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Media and Gender Inequality, new explorations
Introduction to the special section

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The intricate relationship between media and the construction of gender is not new, but it is here to stay. The pervasive influence of gender inequality, traditional patriarchy and colonialism in the media sector – both at the level of employment and content production–, in different socio-economic and political contexts constitutes a point of reflection for researchers and policy makers. The pivotal works dedicated to examining media from a gender point of view argued that media is a central site of gender construction, and contributes to the naturalization of gender inequalities, by the 'symbolic annihilation of women' (Tuchman 1978) and by the construction of meaning by both media producers and media audience (Van Zoonen 1994).

More recently, Karen Ross and Claudia Padovani (2017) showed evidence of the persistent gender inequalities in employment and of the presence of institutional barriers to women's career advancement in the media industries. The achievement of gender equality in the media sector remains a significant concern for media workers, professional media organisations and gender advocacy and lobby groups. As Ross and Padovani (2017: 239) explain "unlike many sectors that have little or no real impact on the everyday lives of citizens, the media are regarded as important players in determining how society thinks about itself".

From the 80s and 90s perspective, that reflected on media as text and later on the challenges of media production for gender inequality reproduction, the research moved to the concept of digital media ecosystem, which combines legacy and new media, digital influencers, user generated content, advertising agencies, technology companies in a global system of interdependencies. The paradoxical situation of the media as a vehicle for empowerment and of inequality (re)producer is still present.

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This special section of *Mediascapes Journal* aims to contribute to contemporary research on media and gender by using an approach that combines the political economy of communication with discourse analysis. The selected articles focus on several important themes: women's positioning in the media and online sector, the creation of discursive, woman-controlled platforms to debate and negotiate political issues, the research of the voices of women on social media/web platforms, and the intersectional analysis of web content. The articles have been selected from the proceedings of the ESA-RN18 international conference held in Turin in 2022, *Communication, Capitalism and Critique: Critical Media Sociology in the 21st Century*, organized in cooperation with the: Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning of the Polytechnic of Turin and the University of Turin, Italian National Sociological Association – Section: Cultural Processes and Institutions, Italian Scientific Society of Sociology, Culture, Communication, Antonio Gramsci Piedmont Institute Foundation.

The binding topic of interest of this special section is inequality. Media organizations function in "inequality regimes" (in Acker, 2006, understanding of the term) with practices, processes, actions, and meanings that lead to maintaining class, gender, and racial inequalities within all types of companies. Inequality reflects in the uneven access to/distribution of resources, but also - as Asker explains – of goals, and outcomes of organizations. In this context, the promise of change is important, but change is dependent on "entrenched economic (class) interests, the legitimacy of class interests, and allegiances to gendered and racialized identities and advantages" (Acker 2006, p. 460). The new technologies of communication have come with the promise of "giving the voice to the voiceless", but as the articles in this section will show they fail in guaranteeing equal access, and in providing equal voices to all the participants.

The contribution of Romina Surugiu, *Mapping gender inequality related to employment in the media sector in Romania (2008-2019)*, addresses the topic of gender inequality in media employment, by using quantitative analysis. The author underlines that gender inequality related to employment affects women in various economic sectors and has consequences related to women's access to resources and status. In the media sector, despite emancipatory social policies, women are still underrepresented as employees, and negatively discriminated against men in terms of wages, access to senior positions, job opportunities, and family-work balance. The paper observes how gender inequality reflects in data regarding the employment and pay in the media sector from Romania, between 2008 and 2019. Romania, as case study, had the advantage of having a history of equal access to jobs for men and women, guaranteed by law and encouraged by the social organization of the country (a legacy of the former Eastern European communist system in which women were supposed to have regular, full time employment).

Bec Wonders' article, *A Space to Debate Socialist Feminism: Mediating Conflict Through Serialised Letter-Writing in Second Wave Feminist Periodicals*, analyses the creation of discursive, woman-controlled forums for political debates. Bec Wonders focuses on the years 1970s when male-dominated organisations like the Communist Party of Great Britain

(CPGB) and the International Socialists (IS), later Socialist Workers Party (SWP), were slow in reacting to the rapid surge of women becoming politicised through consciousness-raising groups and developing a political understanding of personal and sexual power dynamics between men and women. In this context, independent socialist feminist periodicals emerged as forums of debate. At their turn, the political organizations CPGB and the IS/SWP initiated the production of their own women's periodicals. By applying the framework of feminist dialectics in Gracie Lyon's 1976 handbook Constructive Criticism, this paper analyses the letter-to-the-editor pages from the independent and the party socialist feminist periodicals (Red Rag, Scarlet Women, Link and Women's Voice) and concludes with observations about how the serialised, kaleidoscopic form of the periodical made possible the expression of varying degrees of feminist dialectical correspondence according to the editorial and political backgrounds of those producing the publications.

The contribution of Sara Monaci, Tatiana Mazali and Simone Persico, *Critical approach toward sociological studies of social media: the conflictual debate related to smart working during pandemic in Italy*, presents a case of using digital methods as an important instrument for social research on gender issues. The authors note that COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the spread of "smart work" arrangements in Italy. Because of the extended confinement and a looming health crisis, there was a shift in work practices, social relations, family relationship management, and work-life balance. As a result, many people abruptly migrated to networked platforms, in a disruptive and unprecedented phenomenon. The article investigates the Twitter debate on smart working during the pandemic by focusing mainly on social concerns and themes related to work-life balance and female condition.

The authors identified specific communities which debated government measures to help families during the pandemic and discussed digitalization and smart working as a new paradigm for work. Smart working is considered as a chance to enhance living conditions, but there are also associated problems related to the digital divide and the homeschooling for families with kids. The potential for smart working to serve as a tool for achieving an equal work-life balance is also underbalanced by personal stress and social inequality associated with it that further require new regulations and policies.

Lorenzo Dalvit's *A critical exploration of Youtube texts by and about people with disabilities in South Africa* offers an intersectional view (disability, gender, and race) on the Youtube content. The article focuses on one of the most unequal societies in the world, South Africa, that provides a variety of examples of discrimination, oppression and violence on the basis of race, gender, socio-economic and migrant status or political affiliation. Among the marginalized groups, people with disabilities (7.5% of the South Africa population) continue to be discriminated against irrespective of Internet applications and technologies that promise "to give a voice to the voiceless". By drawing on Gramsci's notions of hegemony and public intellectuals, the author explores the discursive constructions by and about South Africans with disabilities on YouTube. One important objective of the research is to understand disability at the intersectionality with race or gender. The author observes that past and present social inequalities significantly shape to what extent and in

what way people with disabilities are visible and viewed online. As cultural media texts, YouTube videos and comments reveal hegemonic racist, patriarchal and ableist tendencies.

To conclude, Media - in their dual form of texts and transmission channels - continue to foster the ambiguous perspective of empowering/disempowering women. In Acker's term (2006, p. 459), they display "patterns of complex inequality". The complex inequality patterns include, but it is not limited at: the stereotyped representation of women and men, the uneven participation of women in media production (on precarious work arrangements and in low paid positions), the constant misrepresentation and discrimination of the poor, the migrants, the disabled, the people of different races. We conclude that the media function in the logic of "gender essentialism" (England 2010), that encourages traditional choices for women by perpetuating a social system in which patriarchal, racist and postcolonial features coexist with patterns of empowerment.

Biographical notes

Tatiana Mazali, Sociologist of cultural and communication processes, is Associate Professor at the Polytechnic of Turin. Her research interests focus on: digital culture and creativity; the relationship between human, machines and society; labour transformations. She teaches 'Interactive media', 'Digital creative industries' and 'Immersive cinema' in Cinema and Media Engineering. She is a member of the Management Committee of the EU COST Action: P-WILL, Platform Work Inclusion Living Lab. She is deputy coordinator of RN 18 Sociology of Communications and Media Research (European Sociological Association-ESA). She co-edits the journal Digitcult@Scientific Journal on Digital Culture.

Romina Surugiu is Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies, and Vice Dean of the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Bucharest. She worked as a postdoctoral researcher in Communication Studies at the University of Bucharest (2010-2013), and at the Uppsala University (2012). She also worked as a journalist (1999-2007) and served as a board member of Romanian Public Television (2012-2015). She was a member of the management committee of the EU COST Action: Dynamics of Virtual Work IS 1202. She is a member of the board of RN 18 Sociology of Communications and Media Research (European Sociological Association-ESA).

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