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Waves of Feminism and the Media

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Abstract

The feminist movement has gone through many different stages, three to be exact. Each stage, or as they are called in the academic world, “waves”, had its own history and unique defining qualities. Media played a role in the movement in the past, and continue to do so today. My research focused on how the two, feminism and media, intertwine with one another and the affect the movement had, and continues to have, on mainstream media. With the recent news of sexual assault allegations in the media industry, the two seem to go hand-in-hand, now more than ever before.

The exact question my research sought to answer was: How were the different waves perceived in media of their respected time period? This research can be applied by showing mainstream media that they have a hand in social change and positive impacts on society. I conducted my research through scholarly articles and through keyword searching of certain archived media articles and objects of the past. For example, I looked at headlines of newspapers and the number of readers certain feminist books received.

The results I found connected to what I assumed. As women’s issues were becoming a familiar topic in society and politics, the media took notice. The uprising of the movements led to media coverage, as well as a change in the business of media as well. Women became writers and editors, which allowed them to have a voice of their own and tell about feminism and why women’s rights were important to them. My paper will dive into the backgrounds and beginnings of each wave of feminism while connecting media history and the power media had on the movement.

Waves of Feminism and the Media

To begin feminist research, one must define what the word actually means. Through observation of my peers, it was clear that they each had different definitions of the word “feminism”. Some based their definitions on what they have seen in the media, while others relied on personal experiences. Just as we did, each different time period had its own definition of what fighting for women’s rights meant to them. This showed that defining the word itself was difficult because it has been fluid and changing throughout the years.

The topic of feminism allows for the discussion of many communication theories and ideas focused on in the communication field. For example, even the smallest details, such as the semantics and pragmatics of the word could produce research studies. Semantics relates to what words mean or what they represent. Since the word does not have one concrete meaning, it is important to realize the meanings of words can change. In this case, it was best to focus on the pragmatics of the word. Pragmatics is how the context of a certain situation can affect the meaning of words (Littlejohn, Foss, & Oetzel, 2017). In my paper, I will define feminism as it relates to each time period, but the overall idea is “equality”.

The first wave was the time leading up to and during the 1950s. The issue at hand was women’s right to vote. The activists at this time were inspired by actions taken years before. They used the ideas and power first introduced by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a highly educated civil rights activist. Stanton outlined the Seneca Falls Declaration, which claimed the natural equity of women and outlined the political strategy of equal access and opportunity. She did this during the Seneca Falls Convention in New York in 1848, which she organized herself (Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 2004).

At the convention, many trailblazers of the fight for women's right to vote were in attendance. On the opposite spectrum, some who opposed the idea of women's suffrage and political action also attended. According to the written account of the proceedings, an individual referred to as "Mr. Colton of Connecticut" expressed his admiration for women, but believed their place to be "at home, instead of engaging in the strife and contention of the political world" (Women's Rights Convention, 1870). With the practice under their belts and the experience of shutting down opposition, the activists were prepared to work toward their right to vote.

After this convention, a media breakthrough happened for women. Amelia Bloomer started publishing *Lily* in 1849, the first newspaper in the United States owned, edited, and published by a woman. The newspaper focused on temperance, women's rights, and dress reform. Dress reform led to the adoption of women wearing pants instead of skirts or dresses. The style of pants that were popular eventually became known as "bloomers" in dedication to Amelia. This showed the power the media had on society, even back then. *Lily* had a yearly subscription of fifty cents, and the audience grew as the years went by. The first issue had a circulation of two to three hundred, with an increase to eight hundred after the first year, and eventually grew to over four thousand by 1853 (Watson, 1991).

Since dress reform was written about and eventually led to a change in society's ideals of what women should wear, this brought into play the agenda setting theory. "Media shape the public agenda. Media do not tell us what to think, only what we should be thinking about" (Littlejohn, et al., 2017). Agenda setting contains two distinct levels. Level 1 establishes the general issues that are important. Level 2 determines the parts or aspects of those issues that are viewed as important (Scheufele, 1999). In this case, *Lily* used agenda setting in the first level to discuss women and the issues they were facing. In the second level, the newspaper actually

pointed out a specific step that could be taken to address women's equality, dress reform. *Lily* discussed a change in society, and readers recognized this, so the change went off of the paper and into our everyday lives.

Another media breakthrough happened in 1870 when the American Women Suffrage Association (AWSA) began publishing the *Woman's Journal*. It was a weekly newspaper founded by Lucy Stone. *Woman's Journal* was perceived as "America's most prominent and long-lived suffrage periodical" (Richardson, 2010). The journal was a way to show the public what the AWSA agreed with and actions they were taking together to make women's suffrage happen. Publications such as *Lily* and *Woman's Journal* showed how the movements and the media worked together. Readers had the opportunity to read about what was going on and the word spread around the country. Without this, the number of activists would not have been so large.

Being inspired by the women before, many activists began the true push and campaigning for women's right to vote. After the year 1900, public protests became popular, especially in the west. These were shown successful since Wyoming, Colorado, Utah and, Idaho became some of the first states to guarantee women's right to vote. Media coverage of the protests and political events rose throughout the country. A study was conducted in 1996 that looked at ten Wisconsin newspapers from 1911-1919 and how they chose to cover suffrage events. The study examined factors that went into words that were chosen and other elements of the coverage. The results turned out to be what most would expect. If a particular newspaper had a prosuffrage editor, the events were written in a positive light and vice-versa (Burt, 1996).

These exercises are still seen today in mainstream media. Even though journalism and getting the news out is supposed to be unbiased, many reporters put their opinions into stories,

either by subtle or obvious word choices. The audience can choose which outlets to follow based on their own opinions.

The 19th Amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920 under the presidency of Woodrow Wilson. The news was spread in newspapers all around. One, in particular, that is now housed at the Newseum is the *Santa Fe New Mexican*. The front page read, “Women Will Vote in Next Presidential Election in November; Tennessee Thirty-Sixth and Final State to Ratify the Susan B. Anthony Amendment” (Newspaper Coverage of the Ratification of the 19th Amendment, 1920). The media effects theory, which states that media have a hand in shaping public opinion, can be connected to this (Littlejohn, et al. 2017). As more newspapers and media outlets reported on women voting, public opinion eventually showed that people agreed with the idea. It obviously shows true today since women can vote and it is a normal act in society in the United States.

The second wave of feminism was the time period of the 1960s and early 1970s. There were many issues at hand, including the idea that outer appearance for women was more important than their personal accomplishments in life. Many advertisements at the time pushed this into the limelight. They were shown to the public in a way that pushed women into gender norms, which included their role in the home or other shallow duties that did not advance them further. These advertisements mostly started in the 1950s, but carried over into the 1960s.

One example of such advertisement was for a Kenwood Chef Mixer. It included a man with his wife hugging him from behind. The wife had on a chef’s hat and red lipstick. The text on the left side said, “The Chef does everything but cook – that’s what wives are for!” This obviously indicated that women had no other roles except to cook and do household chores. Many other advertisements similar to the Kenwood Chef Mixer were popular during this time

period. Activists noticed the obvious problems with these advertisements. They were concerned because many people saw them and viewing women in these ways was becoming the norm.

The second wave of feminism was connected to other movements of the time period, such as the Anti-Vietnam War movement, LGBT movements, civil rights movements, and the Black Power movement. Civil rights movements began the true protests and activism of the time. Leaders, such as Rosa Parks, and protesting events, were the factors that led to giving a voice to the oppressed. College campuses were ideal spots for activist works and protests. Students marched for what they believed was right and spoke out for societal and political changes. Groups, such as Students for a Democratic Society the Free Speech Movement, were formed to connect like-minded individuals (Janowiecki, n.d.).

With the rise of voicing political stands, women, once again, found new platforms to express concerns of inequality. New issues were at hand and with the success of the first wave in legalizing women's suffrage, activists sprouted up all over the country. Protests were created in favor of workplace equality, equal pay, child care support, and other issues (Janowiecki, n.d.).

The ideas of feminist groups and individuals were put into the public through manifestos, which were public written declarations. The First Amendment was highlighted strongly throughout this era and the manifestos were an example of this. Some of the most famous manifestos included: SCUM Manifesto by Valerie Solanas, the Redstockings Manifesto by Redstockings, Black Woman's Manifesto by Third World Women's Alliance, and The Personal is Political by Carol Hanisch. Many people read these and either agreed with what they said, which led them to join the movement, or they were offended by some of the radical wording and ideas. No matter the view, they no doubt were expressing their freedom of speech.

The most popular and most highly recognized mass media object of this time was the book entitled *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. The book was popular because it opened women's eyes to the fact that they were victims of a "mystique". Friedan defined this "mystique" as finding fulfillment in "sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love" (Friedan, 1963). In other words, the women were putting all their focus on those around them and tended to neglect themselves. Friedan questioned the idea that women were only to be seen as housewives and she was especially against the mainstream advertisements that only highlighted women doing household chores. It showed women that they did not have the political influence they needed to make a change in the world, and this inspired many to get out into society and create a voice for themselves.

The Feminine Mystique was a great example of the Spiral of Silence Theory. This theory states that individuals who perceive that their opinions are popular express them, whereas those who do not think their opinions are popular remain quiet (Littlejohn, et al., 2017). The book's popularity grew because women everywhere agreed with what the book was saying, but they never expressed the idea out loud. Friedan came out of the spiral and voiced her opinion that women needed to look out for themselves. Once the readers saw that this opinion was becoming popular, they expressed it too. It encouraged them to do more with their lives than being housewives to their husbands.

Another media milestone in second-wave feminism was the reemergence of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. The magazine was first introduced years before as a family-centered publication, which was the case for many "women's magazines" at the time. Helen Gurley Brown re-branded the magazine in 1965, which led to *Cosmopolitan* being one of the first contributors to female liberation and acceptance of their individuality. Even though the magazine

is known for its sexual content today, when it first was published, issues that are seen as normal today were controversial and brought to the surface back then. For example, it discussed women living alone and having careers while still being single. Women believed they could provide for themselves and they could have a different future than the gender norm of being a stay-at-home mom. They received this new-found liberation and confidence by reading publications such as *Cosmopolitan*.

Years after the protests and political turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s, communication scholars were still studying the actions taken by activists. For example, to study persuasion, Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin coined the phrase *invitational rhetoric*. Their theory was based on the past criticism of persuasion, which stated that it was sort of violence and did not try to see the other side's opinion. Foss and Griffin based invitation rhetoric on feminist values of equality, immanent value, and self-determination. "An attitude of equality places each person and perspective on an equal plane and engenders relationships of respect and non-domination" (Littlejohn, et al., 2017). They emphasized that feminists allowed everyone to make their own decisions on what to do and how to live their lives. This is a quality most seen in third-wave feminism, which had some beginnings during their studies in the 1990s.

The third wave of feminism is the movement happening now. The second wave included a lot of upper-class white females at the forefront and did not give women of color and other oppressed groups much of a voice, which is why the second wave came to a halt. In the earlier waves, money was a large contributor of how information and ideas could spread in the media, so only the privileged and those with money easily accessible were making the biggest differences. The third wave changed this. To put this era in one word, it would be "intersectional". In 1992, Rebecca Walker, a young African-American and Jewish feminist, co-

founded the Third Wave Foundation. The organization's mission was to "politicize and organize young women from diverse cultural and economic backgrounds" (Bronstein, 2005).

Social media contribute to issues being shown in the mainstream media and throughout activism and protests. Money is no longer the largest factor in the spread of news and ideas. The new medium theory explains what is happening. This theory states that new technology has unique features that change the way people communicate with each other (Littlejohn, et al., 2017). Years before social media and smart phones, people would stay in their small bubbles and not meet others unlike themselves, whether that be through their race, socioeconomic class, or other identifier. Today, someone can communicate with someone else at the tap of a finger. This allows more eye opening revelations about different groups and puts faces to issues.

The impact of social media on today's view of feminism was shown through the Women's March. The march was planned as a resistance march against harmful political dialogue that hurt members of many oppressed communities, such as the LGBTQ community, racial minorities, people with disabilities, survivors of sexual violence, religious freedoms, and, of course, women (The Women's March on Washington, 2017). The idea started online and became a Facebook event. Many people shared and showed interest, so it spread like wildfire.

Others were inspired by the organizers of the main Women's March, so they decided to create marches all around the world. In large cities and small, citizens showed their support. It was an opportunity for those who could not go to Washington to meet with one another and express their shared concerns. Participants felt connected to others around the world who were participating. It would not have been such a large event with such an intimate feel without social media.

Since this wave is so different from the other two and contains a platform of social media, journalists and news outlets must report on happenings and issues in a different way than journalists of the other two waves. A study was conducted in 2005 to research just that. Carolyn Bronstein analyzed how third-wave feminism was being framed and determined whether journalists were recycling stock frames used during the women's movement of the 1970s (Bronstein, 2005). Media framing theory refers to the process of putting a news story or other type of media message together, including the ways in which a story is organized and structured (Littlejohn, et al., 2017). Bronstein looked at news stories published between 1992 and 2004. Her findings say a lot about how society was affected by the movements and how the view of women was changed, in a positive way. She found that the only similar frames today to the 1970s reporting were the goals and rights of the movement (Bronstein, 2005). This meant that journalists were still highlighting the goals each newsworthy feminist event had. She also found that journalists do not use victimization, which showed the change in how society views women today.

Third-wave feminism is the broadest one yet. There is no set definition or ideal of a feminist in today's world. It is simply about everyone being themselves and being in control of their own agency. One quote from feminist communication scholar Julia Wood really seems to capture this movement happening today. It says, "The question may not be whether you are a feminist, but which kind of feminist you are." Another definition of third-wave feminism says "there is no one size fits all" (Littlejohn, et al., 2017). Feminists in the third wave embrace ambiguity and find themselves in different positions. They also embrace inclusion and exploration.

Apart from inclusion of other oppressed groups, another large issue at hand for third-wave feminists is sexual assault and violence. The beginnings of these matters in the mainstream media trace back to the 1990s when Anita Hill said that Clarence Thomas, a member of the U.S. Supreme Court, sexually harassed her. He discussed inappropriate and sexual topics in the workplace, and made her feel uncomfortable after she refused to date him.

The incident created a conversation about how the media reported on sexual assault and harassment. Anita Hill was the voice for many victims of these kinds of attacks. One study was conducted in 2001 that analyzed content in media about these hearings. The results found that the articles had two common themes: partisan and/or feminist hypocrisy and feminist responses (Black & Allen, 2001). Many of the sources in the stories were female Senators and other prominent female leaders in politics. This was a positive find because it was one of the first times women were the ones speaking about such large issues.

Since third-wave feminism is so broad, some have seen it as somewhat of a contradiction. Two scholars, Valerie Renegar and Stacey Sowards, looked into this idea further. They examined third-wave feminist texts from the 1990s and early 2000s. The common themes they found included: the absence of a coherent definition of third-wave feminism, the use of negative identity labels as terms of empowerment, and a resistance to simple and singular identity positions (Littlejohn, et al., 2017). To elaborate, the third wave says that what is oppressive to one person may not be oppressive to another. For example, some people see the hijab as oppressive. They believe women are forced to wear it by the demands of men. Others see it as a personal choice and they feel free and empowered by wearing it. The same thing can be said for many choices of women.

The contradictions found in this movement creates a platform for ever-changing views. They make a space for self-determination, new ways of imagining, and new forms of social action that can serve as a model for social movements facing complex circumstances and goals (Littlejohn, et al., 2017).

An example of this contradiction in media was the study completed by Brenda Helmbrecht and Meredith Love. They looked at two third-wave feminist zines and compared their content and views. The two zines they examined were *BUST* and *Bitch*. *BUST* focused on women's personal choices and how they can embrace their desires. *Bitch* focused on women's accomplishments. Instead of having models on the cover like *BUST*, *Bitch* highlighted artwork created by women as the main illustration point. Both zines were still considered feminist and fall into the third wave, even though they illustrated two different ideas (Littlejohn, et al., 2017).

One sentence in our textbook sums up this movement perfectly. It says, "In fact, what unites many third-wave feminists is not a shared political understanding and stance but simply a recognition that there is no single, correct position on feminism." The third wave allows for growth and longevity of feminism for years to come, which will allow research such as this to show the connection between media and social change.

Discussion

Feminism and media have always had a close relationship. Without media, political and social changes for women could have never happened. As social media grows, new points of view will be available to everyone. This will allow for new ideas and new ways of tackling oppression and political changes for women. Since this wave is so broad, it will most likely not have an abrupt ending and will, instead, continue to change and evolve. In turn, the media will continue to report on events relating to women's issues.

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