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A FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COMMUNICATION

Micky Lee

In the spring of 2004, after I defended my doctoral dissertation, I decided to read as much literature on women, gender, and new information and communication technologies (ICTs) as I could. My dissertation examined how UNESCO conceptualised the relationship between women and telecommunications. Although telecommunications are closely related to new ICTs (and sometimes erroneously seen as the same subject), I decided not to address new ICTs in my dissertation. The more literature I read, the angrier I felt. My anger was channelled into writing the article "What's Missing in Feminist Research in New Information and Communication Technologies?" (Micky Lee 2006), published in *Feminist Media Studies*. In that article, I wrote about how a "global feminist political economic analysis" may approach the relationship between women, gender, and new ICTs. The three directions that I proposed are: first, to recognise telecommunications and new ICTs as industries; second, to discover the multiple roles that women have in relation to telecommunications and new ICTs; and, third, to study the ideology that naturalises the unequal distribution of wealth.

In hindsight, I wrote that article with a lot of naïveté. I thought that I had nailed down a missing piece in feminist research on new ICTs and had provided a holistic picture of the gendered nature of the new ICT industries. Little did I know that I had just begun to explore a largely untrodden path. In the following years, I read many wonderful feminist critiques on macroeconomics, intellectual property, nation states, international relations, technology and science, and labour. The many courageous feminists who spoke before I did stimulated me to look deeper into the feminist political economy of telecommunications, new ICTs, and media. My current working definition of a feminist political economic approach to communication is: the study of the gendered production, distribution, and consumption of goods and resources and the examination of how ideology is used to stabilise the unequal relations. I employ Marxist definitions of production, goods and resources, ideology, and social relations. Production is the process of transforming one form of commodity into another form of commodity through the use of labour and technology; goods are commodities that have market value whilst resources may not have market value (such as the time of the unemployed); ideology is false consciousness that masks real economic relations; and social relations are determined by economic relations.

Neo-Marxists (such as Althusser) and post-Marxists (such as Baudrillard) have questioned the usefulness and relevancy of these Marxist terms in a consumerist society. I certainly think feminists should question Marxist thought. But first let me plead the case for why Marxism should form the basis of feminist political economy.

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The ultimate goal of feminist political economy is to understand why women are poor and how a redistribution of wealth is essential to women's status. Some may wonder what women's poverty has to do with communication. This is precisely the question that we feminists in all disciplines should ask ourselves. Women's poverty is seen as the problem for sociologists. Feminists in communication are supposed to deal with the meanings and the symbols in communication systems, not something as material as "real-life" as poverty.

I first saw poverty when I moved to the US in 2000. In Oregon, one of the poorer states in the country, I first saw young panhandlers, disabled veterans, students on food stamps, hungry children, and heavily indebted families. Certainly there are poor people in Hong Kong, but they were never visible to me. Poor people were the elephant in the room. They were obscured by the neon lights, the skyscrapers, and the shopping malls in the postmodern city where I grew up. In Eugene, Oregon, where there are no neon lights or skyscrapers, I saw poor people for the first time. My original intention was to study cultural studies for my PhD, but it took only three months for me to switch my focus to political economy—a tool which I believe is more useful to understand women's status.

Many scholars, politicians, and non-profit organisations have hailed new ICTs and telecommunications as solutions to women's poverty. It is believed that women can search for jobs on the Internet, they can telecommute, and they can learn and educate themselves online. Globally, new ICTs are said to bring economic advantages to rural Indian farmers to check crop prices on cell phones; technology is said to offer children a decent education in the One Laptop Per Child programme. There is less focus on who benefits from the consumption of technology.

Why are Microsoft, Google, and Facebook all headed by white men from the US? Their talent and luck may only partially account for their wealth. White men from a certain class in developed countries are entitled to a sense of confidence, competency, and success. They are provided with access, resources, and an elite education. They launch their corporations in a country where trade laws encourage companies to seek cheap labour overseas; where intellectual property protects corporations, not creators; and where anti-trust laws do not condemn oligopoly. Poor women and men may have a slight economic advantage in the global economy when they telecommute or sell their handicrafts online, but they will not become the next Bill Gates. It is not the case that they are talentless, but rather that historically they have been exploited—first as colonised subjects, then as "Third World" subjects. Poverty is not only about money. Critical scholars have expanded the definition of poverty to include the lack of opportunities and the feeling of hopelessness, inadequacy, and self-insufficiency.

One may notice that political economists have already written extensively on ownership, intellectual property, and market concentration. So what is something new that feminists may bring to political economy? In the second edition of *The Political Economy of Communication*, Vincent Mosco (2009) reports the surge of feminist scholarship in political economic research since 1996, the year when the first edition was published. Although he certainly welcomes what he called a "feminist standpoint," I am troubled by his characterisation of a feminist perspective as an "[alternative] to capital as the dominant standpoint" (p. 115). Without taking the quote out of context too much, what Mosco attempts to suggest is that, whilst the earliest political economists (incidentally all men) paid attention to "objective" issues such as media concentration, later some others gave greater emphasis to the working class, women/gender, labour, and race. The historical timeline that Mosco constructs is correct, but the narrative may be too clichéd. An often

heard reason why feminists critique dominant, non-gendered theories is because we believe women—as both subjects of knowledge and as objects of study—are excluded by fields that are defined by men. Hence, a female perspective is necessary to introduce more alternatives without revamping dominant theories. In most introductory level textbooks, for instance, women, minorities, and working-class people are lumped together in one chapter at the end of a 400-page book, be it on history or on media. The various standpoints add more voices, but do not challenge the dominant, non-gendered theories. There is not an introductory textbook on media that begins by framing the history of media and media theories as gendered.

The “feminist” in feminist political economy of communication is not only to include the excluded and to add alternative voices, but also to re-read the political economy of communication—as both a theory and a method—as gendered. The history and the development of political economy are gendered, and the terms that it critiques (such as capital and global economy) are gendered as well. Therefore political economy should be feminist by nature. Mosco (2009) suggests three entry points to study the political economy of communication: commodification, spatialisation, and structuration. Gender is discussed via structuration. Nevertheless, the elements under the two other entry points are gendered phenomena as well: content, audience, labour, space, time, and communication. A feminist critique problematises these concepts. For example, Eileen Meehan (1993) has shown that historically the media audience has been conceptualised primarily as consisting of upper-middle-class males. Only when women were acknowledged in their role as consumers did they become acknowledged as part of the audience. Gender also problematises the concept of time. Marx believed labour time is an objective measurement of work. Feminists later questioned the reproductive labour that women perform at home and in the workplace (such as emotional labour provided by health care professionals). Although women worldwide still take up the majority of reproductive labour, there is at least an acknowledgement that unpaid labour is work. To this end, I argue that feminist political economy is a more holistic political economy.

If a feminist political economy of communication holds the key to understanding women’s poverty, and if it is a more holistic political economy, then why are there so few feminist political economic studies? Ellen Riordan (2002) reasoned that the dearth of studies in feminist political economy is due to the masculine nature of politics and economy and the exclusion of women in both domains. I opt for a more practical (and possibly more straightforward) explanation. Given the various flourishing approaches to feminism (as this special anniversary issue clearly demonstrates), feminists can identify with a wide array of perspectives. If Freud (1989) was correct, humans seek to maximise pleasure and to minimise pain. For this reason, watching all the seasons of *Sex and the City* is always more enjoyable than reading 10K SEC filings, congressional hearings, court rulings, and users’ terms of services.¹ A feminist political economist, unfortunately, has to interact with documents that were not produced for enjoyment. Most of us (feminist or not) are so thoroughly trained as media consumers that, even though we dismiss the dominant ideology in the media, we do not need to be trained to understand them. On the other hand, we are not actively encouraged to read documents that have a significant impact on our public and private lives. Documents such as congressional hearings are not produced to be widely read. However, documents such as 10K reports and user terms of services are blatant in suggesting how corporations maximise their own interests whilst diminishing the

public ones. For example, sections under Apple's iTunes Terms and Conditions read as follows:

What personal information we collect:

... In the US, we may ask for your Social Security number (SSN) but only in limited circumstances such as when setting up a wireless account and activating your iPhone or when determining whether to extend commercial credit.

How we use your personal information:

We also use personal information to help us develop, deliver, and improve our products, services, content, and advertising.²

From Apple's 10K report:

At the end of fiscal 2009, the Company had opened a total of 273 retail stores, including 217 stores in the US and 56 stores internationally. The Company has typically located its stores at high-traffic locations in quality shopping malls and urban shopping districts. By operating its own stores and locating them in desirable high-traffic locations, the Company *is better positioned to control the customer buying experience* and attract new customers. (Apple 2009, p. 2; emphasis added)

Watching Apple commercials and visiting the online Apple store are both very pleasant experiences. However, the pleasure is manufactured to control consumer behaviours. Scholars tend to highlight the possibilities that new ICTs and telecommunications bring to women for self-expression. For example, women can produce their own radio programmes and podcast them; women can make their own short films and put them on YouTube. In fact, new ICTs, telecommunications, and information corporations probably welcome women-made productions, not because they support their causes, but because women have to consume before they produce; and because online advertising relies on information supplied by users. To understand how the global economy is gendered, feminists need to pay attention to production as much as, if not more than, consumption.

Terry Eagleton (2003, p. 5) writes that the study of pleasure "requires patience, self-discipline and an inexhaustible capacity to be bored." The study of women's poverty then requires a surplus of these three qualities. To many poor women and men who work as farmers, factory workers, domestic servants, and as other types of labourers, the ability to be patient, self-disciplined, and tolerant of boredom are survival skills. Bearing in mind the many poor women whom I have met, and whom I will meet, I here pose this challenge to feminist media studies researchers: to "bore" ourselves with intellectual labour that produces socially engaging, critical and globally responsive work.

NOTES

1. 10K SEC filing is an annual report that US public companies file with the US Securities and Exchange Commission. The filing is meant to ensure public companies' earnings are transparent to stockholders. In a congressional hearing, members of US Senate committees collect information provided by different stakeholders, usually in the form of oral testimony.
2. Apple Terms and Conditions, <http://www.apple.com/legal/itunes/us/terms.html>.

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