

9-22-2014

**Review: Media Disparity: A Gender Battleground. Edited by Cory L. Armstrong with a preface by Gaye Tuchman.**

Nicole Cox

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication>

---

## Recommended Citation

Cox, Nicole (2014) "Review: Media Disparity: A Gender Battleground. Edited by Cory L. Armstrong with a preface by Gaye Tuchman.," *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7275/democratic-communication.234>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication/vol26/iss1/5>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Democratic Communiqué by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

## Review

*Media Disparity: A Gender Battleground*. Edited by Cory L. Armstrong with a preface by Gaye Tuchman. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013, xviii + 292p. (hardback) ISBN 978 0 7391 8187. US List \$95.00.

In the contemporary epoch, questions regarding gender, representation, and equality are increasingly prevalent in U.S. media; we have seen national news coverage of Miley Cyrus “twerking” at the MTV Video Music Awards, national debates over women’s reproductive rights highlighted by Rush Limbaugh’s reaction to Sandra Fluke’s testimony, the sexualization of female politicians such as Wendy Davis, and media’s perpetuation of rape culture via the Stubenville rape case and allegations involving Florida State University quarterback, Jameis Winston. Demonstrating the need for critical analysis of media representation, *Media Disparity: A Gender Battleground* enters the cultural conversation at a time when questions of fairness, equality, and diversity run high.

Edited by Cory L. Armstrong and with a preface by Gaye Tuchman, *Media Disparity* examines gender in contemporary mass media. Using Tuchman’s (1978) work in *Hearth and Home* as its jumping-off point, *Media Disparity* questions the extent to which claims of more equitable gender portrayals, and greater female involvement, are true of today’s media output. Three-and-a-half decades after Tuchman argued that women were “symbolically annihilated” by the mass media, this collection shows that little has changed in the way(s) that women are positioned, and the roles that they perform. Applied to different mediums (e.g., newspapers, television, online environments) and texts (e.g., music, music videos, advertising, sports, health communication, political communication), this point is convincingly reiterated throughout the text.

While Tuchman’s preface provides readers with a synopsis of arguments central to feminist, gender, and media studies, *Media Disparity* also finds strength in its organization and quality of content. The book is divided into four parts totaling 14 chapters, each of which addresses gender from a different perspective. The book’s organization smoothly transitions readers from one focus to the next, and it repeatedly returns to the basic postulate: How far have we come?

In part one, “Traditional Media and Issues,” the authors address such a question in ways oft-categorized as “traditional” feminist, gender, and media studies. The authors examine women’s representation in news media and newspaper coverage, in music lyrics and music videos, in health news and communication, and in sports coverage. While scholars such as Antunovic and Hardin argue that sports coverage has moved from annihilation to “ambivalence” toward female athletes, others such as Everbach discuss how males’ dominance as both news sources and news workers perpetuate a journalistic climate where females are habitually disadvantaged. While the sum of contributions is impressive, Bystrom and Hennings’ chapter is especially noteworthy as it offers analysis of politically-oriented material at a time when female politicians increasingly gain mainstream attention. These

authors explore the differences in newspaper coverage among women running for the U.S. Senate in 2012, and their work drudges up important considerations for the notion of “equality” in the public sphere. And although newspaper coverage kept intact familiar portrayals—such as males’ greater association with “masculine” policy issues and the questioning of females’ “toughness” or intelligence—media depictions of female politicians might, in fact, be changing. Newspapers increasingly presented candidates of both genders in similar ways, with no significant differences in the ways in which family, appearance, or gender factored into coverage. Many chapters in part one provide the historical context(s) for understanding women in media today, and link Tuchman’s earlier claims regarding women in television, magazines, and newspapers to a variety of mediated texts. Collectively, they demonstrate that current portrayals are more often similar than they are different from Tuchman’s original claims.

Despite part one’s effectiveness, it is in part two, “Contemporary Media Platforms and Issues,” that *Media Disparity* sinks its teeth into new gender and media studies questions. Specifically, Eckert and Steiner’s chapter on Wikipedia, and Davis’ chapter on virtual environments shed light on media products and processes in need of greater scholarly attention. While scholars have long noted the gendered differences in online participation, Eckert and Steiner argue that the domination of male voices online becomes particularly problematic when it involves the production and distribution of knowledge. The lack of inclusion and equality for all “voices”—and the limited receptivity of female voices—has hindered the way(s) in which cultural knowledge and information are produced. Davis’ chapter complements Eckert and Steiner’s, as she examines how virtual environments (i.e., multi-user dungeons, *World of Warcraft*, and *Second Life*) allow users to construct, experiment with, and perform different gender identities. While Davis also explores how participants perform their sexuality and engage in gender-bending, what we ultimately see is the reinforcement of problematic gender portrayals, even in virtual contexts. This finding is worthy of further examination.

In part three, “Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Gender in Media,” *Media Disparity* interrogates gender in global media. Here, Vilela, Nelson, and Paek’s chapter on the controversial “Bic for Her” campaign directly addresses the original aims of the book—to revisit Tuchman’s arguments and gauge how far media have come. Collins’ and Brown’s exploration of the Ugandan news business complements Everbach’s earlier research on U.S. news (found in part one). The most pressing chapter in part three, however, comes in Friedman and Johnston’s work on blame narratives in news coverage of sex trafficking cases. The authors call attention to an issue that has gained increased mainstream attention, as evidenced by MSNBC’s undercover special, “Sex Slaves in America,” and the documentary *Tricked* (2013). Friedman and Johnston question how females factor into the reporting of cases that have been actualized through the U.S. legal system, as it is in the legal system that such cases receive legitimacy. Because news coverage focuses so much attention on blame, males tended to dominant the discourse (e.g., authorities, officials, experts, etc.); this, in turn, leaves women’s voices largely out of conversation. Placing agency in the hands of those who act *for* or *in the interest of* women, such coverage reproduces ideologies of powerless-

ness among victims. Females, quite often, are not afforded the time or space to speak for themselves. Familiar tropes such as blaming the traffickers, blaming the customers, and blaming the victims were likewise present, although many of them placed men squarely at the center of the sex trafficking case. Those most affected by trafficking—women—remained secondary.

Finally, in part four, “Where Are We Now?” Carolyn Byerly summarizes the history of women’s movements and how said movements shaped (and were shaped by) media coverage. No longer focusing on the historical representation of females, Byerly outlines how involvement in the women’s movements—and females’ voices—led to an increased awareness in the public sphere. Byerly argues that feminism has now “become imbedded in the public discourse” (214), thanks to the women involved in the movements, and those influenced by their voices. The influence of feminist voices has presented a welcome shift—a change, per se—in awareness and questions of media and gender, but there is still much work left to be done. The book concludes with final thoughts by Cory Armstrong, who hones in on the future of media and the role that social media plays (and will continue to play) in perpetuating gendered disparities. Social media presents users with the ability to engage in self-expression, to define for themselves the parameters of their own sexuality, and to participate in activism in record numbers. Yet it is these social media forms—along with “traditional” media—that continue to situate females as those most negatively affected by its production and use. Increasingly young(er) generations of females are capturing and sharing intimate details, photos, and messages via social media outlets, with consequences still largely unknown. It is this culture of “over sharing,” marked by the pervasiveness and openness of social media forms, that necessitates increased awareness and education.

Overall, this collection is a welcome addition to feminist, gender, and media studies, as well as critical media research. While some authors revisit age-old questions of gender and media disparity, others forge new territory, prompting readers to think about media production and consumption in a changing media landscape. The book’s only limitation is in its absence of discussion regarding postfeminist discourse(s). Multiple scholars have argued that contemporary media is replete with postfeminist ideologies (Gill 2008, 35; Lotz 2001, 106; McRobbie 2007, 255). *Media Disparity*’s shortage of work on postfeminism leaves out crucial conversations regarding females’ role in media today. Ultimately, though, *Media Disparity* is well-written and organized, and the contributions are supported through research. The book would work well as a reader for undergraduate or graduate courses, and I would recommend it to students and scholars interested in contemporary media analysis. *Media Disparity: A Gender Battleground* proves that if we are to make progress in the media products we create and consume, we must know where we’ve been and where we hope to go.

Nicole B. Cox  
Valdosta State University