

Feminisms and Feminist Media Criticism

By Elizabeth L. Enriquez

I assume most of us subscribe to the statement that gender is socially constructed, and that its construction has enforced unequal relations of power between women and men. From this we may move to the assumption that products of consciousness, like literature and media, are also socially constructed, and tend to be a function of those relations of power. It follows, then, that if consciousness is a product of human construction, and that we human beings make our own knowledge, then it is possible to *remake* that knowledge. By reconstructing knowledge, we perform the political act of changing the power relations that rule our lives.

Feminist criticism is one strategy for reconstructing knowledge. Here I am going to focus on feminist criticism of the mass media, considered by many feminists and advocates of social change to be one of today's major sites of struggle.

We already know that feminism does not have a single meaning, and understanding the different kinds of feminist work will explain the different forms of feminist media criticism. I'm going to try to present the major types of feminism and the corresponding framework of media criticism that each one uses. I will present these in chronological order, in the rough chro-

nology of feminisms themselves, but this does not imply that later methods replace or are better than earlier ones. Many critics draw their frameworks from a combination of the approaches produced by the different feminist movements, and the sequence I use today is merely for highlighting the various mutations of feminist media criticism.

Liberal feminism

Let me start with what is commonly named the earliest type of feminism, which is liberal feminism.

In liberal feminist discourse, gender inequality accounts for the irrational prejudice and stereotypes about the supposedly natural role of women as wives and mothers. Some writers label liberal feminism as *bourgeois* feminism, which can be isolated to the 1970s, when the movement's concern was to obtain equal rights and freedoms within a capitalist system.

Liberal feminists strive for equality with men in the male-dominated public work sphere, demanding equal access to jobs and institutional power of whatever kind, equal pay for equal work, and changes in family routines to accommodate their demanding careers.

Liberal feminism's type of media criticism is heavily dependent on content analysis. Television programmes, for example, are analysed in terms of the kinds and frequency of female roles they contain. Such studies might examine the degree to which soap operas, for instance, reflect the changes in the status of women, their movement out of the home (private) and into the work sphere (public). Liberal feminists demand equal access to the symbolic order, and they urge media to contribute to change by portraying more women and men in nontraditional roles and by using non-sexist language. For example, both women and men, in equal measure, should be shown in positions of power,



Media actually have responded in a way to the demands of liberal feminists. But the results are unreal images of women who are simultaneously independent and successful in their careers as well as smart and devoted wives and mothers, and in the meantime able to maintain their beauty and youth.

such as heads of corporations, presidents of countries, etc.

Liberal feminist criticism focuses on the prevalent way of imaging women in media. However, it is criticised for being silent on how these images are produced and understood. We tend to classify these images as positive or negative, without a clear idea of whether media audiences perceive them unproblematically using the same categories. This type of criticism has also tended to promote a supposedly standard image of the type of woman everyone should aspire to become: autonomous, assertive and financially independent. This emphasis has led to a new stereotype, that of the modern, *liberated* woman who has it all and does it all. Media actually have responded in a way to the demands of liberal feminists. But the results are unreal images of women who are simultaneously independent and successful in their careers as well as smart and devoted wives and mothers, and in the meantime able to maintain their beauty and youth.

Liberal feminist strategies have also produced an unforeseen conse-

quence in the media workforce itself. If we watch newscasts on television it would seem that the problem of gender inequality has been addressed. The women are visible in significant numbers. I reckon more than half of the broadcast journalists are now women, particularly the on-camera journalists. However, a female majority in the field of broadcast journalism does not translate into superior power or influence for women. Instead, it has been translated to mean a decline in salaries and status for the field. Friends of mine in the media, both here and in international media, confirm this. They tell me that salaries in broadcast newsrooms have declined in general terms, and women are more likely to accept the lower salaries than men.

The major criticism against liberal feminism is that it assumes that change can happen within the existing male-dominated social structure. This position fails to acknowledge that this stand demands that women must completely surrender to patriarchy's values, norms and ways of being. In other words, to be equal, women must be like men.

Radical feminism

On the other hand, a second type of feminism, radical feminism, celebrates women's difference from men.

In radical feminist discourse, patriarchy, a social system in which all men are assumed to have the naturally evil inclination to dominate and oppress all women, explains women's position in society. Radical feminists are the authors of the battlecry "The personal is political." Many now tend to view radical feminism as extreme, but we should not forget that their strategies led to the exposure of issues previously considered as personal, and therefore private. Included in these issues are all forms of violence against women such as wife battering, rape, and incest, as well as pornography, sex tourism, and trafficking in women.

The radical feminist solution to the gender problem is to establish communities of women separate and autonomous from men. Lesbianism is a political choice. Thus, their media strategies are straightforward: women should create their own means of communication. Technological developments in media have actually aided in proliferating feminist writing and other types of media texts. Radical feminism's main point of media criticism is that the media are in the hands of the male owners and producers, and they operate for the benefit of a patriarchal society. The main focus is against pornography.

On television, the radical feminist critic is concerned with the depiction

of the traditional family as the unchanging, sacred social structure that offers solutions to all ills. The nuclear family is presented as the norm. The critic points out that heterosexuality and male dominance are presented in most narratives as “natural,” but in reality there is a gap between images of marriage in popular culture and marriages in real life.

Radical feminism’s assumptions, however, that all women are good and are able to work without competition and hierarchy, proved to be an illusion. There has been internal conflict among radical feminists, and power differences, differences of opinion and interests appear to exist among women as much as among men. Another problem was their inability to attract a wide following for their media texts. Radical feminist media criticism does not appear to have gained much ground in its pure form. However, many of its elements are found in other frameworks, which propose that the solution for women’s position cannot be found by isolating women from the larger culture, but through the creation of new and legitimate spaces for the feminine voice.

Socialist feminism

Socialist feminists are among those who have incorporated the radical feminists’ concept of patriarchal ideology. But unlike radical and liberal feminists, socialist feminists do not focus exclusively on gender to account for women’s position. An analysis of class and economic conditions of women is a central element.

There are two important issues: the reproduction of labour and the economic value of domestic labour. The nurturing, moral, educational and domestic work that women do in the family is seen as indispensable for the maintenance of a capitalist economic system. Socialist feminists advocate the abolition of class and gender. Women must enjoy reproductive rights and must take up paid labour, while women and men must share nurturing and domestic responsibilities.

Socialist feminism has recently tried to incorporate other social divisions along the lines of race and ethnicity, sexual preference, age, and physical ability (and disability) to reflect the experience of racially and ethnically marginalised women (such as Blacks and Third World women in the North) as well as lesbians, old women and others.

Like radical feminism, socialist feminism regards the media as ideological instruments presenting the capitalist and patriarchal society as the natural order. However, socialist feminists are more concerned with the ways in which ideologies of femininity are constructed in the media, and who benefit from such a construction. Much of their criticism consists of ideological analyses of media texts, using the analytical tools offered by structuralism and semiotics. Socialist feminists combine the objectives of liberal and radical feminisms, which are to reform the mainstream media while producing separate feminist media.

Cultural studies and post-structuralist feminism

Then there is the type of feminism that is influenced by poststructuralism and cultural studies. Writers often group these two together not because they are one but because they share many assumptions. Often we hear these approaches spoken in the same breath as what has come to be known as postmodernism.

The cultural studies and post-structuralist views reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical or biological, or a “natural” given. Gender is socioculturally constructed through the patriarchal language order. Human beings are born and learn to accept and practice the culture of their society when they acquire language. In other words, language is what defines reality, and it follows that because the language order is patriarchal, our notion of what is real, our notion of the “truth,” is patriarchal.

The process of language articulation, or discourse, produces knowledge. And society has implicit rules or conventions for organising discourse. For example we are taught as children not to question the wisdom of our parents; girls are taught to respect the masculine voice; in the academe some disciplines get more research funding than others such that they dominate the production of new knowledge; in the media certain issues are emphasised while others are ignored. Thus, discourse is an exercise of power. Who controls discourse in society defines that society’s truth.

However, societies vary according to particular cultural settings and historical periods. This means that truth varies from culture to culture, from era to era, and is constantly subject to discursive struggle and negotiation.

Language in a postmodern society is a contested terrain. The presence of competing ideologies often produces differential meaning. The media producer, given his/her culture, encodes the text with a set of meanings, but the

Thus, feminist media criticism that derives from cultural studies and poststructuralism is critical of the assumptions of liberal, radical and socialist feminisms. The three approaches have all criticised the media for not being realistic and for assuming that readers and audiences are passive and powerless against the onslaught of patriarchal media messages, zombie-like in their acceptance of the ideologies in media texts. To the poststructuralist, reality is a product of negotiation between text and reader, and the reader is actively, not passively, negotiating with the text. Moreover, the definition of gender itself and the ways we imagine it is unstable, subject to constant redefinition.

Obviously, the media are among the central sites in which struggle over meaning takes place for the purpose of redefining truth and reconstructing consciousness. The concept of a struggle for meaning is crucial in this framework, because this implies that while language resources are male-dominated, the meanings produced when those languages are heard or read have the potential to subvert the dominant meanings promoted by the text. Some critics, however, contend that the ideological content of texts is often stronger than the resistance of the audience. Others believe that audiences resist the dominant ideology in the text in many ways. Still others understand the process of meaning negotiation as a struggle in which power shifts back and forth between text and listener, reader or viewer.

For feminists, there is no dispute that the media function ideologically, working with other social and cultural institutions to reflect, reinforce and mediate existing power relations and ideas about how gender is and should be lived.

The differences in cultural definitions of reality should not be a problem if cultures remain more or less static and isolated from each other. But cultures are never static as they continually go through an historical process of change. In each era a new ideology becomes dominant while the old ones may persist. This is what happens, for example, when science displaces religion as a dominant ideology with the development of a society from a feudal economy to an industrial one. In such a society, the old and the new discourses compete. Today, in this postmodern age of media saturation when cultures are increasingly in contact with one another, the marketplace of ideologies becomes denser and noisier. This means that consciousness is no longer unified or coherent. Truth for human beings living in such a society is defined in several, possibly contradictory ways. For example, some women may be both Catholic and feminist, two ideologies that are opposed to each other in fundamental ways.

listener, reader or viewer may or may not decode the media text and produce the same meanings, depending on whether he/she shares the producer's cultural assumptions. Meanings are not intrinsic to the text, and the authority of the speaker or writer is potentially undermined once the text is heard or read and processed by the listener, reader or viewer. For example, a television advertisement for a brand of beer showing a group of men drinking while a woman serves the drink may be read in several ways. Some may not question the subordinate picture of the woman in the ad, while others may react and reject the image. Moreover, texts themselves are coherent only on the surface. For example, the Philippine television ad for Surf detergent presents the smart housewife who knows the ways of efficient homemaking. The ad suggests that the home is the right place for a woman. But, in two of the ads in this series, two women are shown in positions of power, as political leader (mayor) and as professional (doctor).

For feminists, there is no dispute that the media function ideologically, working with other social and cultural institutions to reflect, reinforce and mediate existing power relations and ideas about how gender is and should be lived. But critics in the cultural studies and poststructuralist mode maintain that the reality offered by the media is



a product of ongoing negotiation at the level of media institutions, texts and audiences. This view is optimistic in the sense that control over ideological meanings is no longer fixed to the text and its institutional producer, but involves the audience and his/her context.

I acknowledge that this view does raise some disturbing questions about the job of the feminist media critic: if textual meaning is so dependent on the context of the audience, how does the critic judge the ideologies that texts

tend to promote on the surface? The critic's readings of texts may not be shared by other audiences. Some writers suggest that we legitimate the pleasure women derive from texts such as soap operas and women's magazines, and recognise the probability of audiences realising that media texts are cultural forms to be enjoyed, even without necessarily coinciding with their realities.

Another writer suggests that criticism of texts should not be uniform and should be genre-specific. For example, critical strategies for news, which claims an unambiguous relation with reality, should be different from criticism of soap operas, which make no such claims.

Other writers, whose view I share, suggest that criticism be done within the academe. We need to integrate media education into the curriculum. We must teach first ourselves then our students how to read critically. Media literacy has become a requirement for political advocacy and, for us feminists as well as others struggling for social change, media literacy is one strategy for reconstructing the patriarchal consciousness into an equitable one for all women and men. ♪

Author's note: I am indebted to the following writers, whose ideas have clarified mine:

Ang, Ian and Joke Hermes (1996). Gender and/in Media Consumption. In James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (eds.), *Mass Media and Society*, 2nd ed.,

pp. 325-347. London: Arnold.
Kaplan, E. Ann. (1992). Feminist Criticism and Television. In Robert C. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed., pp. 247-283. London: Routledge.

Newton, Judith and Deborah Rosenfelt. (1985). Toward a Materialist-Feminist Criticism. In Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (eds.), *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, pp. xv-xxxix. New York: Methuen.

Stempel Mumford, Laura (1998). Feminist Theory and Television Studies. In Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (eds.), *The Television Studies Book*, pp. 114-130. London: Arnold.

Van Zoonen, Liesbet (1996). Feminist Perspectives on the Media. In James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (eds.), *Mass Media and Society*, 2nd ed., pp. 31-52. London: Arnold.

Paper delivered in a roundtable discussion on media and feminism sponsored by Isis International-Manila and held on 27 July 2000 at the Isis' office in Quezon City. The author teaches in the Department of Broadcast Communication, College of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines Diliman. She worked for 17 years in radio and television, mostly as a broadcast journalist, before joining the academe. She is currently member of the Board of Trustees of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Philippines.