists face when doing research in a political context and with the intention of realizing concrete changes, such as the introduction of certain policies or legal solutions.

Starting with her own experience as an advocacy researcher (with an interest in women who occupy traditionally female occupations that are paid less) Steinberg lists a series of differences between action and academic research. Whilst the purpose of academic research is a contribution to theory and production of knowledge, action research has a goal of concrete social change. Moreover, researchers at universities have much more freedom in their work and more control over their research. Action research depends on its donors and the researcher often does not have full control over the design of the research and the use of its results, and often there are more time-related limitations. The context of the research is also different. Since the results of action research should lead to certain practical changes, they always need to be defended in an extremely hostile environment consisting of opponents of the demanded changes.

The consequence of these contextual differences is an essential contradiction between feminist theory and research in the function of activism that Steinberg identifies in her experience of research and activism in the field of equality at work, but that is also more encompassing and relevant in the case of feminist media theory and activism. As she puts it:

[...] whilst feminist advocacy researchers are critical of science and very much feel the limitations of scientific pretensions to objectivity

and universal truth, we use these methods because they legitimise our competence and because they legitimise research results that we bring to the political arena. Considering the ease with which any social science study can be torn to pieces by others with a different set of ideological convictions in a hostile context, I believe that it is often better to rely on conventional methods of social sciences (page 249).

This means that feminist action research often has to accept methodology and an understanding of science that completely opposes feminist methodology largely based on criticisms of conventional methods of social sciences (Smith, 1987; De Vault, 1996, 1999; Gorelick, 1996; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000).

This is not just a matter of formality or taste, but also has serious consequences in terms of research. Feminist methodology is critical towards scientific positivism that sees science as neutral, objective and distanced from the object of research. This is where the first problem stems from for feminist advocacy researchers: since they have to defend their research in an environment of scientific positivism, their position is contradictory because at the same time they should be both 'neutral scientists' and advocates of an openly political project. Furthermore, feminist methodology sees science as a production of knowledge at institutions and by researchers who are socially, ideologically and politically positioned, which shapes their choices in science to a varying extent. Such criticism includes the researchers' influencing the results of research through the very process of research, and the fact that the results are to a varying extent formed by his or her situation, experiences and world outlook. The problem that advocacy researchers face when they defend their research in a positivist environment is that they cannot cite this argument, because their competence will be slighted by opponents who only recognise empirical, measurable evidence. Thence, Steinberg concludes that the only way for research results to be defended and turned into concrete changes is for them to be based on rigorous and conventional methods that cannot be debated. This, however, often does not solve the cited contradictions.

A book by Margaret Gallagher (2000), a feminist media researcher, about contemporary women's media activism, shows some of the cited contradictions,

but this time in the field of feminist theory of media and activism. On the one hand, it emphasises that the purpose of women's media activism should not just be a mere increase in the percentage of women present in the media, but rather in the meanings and significance given to their participation in the media. In order for a change to happen in the media, it takes social and political transformation in which women's rights and women's right to communication are 'understood, respected and implemented.' On the other hand, she also emphasises the advantage of quantitative methods and 'hard data' in feminist media activism and the necessity of speaking the language that media professionals understand:

The facts and numbers are the daily bread of journalists and people who make programmes. In the discussion about what images of the world that we receive in the media contents lack, 'the hard data' – along with concrete examples – will reach media professionals with immediacy that can never be attained by an abstract argument. (pages 20-21)

Further on in this text, I will address this and other contradictions between feminist theory of the media and activism caused by their mutually different contexts. This text is conceived as a mapping of the main activities and strategies of contemporary women's media activism on the one hand, and problems that feminist theoreticians of the media perceive in certain activist practices on the other hand. In both cases, I will focus on several main fields of significance for feminism: language in the media; pornography; greater and/or different presence, visibility of women in the media and the question of what this entails ('more positive', 'more realistic' or 'more diverse' representations of women). This text does not aspire to provide some sort of all encompassing overview of either feminist theory of the media or activism, but rather to point out some of the key problems in relations between these two fields.

### **Feminist media activism and its theoretical frameworks**

Whilst the contrast between feminist activism and theory indicated in the introduction is justified, it still requires two important reservations when it comes to feminist media activism. Firstly, feminist media activism and feminist

scientific research of the media have often been intertwined since the beginning of this type of activism in the late 1960s up until the present day. In the overview of early women's media activism and main branches of feminist media theory that followed, Van Zoonen (1994) says that early activist media criticism (in the USA) has started an entire wave of feminist academic media research that had the goal of providing evidence that would support the criticism of the women's movement. Nowadays as well, the monitoring, i.e. quantitative research and analysis of media content are often an integral part of feminist media activism both globally and in our region.

Secondly, the contrast between activism and theory can in this case be better explained as founded on a more profound divide between various theoretical (and activist) schools of feminism. A substantial part of feminist media activism is consciously or unconsciously based in the theoretical groundwork of liberal or radical feminism and the accompanying understanding of the categories of the media, gender and representation. Contradictions between feminist media activism and theory thus do not (only) indicate some sort of a general contrast in itself, but rather stem from the criticism of liberal and radical theoretical frameworks and activism by another school in the discussion: feminist theoreticians of media and culture whose approach is founded in post-structuralist theoretical frameworks and whose criticism will be the subject of the following part of the text.

In the already mentioned overview, Van Zoonen suggests the possible typology of new subjects that feminist media theoreticians have brought into studies of media and communication.<sup>1</sup> In this typology, liberal and radical feminism and their criticism of the media are tightly linked to the accompanying women's media activism. According to Van Zoonen, liberal-

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1 In her overview, Van Zoonen displays some reservations with regard to the typology she offers and points out the problems brought about by creating typologies: erasing the overlaps and syntheses of different schools; repression of geographical specificities; the fact that some of the authors perceived as part of certain schools do not perceive themselves as such, etc. Along with liberal and radical feminist approaches to communication, her typology also includes socialist feminism. I mention the former of the two schools because they were among the foundations of main currents of feminist media activism.

feminist criticisms of the media and activism have addressed the subject of stereotypes and gender socialisation the most, whereas radical-feminist theory and activism focused on the problem of pornography.

One of the earlier and significant feminist works on the subject of gender stereotypes in the media, that has been followed by numerous pieces of research in service of activism, is the work by Gaye Tuchman (1978). She is the author of a famous thesis on the symbolic annihilation of women in the media that is related to their absence there, except in stereotypical roles and genres such as soaps. According to her, the media does not reflect the enormous social changes in relationships between the sexes and the fact that a large number of women are no longer housewives, but are now employed. The consequence of this *distortion* of reality is that girls don't have female role models outside of stereotypical women's roles. A desirable change would be for the media to begin to present *more realistic* images of women, i.e. to reflect the already existing reality of social change.

Such theses have laid the foundations of innumerable projects in women's media activism. Some very frequent feminist subjects are included here already, such as: insufficient representation of women in the media (in terms of equality at work and the media contents), stereotypes, distorted reflections, and demands for more realistic images of women. As Cuklanz and Cirksena (1992) note, a liberal-feminist approach to the media often includes quantitative research of representations of women, from the decision-making places to various roles in which they are represented in the programmes themselves. A frequent demand that follows this type of research is for numerical increase in terms of both the power of women within media institutions and as invited guest experts to encourage a diversity of roles in which women are represented.

As far as radical feminism and pornography are concerned, activism has been very closely linked to academic research. Andrea Dworkin, a radical feminist activist, and Catherine MacKinnon, a radical feminist lawyer, have lobbied for enacting anti-pornography laws. In order to attain that goal, they needed evidence of the influence of pornography on men's violent behaviour towards women, and the evidence could only have been collected through

research. Their first attempt to ban pornography was based on the thesis that it should be perceived as a criminal act of violence against women in the porn industry, and that encouraging and legitimising sexually based violence against women in general, through pornography, influences men to be violent against women. Considering that the results of two large research projects had contradictory results in terms of the influence of pornography on men's violence against women, the proposal of a law against pornography did not succeed.

Their next thesis shifted the focus to pornography as violating the civil rights of women, and so they began legal procedures against the production or displaying of pornographic material. The thesis on pornography as violating the civil rights of women meant that the promotion of women's sexual submission in pornography threatened and hindered women's possibilities for equal rights in various segments of public and private life. This argument is close to arguments against racist hate speech as violating the civil rights of certain groups. In both cases, the advocates of this thesis stated a series of examples of situations in which racist hate speech or pornography were used in order to hinder members of certain groups exercising their rights. One such example with regard to pornography was related to displaying pornography at workplaces in traditionally male occupations, where it was used as a means of pressure and showing the minority of women that they did not belong there. This proposal was accepted in two American cities, but has otherwise caused great divides in the American feminist movement. Liberal feminists who defended freedom of speech fiercely opposed it, and since in several cases the proposal won some rather strange allies in the shape of right-wing religious groups, it also faced rejection by gay and lesbian groups that feared that such a law would be used against representations of gay sexuality (See: Cornell, 2000; Lederer and Delgado, 1995; MacKinnon, 1992, 1993; Segal and McIntosh, 1992; Strossene, 1995; Van Zoonen, 1994).

Even though the subject of representations of women, gender stereotypes and pornography have remained the focus of attention of feminist media activism since the pioneer actions in the USA in the 1970s and 1980s, this form of activism also underwent certain changes in mid 1990s. The most significant

change is the globalisation of feminist media activism and the standardisation and networking of activist groups that followed. According to Margaret Gallagher, this boom in media activism was contributed to by the UN Fourth Global Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, where the media was recognised as one of the critical fields of importance for equality of the sexes.

In the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a section relating to the media states a series of recommendations about: increasing representations of women in the media and decision making positions; work on training women for media professions and enabling women to have greater access to the media; repressing sexist media contents and stereotypical representation of women; encouraging the production of programmes addressing subjects of particular importance for women; encouraging balanced and diverse representation of women in the media; promoting awareness of the problems of gender discrimination and gender equality in general. These recommendations were forwarded to national governments, the media and civil sector, and trainings for media professionals, professional codes and adequate legislation were listed as mechanisms for their realisation (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995).

The Beijing Platform for Action and the conference 'Women Empowering Communication' in Bangkok, that preceded it, stimulated the globalisation of women's media activism, the networking of activist groups and the standardisation of their projects. Contemporary feminist media activism is thus characterised by a combination of the following activities: observing, i.e. monitoring the media; educating media professionals for gender-sensitive journalism as well as the broader audience in the field of media literacy; advocacy, lobbying and dialogue with the media about concrete problems and possible changes; establishing codices and guidelines for gender sensitive journalism. According to Gallagher, media advocacy is 'based on the conviction that the public can play a role in determining which stories are told and in what way' (page 8).

The most significant action that stemmed from these two gatherings was the Global Media Monitoring Project. This project consisted of monitoring



representations of women in the news in all media during one day and has been carried out three times already (1995, 2000 and 2005) through the coordinated work of women's organisations in over seventy countries. In this global monitoring, some women's organisations in our region took part from as early as 2000, and even more of them in 2005 (WACC, 2005). The results of this quantitative research in 2005 were divided into four parts: gender representation of news subjects (people who the news was about or whose statements were in the news); gender representation of journalists in various subject fields in the news; gender dimensions of journalist reports (how many of them had women as central figures, either as persons the reports were about or in terms of subjects of particular importance to women); and gender dimensions of journalist practices (this part primarily relates to the examples of empowering or undermining stereotypes, and (not) approaching general subjects from a gender perspective).

The report on the results of this global research is too broad in scope to be summarised here, but it is important to mention that these results are seen as an evidence of the under-representation of women and as a tool for future lobbying for changing this condition. Finally, in the context of the subject of this text, it is important to emphasise the understanding of the media and the matter of representation of women that stands behind this project:

Women – 52 percent of the world's population – are barely present among the faces that are seen, voices that are heard and opinions that are represented in the media. The 'mirror' of the world provided by the media is like a circus mirror. It distorts reality, exaggerates the importance of certain groups whilst pushing the others towards the margins. When it comes to reflecting women, women's world outlook and perspectives, this mirror contains a big and persistent black spot. (WACC, 2005)

Establishing concrete problems in representations of women through monitoring of the media is usually a function of making a guide for gender-sensitive journalism that will be used for trainings with journalists and as possible self-regulatory mechanisms in the media. However, Gallagher states that the research of 1995 showed a huge vacuum in the field of media policies

when it comes to guidelines for gender-sensitive journalism. In this research, already eleven years old now, that included sixty electronic media in twenty European countries, only nine of the media had any sort of policies in terms of the gender dimension of their contents. These guidelines were mostly too general to be efficient, and only four electronic media – the public media in Finland, Sweden and the UK – had more specific guidelines. Developing guidelines and instructions was therefore a significant field of activism of women's and other non-governmental organisations dealing with the media.

Two possible illustrations of the guidelines of this type are an internal guide for journalists of the BBC and a manual of the Media Diversity Institute (MDI). I cite these two examples because the BBC often appears as a paradigm of public television and its journalists are invited to train activists and journalists in our region, and MDI is also very active in this region through seminars on media diversity. Also, a part of the MDI guide on gender is on the website of the women's organisation B.a.B.e. from Croatia.

The BBC guide for journalists lists under-representation, stereotyping and offensive terminology as problems that are shared by all groups historically discriminated against. Obstacles to the improvement of representations of these groups involve restrictive measures repressing offensive representations as well as measures encouraging broader and more diverse representation. But whilst restrictive measures are expressed in more detail, affirmative ones are given as a principle: in order to improve representations of marginalised groups, they need to be represented in 'the entire scope of genres' and 'the entire scope of roles'. Restrictive measures are more concrete and suggest that: a person's group affiliations should not be stated unless it is of significance for the story; different groups should not be mixed; offensive assumptions and generalisations about various groups should not be allowed; and traditionally offensive terminology should be replaced by terms used by members of certain groups to describe themselves.

All of these guidelines refer to women too, but representations of women are additionally regulated in sections on 'Taste and Decency' and 'Violence'. When it comes to under-representation of women, the guide specifically states that older

women are very scarcely represented in the media, and that non-sexist language is one of the ways to avoid supporting the attitude that certain activities are only reserved for one of the sexes. Thence the examples of non-sexist titles of occupations as an alternative for older terminology (e.g. fire-fighters, police officers, tax inspectors in place of firemen, policemen, etc.). Guidelines on 'Taste and Decency' and 'Violence', furthermore, demand non-stereotypical representations of female and male sexual behaviour, the same standards in portraying female and male nudity, and paying particular attention to representations of violence against women. Guidelines warn that programmes that contain representations of violence against women and children require great care and that it is forbidden to encourage the idea that women should be exploited or degraded through violence, or that women are, except in exceptional cases, willing victims of violence.

A part of the MDI manual dealing with gender is somewhat more specific than the BBC guide, when it comes to advice for gender-sensitive journalism, and apart from that, it does not define the regulation of this field in the context of 'decency'. MDI guidelines suggest that: journalists should re-examine the lists of speakers they most frequently invite to comment on various subjects and that they should invite more women to discuss a whole range of subjects; journalists should not comment on women's appearance unless they would do the same with men in a similar situation, i.e. unless it is specifically relevant; journalists should not state assumptions about the right role of women and should look for 'women whose lives are different from the norm in terms of what women are supposed to be'. Moreover, MDI suggests that journalists consult women's groups and see which subjects are important to them. As possible subjects of this sort, MDI suggests subjects of violence against women, sexual harassment, prostitution and sex-trafficking.

I can't speak about women's media activism in our region in general terms – however we define the region, either as the space of the former Yugoslavia or the Balkans – because I am familiar primarily with activism in Serbia, and then also Croatia. However, examples from these two countries lead to an assumption that women's media activism in the region is increasingly a part

of regional and international networks and largely similar to global activities mentioned earlier. The examples for this are facts that organisations from Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have taken part in Global Media Monitoring in 2005, that some of these organisations are members of REWIND-net, a regional network of women's documentary centres also dealing with media monitoring, or that the already mentioned manual of the MDI found its way onto the website of B.a.B.e. in Croatia. Women's media activism in Serbia and Croatia includes several types of activities: public protests against concrete examples of sexism in the media; monitoring of representations of women and subjects related to gender in the media; workshops for journalists on gender-sensitive journalism; workshops for members of women's organisations on communication on gender subjects by means of the media; writing guides for journalists. Organisations dealing with the media activism in these two countries are: B.a.B.e. and Women's Infotheque in Croatia and AŽIN, LABRIS, ASTRA, Žene na delu, Hora, Peščanik and the Association of Women of Prijepolje in Serbia.<sup>2</sup>

Women's groups in Serbia and Croatia have protested against sexist contents in the media on many occasions. Some of the protests that provoked a lot of public debate in Serbia were related to: a billboard advertising tyres by using a photograph of a nude ballerina with her legs spread open and the slogan 'Adaptable to all surfaces'; a paparazzi photograph of Nataša Mičić, acting president of Serbia, with the focus on her exposed legs at the moment of stepping out of a car; and sexist comments about women in one of the programmes of TV Pink against which fifty-five women's organisations also filed a complaint based on the new Law on Information, i.e. its article prohibiting

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- 2 This brief overview of feminist media activism is a part of the research for my doctoral thesis 'Gender and media diversity on television in Serbia and Croatia after 2000' (Department of Gender Studies, Central European University, Budapest). As I have started this research recently, the list of organisations and their activities that I list is certainly not final, and it is more than likely that during the research I will find out about more groups and actions that are unfortunately not mentioned here. I would also like to mention a special issue of the magazine *Genero* (Centre for Women's Studies Belgrade, 2004) with the subjects of *Women and the media* as an academic approach to feminist media activism in Serbia.

hate speech and providing a possibility for a registered group to file a complaint against the media spreading hate speech (Minić, 2004).

In my opinion, these protests had positive effects not only because they attracted the attention of the broader public to the issue of sexism in the media, but also because they made the subjects of gender inequality more visible in the media. Even though associations of journalists generally do not recognise sexism in the media as a problem that needs to be paid attention to, in the several past years some very small but perhaps promising steps forward have taken place. LABRIS has organised a seminar for journalists in cooperation with NUNS (Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia), and NUNS has recently founded a women's group which tries to collect data on the position of women journalists in Serbia. In one of its reports, the Press Council of Belgrade Media Centre has also broached the subject of misogyny in the media (Press Council, 2005). Also, the debate about the photograph of Nataša Mičić as a culmination of public conversation about her with persistent focus on her appearance, legs, hairstyle, beauty, etc. – from the moment it became clear that she was going to become acting president of Serbia – opened the subject of the way in which sexualisation of women in public office is used aggressively in order to discredit them in their professions.

However, the ways in which women's organisations have articulated their protests often demonstrate a lack of critical or theoretical awareness of the arguments they state. The most drastic example is a mistake made by some participants in the campaign and the complaint against TV Pink who more than once said they advocated 'a decent Serbia'. Having used this statement, consciously or not, to flirt with the conservative and patriarchal understanding of decency, they found that it backfired. The PR department of TV Pink went through websites of organisations that filed the complaint against them, and found several lesbian organisations and the 'Cunt Manifesto' on one of them, and later published the most 'indecent' bits in several newspapers and said: Look who's asking for a decent Serbia (Minić, 2004).

Even though public protests are still a part of women's media activism in these two countries, they have also increasingly turned to a dialogue with the

media of late through the linked activities of monitoring, training for journalists and writing manuals. The listed organisations have carried out media monitoring in particular subjects: violence against women and coverage of female members of parliament in the media (Women's Infotheque and AŽIN), subjects related to LGBT persons (LABRIS) and sex trafficking (ASTRA). Along with monitoring representations of women in the media, B.a.B.e. have included analysis of the gender dimension of media legislation and perceptions of media content by women viewers in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in their regional programme (EQVIWA) that has been running for a number of years.

Media monitoring was followed by trainings for journalists, so that ASTRA, AZIN, B.a.B.e. and LABRIS have organised accompanying workshops for reporting on the subjects that had previously been the focus of monitoring. Whilst LABRIS and ASTRA have published manuals for journalists on subjects covering LGBT people, as well as sex trafficking, one of the more recent publications of the B.a.B.e. organisation is a manual with the purpose of raising overall levels of literacy about the gender dimensions of media. The programme *Women Can Do It in the Media*, created by women's organisations Hora from Valjevo, Peščanik from Kruševac and the Association of Women from Prijepolje, included workshops for women journalists as well as making a code for gender-sensitive journalism. Finally, workshops that were part of EQVIWA projects have resulted in the making of three documentaries in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina with the subject of 'women and the media'.<sup>3</sup>

However, neither the trainings nor the manuals are numerous in these two countries and a more systematic and broader approach to this type of activism is still lacking. In this respect, EQVIWA can perhaps be mentioned in particular as a project that is not only regional and long-standing, but also takes place at several different levels. Also, these projects mostly deal with printed media and neglect electronic media which is a serious shortcoming considering the

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3 Titles of these films are: *Dream Job (Posao snova)*, Danijela Majstorović (BIH), *Ballerina and the astronauts (Balerina i astronauti)*, Martina Globočnik (CR) and *Boys and Tomboys (Muškarci i muškarače)* Sandra Mandić B92 (SR)

influence of these types of media (again, it is only EQVIWA that deals with electronic media). Cooperation with journalists and journalists' associations is in its initial phase but still very limited. These types of activities in women's organisation are nevertheless on the increase and require more attention in the future. It will be particularly interesting to see the extent and the ways in which these women's organisations influence, or fail to influence, the current work on and implementation of national policies for gender equality in Serbia and Croatia, as far as the question of women and the media is concerned.

### **Criticisms of repairing the media and their theoretical framework**

The idea of the media as a (distorted) mirror, and questions about the effects of the media on the socialisation of violence against women, are often in the background of the feminist media activism described earlier. Criticisms of these assumptions in the approach to the media often, although not solely, come from the perspective of post-structuralist theory. The subject of these criticisms are: activists' focus on the representation of women in terms of numbers and stereotypes, certain approaches to pornography, offensive terminology and hate speech as well as demands for 'more realistic' representations of women. This criticism is also founded in quite different starting assumptions and understandings of media representations, meaning, and group identities.

Activist criticisms of the media as a distorted mirror is seen as problematic here because it presupposes the existence of a clear and unequivocal reality that the media can then reflect, either correctly or incorrectly (Van Zoonen, 1994). From this perspective, representation is not a reflection of reality but a social practice of searching for and assigning sense and meaning to reality, and a practice that is significantly determined by relations of power within society. Socially practical dimensions of representations do not only consist of the interaction of various participants in defining certain events, identity, relations etc., but also of dominant definitions' seeking to reproduce the already existing relations of power within a society. The media are thus seen as a field of a cultural and political struggle between advocates of dominant and marginal definitions of reality (Curran, 1991; Hall, 1997; Murdock, 1992).

A different understanding of the meaning of the media content and also, indirectly, of media effects follows from this. If the media are a field of cultural and political struggle, meaning is then the object of this struggle, even in the very process of production, within the media text, and in the process of reception. Coding and decoding (Hall, 1973) of the media's meanings is filled with contradiction and prey to polysemy. Audiences accordingly can resist the dominant meanings of any given media text. Ultimately, groups and group identities are seen as culturally constructed, heterogeneous and cross-sectioned with hierarchy relations and various group affiliations. Women, thus, are not a unified group but are divided according to ethnic affiliations, class, sexual orientation etc. (Fraser, 1997; Stevenson, 2003).

Activism focusing on representations of women in terms of numbers and stereotypes is criticised for neglecting a series of other factors that influence representations of women in the media. When it comes to calls for greater representation of women in media professions and in decision-making positions, feminist media theoreticians and journalists point out that this approach often mixes representation of women in terms of numbers with changes in media contents towards greater representation of women's perspectives and subjects (Baehr and Dyer, 1987). According to Loach (1987), in order for greater numerical representations of women to be followed by changes in contents, it is necessary to change values, procedures and practices of media institutions. Van Zoonen (1989, 1994), also points out that the production of media contents is collective in its nature and that it is naïve to expect that individual women in the media will manage to change a lot. According to her research in Holland, professional values, attitudes of co-workers, ideas on the audience, and social political contexts, are but a few of the obstacles a journalist who wishes to contribute to bettering the position of women will face.

Making conclusions about media contents on the basis of quantitative research on the number of women present and their stereotypical roles is also criticised because of its very narrow focus and lack of theoretical explanation for such under-representation (Cuklanz and Cirksena, 1992). According to Van Zoonen, feminist research on stereotypes was useful because it has



provided material that feminists could use to exert pressure on the media. As a theoretician herself, however, she maintains that such research is theoretically problematic because it often neglects the specifics of genres, the media audience's experiences, the relations between characters in narratives, and other similar issues. According to Van Zoonen, they also assume a linear relation between stereotypical representations in the media and acceptance of stereotypical identities by the audience, not leaving the audience any room for an active reading of the media contents.

When it comes to the subject of pornography, most of the criticism is directed towards the approach of radical feminists in America. Criticisms of this approach moved in many different directions, claiming that attempts to pass anti-pornography laws were violations of freedom of speech, or that this approach conflates representations of an act with the act itself. In this text I am predominantly interested in another type of criticism that points out the frequent mixing of feminist anti-pornography arguments with traditional censorship of explicitly sexual material based on Christian and patriarchal morality. According to McIntosh (1992), feminist attempts to ban pornography have confirmed and strengthened patriarchal stigmatisation of sexual explicitness 'developed along with the morality of the middle class during the nineteenth century' (page 163). According to her, feminism has not managed to move the bases for prohibiting pornography from the accusations of obscenity towards accusations of sexual submission because by the very acceptance of the concept of pornography it accepts a restrictive patriarchal sexual morality. Criticisms of the legal regulation of pornography often saw not less, but more, i.e. different, female pornography as an alternative.

As in the case of pornography, the regulation of offensive terminology and hate speech was met with much criticism by feminists and other theoreticians. Whilst advocates of legal sanctions against hate speech claimed that hate speech is at the same time an act that hurts groups that are discriminated against anyway, the opponents of such laws have protested in the name of freedom of speech and once more emphasised the difference between speech and act committed out of hatred. In the book on hate speech, Judith Butler (1997), a

feminist theoretician, considers that such speech *can* act, and violently, i.e. that hate speech can also be an act of violence, but nevertheless opposes its legal regulation. According to her, it is naïve to assume the law's neutrality and to fail to see that such a law that sanctions speech can be abused, most of all in relation to the already marginalised groups. Such a law also narrows the field of possible ways of fighting against hate speech that are not based on state intervention and reduces the actions against hate speech to the act of persecution. Butler advocates the thesis that words that conventionally express hatred and can act violently, can have their meaning altered in a different context. She states examples such as 'queer', 'black', 'dyke', 'woman', where the meaning of these words is separated from their power of degradation and re-contextualised in more affirmative ways. Instead of legal regulation, she supports a strategy of critical appropriation and altering the meanings of offensive terminology and hate speech.

Finally, demands for 'more realistic' representations of women are fiercely criticised from the perspective of post-structuralist feminist theory. Criticism of normative regulations of representations of women and other groups is founded in post-structuralist understanding of identity as fragmentary and historically specific. According to Van Zoonen, more realistic representations of women are not possible because there is no historically and geographically stable gender identity as a reference point of such supposedly more realistic representations of women. The examples of transgressions of female/male differences, such as Prince or Grace Jones, and the historical specificity of differences between men and women suggest the unsustainability of normative criteria of 'realistic' representations of women, and of how the media should represent women in general. Normative regulation of representations of women is seen not only as an impossible project of establishing universal criteria of representation, but also as politically harmful because every fixing of identity leads towards new exclusions, this time within a particular group. Speaking of strategies of affirmation of lesbian and gay identities, Butler (2002) thus poses a question: 'Which versions of lesbian and gay identity should be made visible and which internal exclusions will this visibility establish?'

Considering that these theoreticians, on the one hand, do not deny that the representations of women and men that support discriminatory relations within society are dominant, and on the other hand criticise normative regulations as a way of changing such a condition, the question can be asked: which alternative strategies of acting towards cultural change do they see? In the case of these theoreticians, the focus is shifted from normative intervention to the power of critically re-appropriating dominant meanings and using them for the benefit of marginalised groups suffering from discrimination. In accordance with the tradition of British cultural studies, theoreticians such as Van Zoonen (1994), Ang (1996) and Fiske (1987), emphasise the cultural competency of the audience, their activity and power of 'negotiating' with the media text, as well as resisting dominant meanings. In a somewhat different way, Butler (1997) also sees critically re-appropriating dominant meanings and their re-signification as a strategy of acting against discriminatory cultural values. Instead of affirmations of group identities leading to yet more exclusions, Butler and many other feminist theoreticians see the deconstruction and destabilisation of identity, differences, hierarchy couples, such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, white/black etc., as a strategy directed towards pluralist inclusion of differences.

Nancy Fraser (1997), who also sees deconstruction as a strategy that has the potential to transform both minority and majority cultures, perceives two problems related to this strategy. Speaking of the possible problems of this approach, Fraser notes that feminist deconstructivist cultural policy is 'very far from direct interests and identities of women, as they are culturally constructed at this point' (page 30). Fraser sees another problem with this approach in the lack of normative perspectives, i.e. in the fact that from the viewpoint of deconstruction all differences and all identities seem equally repressive, fictitious and exclusive. According to Fraser, this is a serious problem of deconstruction as a strategy, because in order for democratic cultures to be furthered it is necessary to be able to make a judgement between those identities that strive towards the homogenisation of differences and those that are open to their inclusion.

Her remarks are particularly interesting if the strategy of deconstruction of identity is viewed in the context of feminist media activism. Fraser's statement on the distance between deconstruction and direct interests and identities of women is in a way linked to the statements of Steinberg or Gallagher on how feminist activists *have to* speak the language that the environment they act in understands and accepts. Her criticism of the lack of normative perspective in the strategy of deconstruction reopens the issue that activists address. If representations of women in the media are often sexist, what sort of representations would be better? In the final section of the text I will attempt to suggest what these two groups of feminists interested in the media could learn from one other.

### **Finally...**

This text stemmed from my personal fascination with disagreements between (certain schools of) feminist media theory and activism, and the impossibility, or the refusal, to define myself as being entirely for or against one of these strands. Since I am interested in both theory and activism, I find equally convincing both Van Zoonen's arguments about the unsustainability of criteria for more realistic representations of women, and Gallagher's arguments about the potential of media advocacy and conviction that the public can influence which stories are told and how. I consider it important for media activism itself that activists be aware of, and acknowledge, criticism generated by certain activist strategies. However, it is better to make even the smallest steps forward in terms of changes than none at all, because the ideal ones are not attainable. Instead of firmly advocating one position, I have always found it more interesting to try and find a way to combine certain arguments and experiences of these two different strands. For lack of some ideal convention in which feminist media activists and post-structuralist theoreticians would peacefully and constructively talk to each other, rounded off by a final debate between Liesbet van Zoonen and Margaret Gallagher, and perhaps featuring the occasional comment via video conference from Judith Butler, this text has been written as an attempt at a virtual dialogue.

One of the points of feminist action research workers that deserves attention is pointing out the importance of awareness about the environment one acts in, as well as knowing the language understood by this environment. Both Steinberg and Gallagher believe that their efforts towards change will be more efficient if they are advocated in the language of the environment they act in. In both cases, this means supporting arguments with numbers. Both authors recognise the limitations imposed by this approach, but still see 'evidence in numbers' as an instrument of attracting attention and adding weight to their arguments. This point is important not because it speaks of the power of 'hard data' as a language that the media understands, but because it speaks of activism as acting within certain constraints. Unless we think that we should utterly renounce the mainstream media, then accepting certain compromises is probably the only way to act in such an environment.

Awareness of the environment in which one acts is also important in order to avoid certain unwanted compromises. Some of the frequent compromises when the media is open to feminism are: approaching feminist criticism of sexual objectification of women's bodies from the angle of 'decency'; increasing the number of women in the media without making more room for subjects of particular importance for women; sensationalism in covering the subject of violence against women; and representing feminism through its most moderate currents along with exclusion of the more radical ones. Some of these problems are pointed out by the aforementioned theoretical criticism of feminist media activism. This criticism is necessary to acknowledge in activist practice, because feminist media activism only stands to lose if it flirts with patriarchal sexual morality, if it fails to clearly articulate that a greater number of women (even though necessary) does not automatically mean more room for women's perspectives, and if it fails to approach the subject of the representation of women with an awareness of differences between women.

If feminist media activists acknowledge theoretical criticism of their strategy, what the theoreticians could learn from them is to place their thoughts of strategies of resistance in a slightly more concrete 'environment'. Also, a question is posed of who they speak to about strategies of resistance, considering

that they use a language that is anything but accessible. Such a requirement should naturally not be posed before someone who deals with theory academically. The reason for this requirement might still exist, because feminist theory, as well as any theory that advocates social change, is highly politically motivated. Steinberg speaks of this dimension of feminist theory and research:

Many (feminist sociologists) have expressed great curiosity and, sometimes, even envy towards my work and its direct influence on women's salaries and those of minorities employed at poorly paid, traditionally women's workplaces. The wish of feminist sociologists for direct participation, as researchers, in the attempts towards change is not unique, but it is to be expected that feminist sociologists will feel these frustrations more because it is difficult to deal with feminist research with its explicit accent on social change as with an activity in an 'ivory tower'. At the same time, I feel romanticism and lack of understanding of challenges in these conversation, frustrations and insolvable contradictions that follow research striving towards social change in a certain political context. (page 251)

One of the reasons for writing this text is what I see as a theoretical and political romanticism in advocating certain strategies of resistance and change. Thus Fraser recognises the problem of deconstruction being very far from current 'immediate interests and identities of women', but it deserved just a single sentence within that text. Van Zoonen, as well as some other theoreticians who refer to British cultural studies, emphasise the power of the audience to negotiate with the dominant meanings of a text and resist them. Even though empirical studies of the reception of media texts have confirmed this, these theoreticians perhaps overestimate, and even celebrate, the audience's power to resist. Butler advocates changing the words' meanings, the words denoting hatred, for example, as if it were an act that an individual can personally decide to perform regardless of others and the environment. Criticising the strategy of re-signification that Butler advocates as too individualist, Vasterling (1999) and Salih (2002) point out that this strategy can only be successful if others take the change of meaning as well, i.e. if there is at least a limited semantic consensus

around the change of meaning. This requires a collective action, organisation of this action and acting within a concrete social and political environment, which Butler's strategy of re-signification does not really address.

When it comes to normative approaches of representation, I agree with Fraser when she criticises deconstructive strategies for lacking any normative perspective, and maintains that in order to improve democratic cultures it is necessary to be able to differentiate between those identities that strive towards exclusion of differences and those that are open to them. Fraser (1995) also criticises Butler in a similar way and asks: 'Why is re-signification good? Can't there be bad (repressive, reactionary) re-signification as well?' (page 67). In other words, why would re-appropriating feminism by nationalist movements for the purpose of representing some other ethnic community as backward due to the bad position of women in that community be just as good as a group discriminated against critically re-appropriating hate speech? If it is impossible and harmful to establish criteria for how the media should represent women, does that mean that cultural values that support gender discrimination are equally acceptable as those that oppose it?

Normative perspectives and mechanisms are necessary not only because it is a way in which public interest is defined and implemented (or not) in the media environment, but also because the difference between bad and worse representations of women is not socially and politically unimportant. Between a problematic concept of improving representations of women where, for example, professionally successful women are favoured to the detriment of many other sub-groups of women and a different concept in which two or three priests interpret women's god-given duty as giving birth, it seems to me that the former, the problematic one, opens more space for values of equality than the latter. Criticism of normative approaches is important because it points out the problems inherent there: generalisation narrows the space for specificity in special cases, whilst creating possible new exclusions of those who don't fit into a certain concept of change in representations of women. A possible way to reduce these problems is to insist on diversity in representation of women, men

and those identities that are a transgression in terms of male-female difference. This requires more media space, which is, of course, difficult to obtain.

Finally, the idea of *realistic* representations of women, even though problematic for the aforementioned reasons, is not to be entirely rejected. In the book about *Cagney and Lacey*, one of the first American police series where two women police officers were the central characters, Julie d'Acci (1994) finds a certain value for feminism in what the fans of the series praised as more a *realistic* representation of women in a torrent of letters protesting against ending the series. Thus one woman viewer writes:

(...) it was about time a programme appeared on television that represents two realistic and human women who are successful as police detectives. They may not be infallible and may not look like Susan Sommers, but many of us don't nor would ever wish to. That's why we prefer seeing a programme that has people like ourselves as central characters, who live probable and possible lives (page 178-179).

Julie d'Acci's interpretation of the meaning of *real* in representations of women in this case is interesting because it is affirmative even though within a post-structuralist framework, i.e. with a full awareness of the criticism of perceiving the media as a reflection of reality. D'Acci refers to Gledhill (1988) and her understanding of a textual figure of a woman as a space of negotiation between patriarchal meanings and those meanings that are taken from the lived social and historical experiences of certain groups of women today. According to d'Acci, a *realistic* portrayal of women that was so important to the viewers of this series is not just a matrix taken from the women's movement of the time, even though it is that as well. One of the meanings of *real* here consists in recognising one's own experiences, as women who are contemporaries of the series, in textual negotiations between old and new gender identities and possibilities that women have in society. Another meaning of *real* that D'Acci sees in this case is a reference point for those programmes that the audience recognises as different from conventional, stereotypical portrayals of women in the media. From the viewpoint of this analysis, many activist demands for *more realistic* portrayals of women may perhaps be seen as an expression of the need



and the right of women to have their own experiences recognised in the public space and to receive something other than usually offered representations of women as well.

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