



Naked women, feminism, and newsroom culture

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ABSTRACT: *The emphasis of media scholarship on media texts and their various meanings, and audience responses, has been at the expense of any detailed considerations of those who actually produce the texts. This focus has either downplayed or dismissed both journalists' subjectivities and the power relations of production processes in newsmaking, and how journalists' personal histories might influence what becomes 'news'. In this paper, I examine negotiations over feminism in a series of dialogues that occurred recently in the newsroom of The Mercury newspaper in Hobart, where I have worked as a sub-editor. These discussions centre on the publication of an image of a group of naked female anti-war protesters. I explore the various subject positions that journalists took up in regard to feminism. I also draw on material from recent in-depth interviews with print media journalists who discuss the place of feminism in newsroom culture. I conclude that feminism is a significant part of newsroom culture, although a feminist-friendly newsroom is far from the norm.*

Introduction

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This paper is specifically concerned with how feminism and ideas of feminism are deployed in the newsroom¹. It focuses on the various subject positions that senior journalists take up in regard to feminism. To do this, I draw on a series of dialogues that occurred in the newsroom of *The Mercury* newspaper in Hobart, where I work as a casual sub-editor², about naked women protesting against war³. A

group of 36 women decided to strip naked and form the words 'No War' with their bodies in a private, outdoor location in South Hobart. Their actions were in protest at the United States-led war on Iraq in March and April 2003. Australian troops were also involved in the conflict, and the protesters wanted them to return home. The women alerted *The Mercury*, via a press release, about their intended actions. The group organised their own female photographer, and submitted a colour photograph of the protest, because the newspaper was unable to meet their request for a female photographer (all nine full-time photographers on staff are male).

I am interested here in subjectivities in the newsroom, in how journalists create meaning, especially about clearly gendered issues, and in exploring how the term 'feminism' is negotiated by journalists. What does feminism mean to journalists, and what subject positions do journalists take up in relation to it? I argue that feminism is a significant part of newsroom culture and that these dialogues demonstrate an engagement with, and challenge to, ideas of feminism, while also drawing on some stereotyped ideas about it.

In focusing on journalists' subjectivities, I do not wish to detract from the importance of political-economic structures that define the larger context within which the media operates. Similarly, I do not wish to ignore the important issues of race and class. My goal, however, is to bring to attention the importance of gender in the production of news—an area of inquiry that is sadly lacking in current scholarship about the production of news, particularly in Australia.

Feminist research of the news media has been dominated by critiques of the representation of women in the news. Insufficient attention, however, has been focused on the question of how gender relations in the newsroom actually shape and inform these representations. Consequently, this paper takes as its starting point US researcher Byerly's (1998, p. 3) contention that 'feminist media scholarship needs to move beyond its tendency to be concerned primarily with an analysis of texts and messages and begin to pay more attention to the structural content within which texts are produced and distributed'. I advocate that feminist media scholarship move away from, yet not completely ignore or deny, the idea of a misogynist media, and instead explore how feminism is a part of news content, in order to reveal the negotiation that takes place over textual product and how it is shaped by social relations in the newsroom.

Feminist criticism over the past 30 or so years has addressed three central problems concerning women and their relationship to the media. The first focus of researchers was on women's absence in serious news content. Tuchman (1978b) was the first to argue that such invisibility had the effect of reinforcing women's marginality, and thus she coined the term 'symbolic annihilation' to describe the impact. In this way, women remain unknown as relevant and accomplished social actors.

The second problem defined by feminist media theorists is one of representation, or portrayal. When women are included, the news media often categorise them stereotypically—in the private sphere as mother, wife, carer, and nurturer—or focus on their sexual and aesthetic attributes rather than their ideas, activities, or accomplishments (Allen, Rush, & Kaufman, 1996; Baehr, 1980; Barr, 1977; Benedict, 1992; Edgar & McPhee, 1974; Epstein, 1978; Macdonald, 1995; Steenland, 1995; Tuchman, 1978a, 1978b).

The third focus of research was on women's access to newsmaking apparatus. The main concerns here have been about women's employment and advancement in the industry—typically in the form of a 'body count' (De Bruin, 2000). Although women have been increasingly successful in quantitative terms, their structural position has not changed since the 1960s. Women still work within low-status media, are rarely in a managing position, and are confined to 'softer' specialised news topics, which, among journalists, are rated as having lower status. Moreover, many theorists assert that it is the dominant male culture in mainstream newspapers that keeps women journalists on the periphery (see, e.g., Gallagher, 2002). Less than 50 years ago, journalism was an almost exclusively male domain, and, while women now make up around 38% of industry workers worldwide (Peters, 2001), jobs at the top end remain elusive—the percentage of women editors, heads of department, or media owners is still less than 3% (Gallagher, 2002).

More recently, some British, American, and West Indian feminist media scholars have begun to problematise gender and media production by defining and looking at the gendered sub-structures in the media organisation (e.g., Byerly, *in press*, 1998; De Bruin, 2000a; Ross, 2001). Yet, in Australia, there is an obvious gap in the literature. A comprehensive literature review and international scholars confirm the lack of Australian research that explores the relationship between gender and the news media.

Newsroom conversations

The first newsroom conversation took place with a female reporter who explained the event to me and asked if I thought it was anti-feminist. I said I didn't think the women's actions were anti-feminist, but 'not all feminists think alike'. She said that a senior female journalist who was directing her to write the story had said to her, and in the news conference, that 'Women have fought for a long time not to have their bodies objectified, and now they are doing it to themselves'.

The second newsroom conversation involved another senior female section editor, who was scrutinising the photograph that the protestors had provided. She had enlarged the image on her computer screen and was making disparaging comments about the women's bodies—their size, shape, and colour (two of the women were dark-skinned). She commented loudly that some 'had shaved their fannies'. Then as I passed by her work station she asked: 'You wouldn't do that [be involved in a nude protest] would you, Louise?'

Another conversation then took place with the newspaper's editor⁴, who had overheard this conversation. He came to where I was standing next to the senior female section editor and also looked at the image. It seemed he wanted to elicit a personal discussion when he also asked if I had been involved in the protest.

I laughed and said: 'No, I only take my clothes off in the bathroom'.

He also laughed and agreed that he was the same.

I asked why he thought I might be involved and he replied with a question about what I thought of 'these women doing it'. He answered his own question:

You know, these are the women who get their clothes off [for publicity I think he was insinuating] and then are the first to complain if it is nudity and women in another way.

I intervened: 'How do you know that they are the same women. Don't you think that's a bit of a generalisation?'

He replied: 'Maybe I am generalising'.

I continued and said that there was a difference between what these women had done and complaints that some women lodge to the newspaper about the print media's objectification of women.

I said: 'The difference is that these women had total control of the image, and that we [the newspaper] decided if we used it or not'.

The final conversation occurred the day the story was published. An older male sub-editor said to me: 'I don't understand why they have done it [taken their clothes off]. Was it just for the publicity, a way to make a statement?'

I replied that I did not know the women, the reasons for their actions, or their politics, but it seemed that they had achieved their objectives.

Women, bodies, and feminism

In these anecdotes, women, naked female bodies, and feminism (or conceptions of feminism) are the central concern of all the participants—including myself. There is a shifting and contested variety of subject positions available here: objective journalist, female journalist, feminist, and feminist journalist.

These discussions on the newsroom floor are interesting to analyse, primarily because they reveal the often unarticulated impact of feminism in the news-making process. They, no doubt, also demonstrate slippages where feminism is deployed to work against politically active female news sources and feminist journalists. There is a contradiction between the sometimes 'negative' dialogues and the end result, which I see as a 'successful' published outcome for the protesting women. Byerly (in press) notes that those journalists who interrupt the 'masculine' norm by challenging it or suggesting alternatives to the mainstream repertoire of news risk discipline or ridicule. According to Byerly, who spent many years as a journalist before becoming an academic, 'normal' means news that does not offend advertisers and 'imagined' readers. Perhaps it can also be argued that 'normal' might mean news that does not offend the sensibilities or orthodoxies of senior journalists and editors—that is, their subjectivities. So these journalists' subjective position as 'objective newsmaker' is reinforced as a stable uncontested one, but becomes unstable when challenged by a feminist perspective, both in the newsroom and through feminist news sources.

In news journalism pursuing institutional goals, the constraints of organisational routines, relations with sources, editorial policy, and the like are embodied in a professional ideology that prescribes that journalists are detached outsiders who cannot promote specific interests (van Zoonen, 1998, p. 135). The guiding principle of Western

journalism, which has prided itself on 'objectivity' and neutrality in reporting, claims to discourage journalists from demonstrating their personal political convictions inside or outside the newsroom. This professional value system denies the fact that reporters may be politically active or that they may be personally affected and motivated by the very news events that they cover (Byerly & Warren, 1996, p. 3). It also denies the idea that their personal histories shape their view of the world and that they become journalists through particular cultural and social contexts.

Even though the idea of objectivity (meaning distance and neutrality) in journalism has come under siege, from both inside and outside the industry, the term itself has maintained its value as a marker of 'good' journalism and journalistic integrity (van Zoonen, 1998). Its opposite 'subjectivity' (defined as personal interests and opinions) is difficult to envisage in a positive light (van Zoonen, 1998). Objectivity has also been significantly linked to rationality and, in Western tradition, the rational mind is one belonging to a male. Female journalists, therefore, enter the industry cloaked in the rational man's opposition—the irrational subjectivity of woman. However, in sports reporting, subjectivity is accepted and, indeed, openly encouraged. The sports reporter is expected to be 'thick' with contacts. As van Zoonen (1998) points out, there is a recognised mutual interest, by love or fandom of the topic, rather than distance. Since most sports journalism is about men, masculinity is a key element for professional understanding. Yet any apparent partiality on gender (e.g., being feminist) is viewed as subjective, which demonstrates how the media allows for subjectivity only when more or less in line with accepted masculine goals.

There are many questions that arise from the various dialogues I have presented here. The overarching question is, how did an anti-war protest get re-configured as a feminist/women's protest and what part does the nakedness of the women play in the assumption of a 'feminist protest'? Also of interest are other questions, such as:

- How do protesting women become 'complaining' women and get overwritten with feminism, when that was not the basis of their protest?
- What subject positions do female journalists take up in order to fit the dominant newsroom culture?
- How do subject positions in the newsroom get shaped by engagement with news stories? Is there an underlying fear of covering what is perceived to be a woman's issue?

- How do constraints and negotiations over feminism shape subjectivities in the newsroom?

These discussions also reveal other points of contention, not the least being my multiple identifications as journalist, feminist, feminist journalist, and academic. In this paper, I do not suggest that I can adequately address all of these questions, and explore my own subject position, but I raise them for their pertinence to further research.

So, what is it that really gets under the skin of media managers about exposing protesting female flesh to their readers? (This, however, is certainly not the only concern for the editors. I would argue, in this case, that there was similar concern over the control the women had of the published image.) Is it the political nature of the protest, or is it that political women are automatically considered feminists and feminism carries some inbuilt irritant?

There are a number of complexities in attempting to address these questions, not least being the paradoxical nature of female exposure—so prevalent as to be almost invisible (Barcan, 2002). Rarely is intentional public nudity seen as an act of madness, extreme immorality, and criminality, as it once was. As Bordo (1993, p. 698) posits, the naked female body is 'common cultural property'. The representation of naked women in the media has been hotly debated by feminists. Many have viewed media images of the naked female body as saturated in sexual objectification, created by men for the visual pleasure of a largely male audience. Many have called for censorship of such images and found themselves in a bizarre alignment with the 'right' (e.g., US theorists Dworkin (1981) and McKinnon (1988), and Australian scholar Jeffrys (1991)). However, others, like Lumby (1997), argue that complaints of sexism levelled at the media are simplistic. For Lumby, feminist complaints and calls for censorship are 'puritanical and outmoded', not recognising the ease with which contemporary women engage with the media and the multiplicity of images. Lumby posits that women are empowered by their own sexuality, not victims of it. Certainly, in the case of the 'No War' naked women, this position is appealing. However, I think this comes from the women's rare control over the image more than general assumptions that all women are empowered by such images⁵.

Gender politics in the newsroom

In the conversations that took place about the 'No War' naked women, each of the participants was engaging in a dialogue about what

feminism means. Clearly, the journalist's comment that 'Women have fought for a long time not to have their bodies objectified, and now they are doing it to themselves' brought other meanings of feminism to the fore. For example, the female reporter who queried that interpretation with me, the editor who subscribed to it and then went further to link feminism to complaining women, the senior female section editor who by publicly ogling the image of the naked women was perhaps attempting to detach herself from any form of feminism, and the older male sub-editor who was confused about why women or feminists would strip naked to protest.

The senior female journalist's comments in the news conference carried a lot of weight. For example, the reporter was told to ask the protesting women if their actions could be considered 'anti-feminist' based on her understanding of feminism, and this then became the main frame for the story. Because her immediate superior had taken a position that challenged women who used such a method of protest, the less senior reporter was committed to ask the 'anti-feminist' question. Once the question was asked, the protesting women's articulate rebuttal became the key focus of the article—which inevitably worked to link protesting women to feminism. Yet, even though this linkage could be read as a negative, in terms of how feminism has shaped news content, the women's 'feminist' beliefs, and defence and definition of what feminism means to the contemporary woman, were actually allocated a good deal of news space.

The senior female journalist's comment that women 'had fought for a long time not to have their bodies objectified, and now they are doing it to themselves' certainly derives from a feminist position, but one that is, at the same time, critical of it. It could be argued that she draws on an anti-feminist or post-feminist frame that works to suggest that women are often 'their own worst enemies'. (The definition of post-feminism is a varied and contested one; post-feminism is neither monolithic in its discourse nor its practice, but it is a term that limits the currency of feminism by placing it in history, as if the aims of feminism have already been achieved.) The senior female journalist's comment invokes a history of struggle, and in so doing acknowledges that women's bodies have been objectified in the past. The comment also demonstrates an acceptance of feminist terminology ('objectified bodies'). Yet, this is a feminism that is concomitantly used as a tool of judgment against other women ('now they are doing it to themselves'—making objects of themselves). She turns a feminist position around to an 'acceptable'

anti-feminist position, thus effectively letting the male media managers, and herself, off the hook and reinforcing her professional status as rational, objective journalist. The protesting women and their naked bodies have challenged the senior female journalist, because she—the rational objective journalist—becomes located in the same subjective female body as the protesters.

Her comment was critical of the women's method of protest, their agency, and their feminist claims. Women who succeed in journalism, where male values dominate, do not necessarily have to disavow predominant feminist values. But, the outcome, while acknowledging feminist values, must still fit with an objective, rational journalistic discourse, which, historically in Western tradition, has been mostly male. Perhaps because there are so few women journalists in positions of authority at *The Mercury*, female journalists become focused on being 'as good as a man', disavow their gender, and are critical of others who then use their femaleness (or feminist beliefs) to elicit media coverage.

McLean et al.'s (1997) discussion of the effects of a dominant masculine culture in engineering undergraduates is helpful in exploring this idea. Their research found that, given the persuasiveness of the dominant discourse and the sanctions applied against those who challenge this, the majority of female students interviewed strongly denounced feminism and disassociated themselves from any strategies identified with a women-in-engineering program. This fear of being imbued with (female) gender seems similarly evident in a case recently at *The Mercury*, where, at the prestigious union awards, none of the full-time female reporters entered a new category titled 'The Women Tasmania⁶ award for excellence in journalism'—even though it had one of the highest cash rewards⁷ and they all had written stories that met the award criteria.

The editor's dialogue also indicates that he took on board the senior female journalist's position on feminism when he asked what I thought of 'these women doing it'. Was he attempting to link my feminist position with her feminist position? Did he think all feminists had the same ideological position? What is clear is that he asked me because I was a feminist, but then concluded by categorising me with 'complaining women' when he said: 'these are the women who complain when it is nudity and women in another way'. But I did not see the image in this way, and this is when the discussion changed.

Was the editor's comment deliberately obtuse? Was it only a certain type of woman—perhaps a 'complaining' feminist—who criticised the way that women were represented in the newspaper?

I felt under a great deal of pressure to *speak for* these women. There was an unspoken assumption that we would share a common sisterhood because we were women and also because we identified as feminists—yet I knew none of the women or anything of their protest or gender politics before I walked into the newsroom that afternoon. The balancing act between my subject position as feminist and 'objective' journalist was, for me, tenuous in these discussions: not relinquishing my position as an 'objective' media worker, yet completely submerged in the position, created by me and reinforced by others, of 'feminist journalist', which lessened the validity of my professional position. While the editor was seeking my opinion as a feminist to make sense of the women's protesting action, he was also associating me with those feminists 'who ring up and make complaints'. As a journalist, I had become invisible; as a feminist, I was categorised with these protesting 'complaining' women.

So, what of the older female journalist? Why was she so concerned that some of the women had 'shaved their fannies'? And why was she loudly involved in objectifying the protesting women's bodies? I suggest that her objections absolve her of any feminist connection. (This is not to say she doesn't understand or draw on feminist discourse at other times, because she often privately reveals to me concerns about the workplace within a feminist frame.) By ogling the women's bodies, she is located more safely as 'just one of the boys'.

Gallagher (2002, p. 5) argues that male attitudes in the newsroom are by far the most common obstacles to advancement that women media professionals report. One of the most important implications of the male dominance within media organisations is that women are judged by male standards and performance criteria. As Gallagher (2002, p. 5) states, 'Often this means a constant effort to be taken seriously, and "to prove that you are as good as a man"'.

Perhaps for this senior female journalist, it is not that she needs to prove she is 'as good as a man' in terms of professional competence (she is, after all, one of the few women on the approximately 90-member editorial team who has more authority than many of the men). Perhaps, because of this isolation, her desire to be 'one of the boys', rather than 'as good as one of the boys', is central to her actions.

Similarly, it could be argued that her position at the top may depend on her being a 'man'.

Byerly (1998) suggests that a few women are allowed into male ranks if they behave like men. McLean et al. (1997) maintain that there are three main ways that female students respond to the masculine culture of engineering, and this could be applied to journalism: being 'just one of the boys' (mimicking male behaviour and being invisible as a female); traditional femininity (the traditional female gender role that reinstates a conventional heterosexual male-female relationship); and a feminist response (which could be viewed as the main form of resistance to the dominant culture). Similarly, Merlin-Higgins and Djerf Pierre (1998) suggest that how women deal with typical newsroom culture depends on any number of personal, professional, and experiential factors. Such strategies include *incorporation* (being one of the boys), *feminist* (making a conscious effort to provide an alternative voice), and *retreat* (fleeing mainstream, full-time journalism and becoming freelancers).

Why is it that the act of women seeking publicity by unusual methods is so complicated for all of these journalists? When the older male journalist called on my 'feminist' position to make sense of the women's action, he was similarly concerned, as was the other senior sub-editor, about whether they 'did it just for publicity'. But many stories published in newspapers are 'just' publicity for an individual or institutional cause. Is it that women are rarely willing to strip naked for media exposure, and this rarity surprised the editors and caught them off guard? The many images of naked or semi-naked women published in newspapers suggest this is not the case. For example, in recent years, *The Mercury* has published a series of stories and images of older women stripping for a 'girlie' calendar, sportswomen stripping for money, and women stripping for Miss Nude Tasmania competitions. But the 'No War' naked women were political women, they were challenging war, and it seems political women are read as feminists and their politics reduced to a statement about gender, even if the protesters had not initially promoted themselves as such.

The politics of nudity

There is also another angle to consider in the reticence of the senior journalists to see this story simply as one of protest, rather than one about women and/or feminism and gender politics. Although the 'No War' naked protest was not in a news sense particularly enticing—after all, there were only 36 people protesting and there was no conflict,

physical or otherwise—it was an exceptionally enticing picture. The female nudity was the only aspect of the story that was 'news', and it added a much needed fresh and local angle to the constant war stories emanating out of Iraq.

While the freely offered nudity was appealing, the paradox for the decision-makers was that the nudity came with a strong political message that ran counter to the political position of the newspaper (which was pro-war). According to a report in the trade press magazine *The Walkley Magazine*, which quoted the UK's *Guardian* newspaper, all 175 of Rupert Murdoch's News Limited media outlets worldwide (of which *The Mercury* is one) were biased towards the war (Malone, 2003). Not one, according to the report, was anti-war—'a somewhat surprising statistic you might think, given that in countries such as Australia and the UK the population was roughly divided on the issue' (Malone, 2003, p. 16).

The point is that these were women protesting the war in Iraq and wanting Australian troops to come home—they were nude but political, rather than the conventional nude but passive female image. Yet this political (anti-war) position was not mentioned by key editorial decision-makers as a reason for having concerns with the story. Rather, it was the female nudity that seemed to be the problem. I would suggest that it is female nudity that allows disavowal of the protestors' anti-war politics.

Conclusion

In a culture that openly commodifies female nakedness, and even applauds it, the idea that there might be circumstances in which female exposure is perverse, or deviant, becomes linked to feminism. It seems that, although the display of female nakedness is encouraged in the media, other forms of public nakedness—those with a political message—are outlawed. These naked and protesting women gained a rare public (feminist), political voice, even though this was not their initial intention—but that is how the story was developed, and the spokeswoman articulated a very clear feminist position. What is so interesting to me about this dialectic is the disjuncture between the debate in the newsroom, where many of the participants were critical of feminism, and the 'successful' news story. It is clear that one does not determine the other fully, or predictably.

So, how do naked, protesting women challenge the objective journalist? And do male and female journalists experience the challenge differently? I think that naked, female protest is particularly troubling for many female journalists because, in theory, they need to attain the status of the objective journalist. However, in practice, their bodies imbue them with a female subjectivity, which makes challenging this particular story with a women-centred or feminist position difficult if they are to retain their objective status. So, although this newsroom encounter indicated confusion about what feminism means and some dissension among its workers who took various subject positions on female nakedness and feminism, the final outcome was a victory for the protesting women—they were vocal, they were visible, and they were political.

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Notes

1. My larger project is concerned with the production of news in the print media, specifically with an analysis of the gendered relations of production.
2. I have worked in the print news media as a journalist for 16 years, in various roles and on various regional and metropolitan newspapers in Australia. For the past eight years, I have worked at *The Mercury* newspaper.
3. The four journalists paraphrased in this paper have given written approval for their newsroom dialogues, in which they were variously involved, to be discussed in this paper and any other academic format.
4. The editor supplied written approval to use his name and position within the organisation.
5. Lumby made the comment, after hearing this paper presented at the ANZCA 2004 conference, that her point was that not all women are disempowered by such images.
6. Women Tasmania is a government department, formerly known as The Office of the Status of Women.
7. In 2004, the cash prize was lowered to the same as the other categories.

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