



German
Historical
Institute
London

German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Conference Report: *The History of Medialization and Empowerment: The Intersection of Women's Rights Activism and the Media*

by Cassandra Hammel

German Historical Institute London Bulletin
Vol. XLIV, No. 1 (May 2022), 157–62

ISSN 0269-8552

The History of Medialization and Empowerment: The Intersection of Women's Rights Activism and the Media. Third meeting of the International Standing Working Group on Medialization and Empowerment, held online, 20–21 January 2022. Conveners: Christina von Hodenberg and Jane Freeland (German Historical Institute London), alongside partners at the Max Weber Forum for South Asian Studies in Delhi, the German Historical Institute Washington DC, the German Historical Institute Rome, and the Orient Institute Beirut.

This conference explored the role of the media in shaping and constituting discussions of gender roles and women's rights globally, and marked the end of a three-year project looking at the interconnections, contingencies, and dependencies of women's rights and the media throughout the long twentieth century. It was organized as part of the international research project 'Knowledge Unbound: Internationalization, Networking, Innovation in and by the Max Weber Stiftung', which is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

Drawing on their work in the history of feminism and media history, Jane Freeland and Christina von Hodenberg welcomed the participants with some methodological remarks. Although it plays a crucial role as a wellspring of and a source of evidence for feminist activism, Freeland argued that historians seldom look at the media as an actor in its own right, one that has shaped feminist politics and ideas of private and public life. To address this shortcoming, von Hodenberg suggested scholars draw from the concept of medialization, a term describing how the growth of mass media (from popular press, radio, and TV to the internet) throughout the long twentieth century has increasingly resulted in the media setting the conditions for public debate and understanding. A key aim of the conference was to investigate how paying attention to the medialization of feminism might change histories of feminism and women's emancipation.

The first panel explored the role of the media in discussing and shaping the way we think about the connections between gender, war, and violence. Twinkle Siwach (Jawaharlal Nehru University) examined violent crimes against women in contemporary India. By looking at the First Information Reports logged with the police and

how they are picked up by the media, the courts, and civil society organizations, Siwach identified different networks of communication. Christin Hansen (Paderborn University) then explored media representations of women in combat during the Spanish Civil War. While women's magazines like *Mujeres Libres* used the war as a space for negotiating gender roles and feminism, Hansen argued that these representations did not challenge gender roles, but rather perpetuated them. In commenting on the two papers, Freeland invited the participants to look more closely at the link between gender and violence and to think of it not just in terms of gender-based violence, but as a mutually reinforcing dynamic that continues from times of armed conflict to periods of peace.

The second panel focused on transnational aspects of feminism and the media, with four speakers examining the role of the media in spreading feminism and ideas of women's emancipation across borders. Marie Cabadi (University of Angers) compared the production of women's newsletters in Belgium, France, and the UK that were circulated by women's centres both nationally and internationally. Cabadi argued that women's newsletters could also be seen as an extension of local feminist spaces, bringing together women from all over the world. Alexandra (Sasha) Talaver (Central European University) and Lea Börgerding (FU Berlin) presented a joint project that compared two socialist women's magazines during the International Women's Year in 1975: *Rabotnitsa* from the Soviet Union and *Für Dich* from the GDR. Talaver and Börgerding argued that both magazines were similarly invested in shaping a vision of the global women's movement by highlighting women's solidarity based on anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism, while delegitimizing and downplaying liberal feminism. Frederik Schulze (University of Cologne) subsequently explored the crucial role of medialization and transnational connections in the history of women during the inter-war period in Latin America. Schulze emphasized the need to look beyond feminist media and include political, educational, and scientific publications, as well as mainstream and entertainment media, photographs, movies, and radio in our corpus of sources. In her commentary, Zsófia Lóránd (University of Cambridge) highlighted the role that historiographical work has played in broadening the view

of the 1970s by including the Eastern bloc and internationalist organizations, such as the Women's International Democratic Federation.

The first day of the conference ended with the third and final launch event of the online exhibition 'Forms, Voices, Networks: Feminism and the Media'.¹ The aim of the exhibition, as the curator Maya Caspari (GHIL) highlighted, is to explore the relationship between feminism and the public media in twentieth-century India, Germany, and Britain. The exhibition follows the approach of gender historian Lucy Delap, who in her recent book suggests looking at the history of feminism through the metaphor of a mosaic, because

like mosaics, feminist coalitions were built up from the bits and pieces available—other movements, committed individuals, actions and ideas. Some mosaics have been long-lived; others have crumbled, and their tiles have been reused, or have disappeared from view.²

Rather than attempting to tell a single chronological story, the exhibition adopts this 'mosaic' structure to present a series of snapshots of moments when feminists have mobilized the media in creative ways across often diverse contexts.

The launch event focused on feminism and the radio in Britain and Germany. Kate Lacey (University of Sussex) stressed the importance of the radio, a medium that has often been overlooked by both media and feminist historians. Lacey argued that since its invention, the radio has helped women to find a voice in the public sphere. At the same time, she encouraged us to think of radio not only as a space where women can make their voices heard, but also as a forum for active listening. Lacey further stated that radio's ability to cross not only physical borders and boundaries, but also those of class, age, and disability, allows it to diversify the spaces of feminist media production. Alongside Lacey, the co-founder of FemFM, Caroline Mitchell (University of Sunderland), described radio in the early 1990s as a very male affair. Although already working at radio stations, women were

¹ See [<https://feminismandthedia.co.uk/>], accessed 11 Feb. 2022.

² Lucy Delap, *Feminisms: A Global History* (London, 2020) 20-1. See also the discussion of this book in the review article 'Tracing the History of Feminisms: Methods, Meanings, and Questions' by Jane Freeland earlier in this issue.

largely invisible at that time. The challenge, Mitchell explained, was to tackle the stereotype that women could not present on air. Combating this, the collective FemFM did everything themselves—from designing the programme and presenting to marketing and writing jingles. For FemFM, it was important that the voices of women were heard on air.

The second day of the conference began with a panel exploring how the media challenges current periodizations of the history of feminism. Atsuko Sano (University of Tokyo) examined how the use of information and communication technology changes the discourse on reproductive health rights in contemporary Germany and Japan. Sano argued that the introduction of new media has allowed women in both countries to network and share information about abortion and contraception, greatly expanding women's knowledge. Isabel Heinemann (University of Münster) similarly explored the negotiation of women's reproductive rights in 1950s and 1960s Germany. Focusing on women's statements on abortion published in *Stern*, Heinemann challenged the common assumption that the West German women's movement began with the abortion protests of 1971. By choosing mainstream media instead of New Left and feminist journals, Heinemann identified alternative moments of women's politicization. Michalina Augusiak (University of Warsaw) examined the memory politics of the Polish League of Women between 1945 and 1989. After initially renouncing pre-war women's activism as class-exclusionary, Augusiak argued, the state-sponsored organization developed a more favourable account of the history of the Polish women's movement. In her commentary, Hannah Yoken (University of Jyväskylä) pointed out the utility of the wave metaphor when introducing people to the history of women's organizing, while encouraging the participants to think about when it is necessary to problematize and deconstruct periodizations, and for which audiences.

The next panel examined women's political representation in the media. Sharon Omotoso (University of Ibadan) looked at the medialization of corruption and its effects on women's political participation in present-day Nigeria. Although female politicians are usually ignored and downplayed, Omotoso argued that they are typically over-reported when accused of corruption. Therefore, she concluded,

corruption is medialized against women in public office, leading to women being maligned and often bullied out of politics prematurely. Jane Freeland analysed the last years of the East German women's magazine *Für Dich* during German reunification as it moved from an official socialist publication to a commercial venture. *Für Dich* not only provided a space for women's politics and issues in the months leading up to reunification, but also played an important role in portraying the lives of East German women during the transition. Economic circumstances were also crucial in the paper by Dóra Czeferner (Institute of History, Hungarian Academy of Sciences), who analysed the Hungarian feminist press in the early twentieth century. Focusing on *A Nő és a Társadalom* ('Women and Society'), Czeferner traced the development and struggles of early feminist media. The comment by Emily Steinhauer (GHIL) centred on the complex relationship between feminism, politics, and the media. Steinhauer invited the participants to think about medialization in this context as a constant reciprocal process.

The last panel explored the role of the media in drawing attention to women's sexual and reproductive rights. First, Annalisa Martin (Birkbeck, University of London) examined sex worker activism and engagement with the local press in the 1960s and 1970s. By focusing on letters sent to local newspapers, Martin showed that women who sold sex were politically engaged in trying collectively to raise awareness and agitate for change long before the foundation of an organized movement in the 1980s. However, the message of these informal interest groups was mediated and largely framed by journalists. The paper by Inbal Ofer (Open University of Israel) explored the connection between women activists, feminist agendas, and print media in Spain by focusing on the decriminalization of abortion in three mainstream newspapers. Although feminist activists first introduced sexuality and reproductive rights into public debate, Spanish mainstream media viewed medical professionals as more legitimate mediators of these topics. In her presentation, Ofer therefore gave more room to feminist discourse and media practice. The final paper by Jennifer Rodgers (Caltech) dealt with the importance of print media in opening public discursive spaces about childbirth in divided Germany. Rodgers explored how women in both countries mobilized print

media to educate and empower women on their right to bodily autonomy. However, Rodgers focused on underlying questions of race and ethnicity by contrasting the romantic fetishization of Native American birthing practices with the racialization of what were perceived as African birthing practices.

The conference ended with some concluding remarks by Penny Morris (University of Glasgow), who emphasized the interconnectedness of media not only in terms of the relationship between different media forms, but also in terms of the transnational practices of magazines and feminisms. Jane Freeland agreed with Morris that focusing on the media challenges both historical narratives of feminism and the very definition of feminism. The media not only shapes discussions about women's rights, she argued, but also makes them visible, promoting the idea of feminism as a complex mosaic. Christina von Hodenberg took up a question raised on the second day of the conference about the importance of media economics and the market, a topic that deserves further study in the future.

Overall, the conference proved that it is worth taking a closer look at the media, especially for the history of feminism. It further showed that feminist counter-culture and mainstream media cannot be considered separately, but that it is precisely their relationship to each other and the processes of negotiation that challenge common narratives and produce new perspectives. During the two days of the conference, fundamental methodological questions were raised that call for further studies. What are the challenges of working with feminist media? How can we explore the emergence of feminist ideas and the transnational networking of feminist movements while considering their differences, conflicts, and negotiation processes? How do we reflect on the complex and often changing role of media for feminists?

KASSANDRA HAMMEL (University of Freiburg)