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INTRODUCTION

Sexuality, gender, media. Identity articulations in the contemporary media landscape

Cosimo Marco Scarcelli ●[a], Tonny Krijnen[b] and Paul Nixon[c]

[a]Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology, University of Padova, Padova, Italy; [b]Department of Media & Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands; [c]The Hague University of Applied Sciences, Hague, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

From the Trump administration's attempts to narrow down the definition of gender to biologically determined sex at birth to the everyday life gendered performances in digital platforms, from increasing representations of LGBTQI+ in TV programmes to the popularity of PornHub, the relations between gender, sexuality and media are ubiquitous and deeply embedded in everyday life. This Special Issue of Information, Communication and Society draws together cutting-edge contributions on the themes of Gender and Sexuality and Media. Showcasing the work of experienced and internationally renowned scholars and some less experienced but no less relevant voices of emerging scholars. The research upon which the contributions are based analyse media both in terms of representation and agency exploring media texts and the practices of media production and consumption. The special issue provides an accessible and enjoyable, discussion of many of the major themes pertinent to differing uses of digital and other media related to the field of Gender and Sexuality. Investigating nuances of contemporary sex and gender scripts as they are played out in popular media and challenging the heteronormative and sexist performances often encountered. It offers insights upon both 'traditional' and digital media and in some cases illustrates how those two have morphed making it sometimes difficult to clearly define boundaries between the traditional and the digital.

Introduction

From the Trump administration's attempts to narrow down the definition of gender to biologically determined sex at birth to the everyday life gendered performances in digital platforms, from increasing representations of LGBTQI+ in TV programmes to the popularity of Pornhub, the relations between gender, sexuality and media are ubiquitous and deeply embedded in everyday life. Yet, this handful of examples illustrates and reifies the dynamic and discursive character of the concepts of both gender and sexuality. Media form the most important arena for shaping, articulating, representing and performing these definitions (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015; Ross, 2012). The current debate on

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gender and sexuality, and their intersection, has been built upon the struggles of many groups and individuals. The *#MeToo* movement and transgender activism are just recent examples of such groups, while first, second, and third wave feminists and organizations such as GLAAD have a longer presence as groups attempting to bring these issues into the mainstream media (and debates). Gender and sexuality, after all, have important influences on the ways in which we live our lives and view the lives of others. Once rigidly controlled by both church and state, gendered identities and sexual lives of individuals are much more open to discussion, interpretation and remediation via (new) technologies in today's society. Whilst we cannot conclude that traditional views have been totally expunged, there is no doubt that as individuals we are much more aware (and accepting) of the issues that gender and sexuality bring into our lives. Nevertheless, questions connected to sexual identity and gender are constantly under attack in both a political and cultural way and attempts to reify patriarchal scripts are aplenty. Gathering academic work in a special issue on gender and sexuality, with a specific focus on media, is a necessary step in understanding the current political climate where gender studies and all the connected fields are under attack. As Ross et al. (2020) postulates, feminist media studies continues to be a field that is criticized and often described as unnecessary or frivolous.

The battleground is composite and complex, crossed by different social actors that occupy the politic and mediatic scene. We can see crude and sad examples of today's battle ground exemplified in just three occurrences; the growth of the catholic anti-gender movement in Italy, who opposed the approval of the bill on civil unions for same-sex couples and the introduction of gender education programmes in schools (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019), Hungary's Prime minister – Viktor Orban –abolishing all higher education gender studies programmes in 2018 as, from his point of view, they propagated an ideology that was 'wrong', and Australian MP – Simon Birmingham blocking the Australian Research Council from granting research funding for all studies with a gender dimension. These three examples illustrate the fact that apparently, gender and sexuality issues are still a problem in some parts of contemporary societies that, despite some progressive changes, continue to look at these topics with a certain diffidence.

Similar to the dynamic character of our understandings of gender and sexuality, new media technologies add novel challenges and areas of interest to the study of media, gender, and sexuality. While in mass media's early days the blurring of the private and public sphere (boyd, 2008; Meyrowitz, 1985) and the platform offered to activist groups by mass media were media's most important contributions to the debate on gender and sexuality, newer media technologies also mean something in terms of blurring boundaries between producer and consumers which has particular impact on discourses on gender and sexuality (Krijnen, 2020). However, discursive articulations on gender and/or sexuality in newer media do not fully replace those in more traditional media. Rather, they should be seen as intertwined and complementary: media such as magazines, film and TV employ newer, digital media and are known to incorporate their audiences' viewpoints and ideas (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015). The discursive struggles on gender and sexualities are hence not easily located within either media organizations, media audiences, activist groups, and so on. Yet, the urgency to understand how media play a role in the of debates on gender and sexuality is clear. Researching gender and sexuality, with a focus on media, becomes, for these reasons, one of the main ways to understand our society with a focus on privileges, power, differences, scripts, stereotypes, etc.

The relationship between gender, sexuality and the media has been studied from different theoretical and research perspectives such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, feminist and cultural studies. Media studies, with a range of epistemological, ontological and methodological approaches contributed to the debate focusing on topics related to representation in news and popular culture (De Vuyst, 2020; Edström, 2018; Milestone & Meyer, 2012; Ross & Padovani, 2017) and the production and consumption of these products (Banks, 2009; Chronaki, 2013; Scarcelli 2015; Smith et al., 2015).

Despite ontological and epistemological differences between the various academic disciplines, Tuchman et al. (1978)'s seminal (edited) volume *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media.* often functions as a starting point (eg. Ross et al., 2020). This collection of essays still functions as a landmark volume for any studies on gender, media and communication, yet, technological developments and social changes greatly challenge the relations between media, gender and sexuality, once more underscoring the necessity for new studies.

Following the traditional three-partitions of production, representation, and consumption, each of which important to understand media and their importance as to how we understand gender and sexualities (Krijnen & Van Bauwel, 2015), we briefly retrace (theoretical) developments in research on sexuality, gender and media. Thus, we reprise salient works which represent the frame of this special issue and that encompass what Van Zoonen (1994) identified as the (classic) main topics in the studies of gender, sexuality and media: stereotypes and social rules, ideology and pornography. We would, however, like to emphasize that production, content and consumption should by no means be viewed as isolated concepts, rather, each them is 'intricately linked in the process of meaning making' (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 41).

Work on the relations between media productions and gender and sexuality is marked by both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Gaye Tuchman's coinage of *symbolic annihilation of women in media* forms the milestone for both approaches. Tuchman (1978) convincingly argues how media systematically under- and misrepresent women, an argument that is easily extended to the LGBTQI+ (and other) communities. Taking symbolic annihilation as a starting point, studies have concentrated on answering the 'why'-question: why are women and many other groups symbolically annihilated? Many studies show how women are under-represented in decision making positions (with a correlation between women in decision-making position and representation of women in news) (GMMP, 2015; Byerly & Ross, 2004), how vertical and horizontal gender segregation marks media production (Gill, 2014; Lauzen et al., 2006; Torkkola & Ruoho, 2011), and how the Glass Ceiling hinders those 'other-than-the white-heterosexual-male' to gain any significant position in the media industries. However, as Krijnen and Van Bauwel (2015) emphasize, the majority of studies focus on a singular media industry while today the industry is horizontally and vertically integrated.

Speaking about media production today, does not only imply discourses on media industries, but also production by consumers, or, what Bruns coined produsage (Bruns, 2006). In its early days, new technologies, and especially Web 2.0, were hailed for their democratic potential: anyone, including previously marginalized groups of people, could produce and publish media content. It was suggested that this 'new' content would be more representative and less in the service of the interest of media owners. Indeed, currently audiences cannot be situated solely at the receiving end of media. The

impact of social media's influencers, or the impact of social media campaigns such as #MeToo, illustrate that indeed the power configuration between producers and consumers is challenged to some extent. Nevertheless, we should be careful to not overestimate the power of the producer, as media companies incorporate audiences' ideas (Hermes, 2014), 'new' media reproduce more traditional configurations of representation (Caldeira, 2020), and not everyone has similar levels of access to media (Krijnen, 2020). This special issue aims to explore these challenges more in-depth.

Similar to media production studies, research in media content and the representation of gender and sexuality is marked by a quantitative and qualitative approach. On the one hand the quantitative approach, rooted in social psychology, focused on how many women and men were represented in the media and where. This perpetuated the image of the woman's place in the domestic sphere, adopting her role as mother or sister, taking care of her family and home. The man occupies the public sphere as breadwinner and is focused on politics and technology. A pattern that to a lesser extent also still persists today. On the other hand, we find qualitative approaches rooted in sociology and cultural studies. Often Erving Goffman's (1979) work on gendered advertising or Hall et al.'s (2013) writings on the discursive representations of femininity and masculinity are taken as a starting point. Works that allowed us to see how women and men were represented in the media and the more submissive position in which women were frequently represented.

Images replicate stereotypes and the differential power between gender and sexualities. As Goffman (1979), Hall et al. (2013) and De Lauretis (1984) showed, gender representation is important especially in terms of patterns. In other words, it is not the singular images, but the repetitive occurrence of representations in various media that articulate discourses on what gender and sexuality mean. Media are viewed as arenas for the discursive struggles on what it means to be, for example, female or male, gay or straight, old or young, coloured or white, or any intersection of these features we can imagine.

Before the 1980s, debates on sex and media included a specific focus on objectification. Initially, representations of sexuality and gender were divided into positive or negative images, a direct link between these images and behaviour was assumed. In latter decades, this idea has been challenged by a welter of studies on media, sexuality and gender (though this assumption has not disappeared from academia) (Carter, 2012; Kearney, 2012; Van Zoonen, 1994). Currently, media content is scrutinized with a particular focus on heteronormativity and fair representation (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Chambers, 2009). As Attwood (2006) and Paasonen et al. (2007) note, sex and sexuality has become more visible in Western society, particularly in the media and the relation between identities, media, and sexual practices is more complex than in the past (Attwood, 2018). However, in terms of representation we still remain in a context dictated by heteronormativity (Duggan, 2002): heterosexuality remains the standard framework to shape sexuality and gender in media content. Queer theory challenges these notions, with a retreat from binary thinking (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993; McIntosh, 1997), aiming for a theoretical interrogation and interpretation of gender and sexuality in media texts (Dhaenens et al., 2008; Gill, 2014). We attempt to showcase these more contemporary understandings of gender and sexuality and their relation to mediated content in this special issue.

The last element of the three partitions is the consumption of media. Studies on media consumption, gender and sexuality can easily be allocated to different academic fields that distinguish themselves from each other on both an ontological and epistemological level.

Some fields insist on a direct relation between media content or messages and audiences' thoughts and behaviours – effect theories (McQuail, 2005), cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), and Uses and Gratifications (Katz, 1959) as the most important among them. Inspired by Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model, other studies of media consumption are more focused on the relationship between social context and one's (gendered and sexual) identity, underlining the dialogic process of how identity and consumption of media texts mutually shape each other. Audiences are seen as active producers of meaning while they consume media products (Barker, 2012). It is this latter perspective that forms the base for our understanding of media, gender, and sexuality. This special issue is based on the idea of gender and sexuality as a social and cultural construction. Departing from an essentialist, dichotomous notion of sex and gender, we follow Butler's conceptualization of fluidity of sex and gender. We are not born as men or women and masculinity and femininity are not innate. Rather, our conceptions of gender and sexuality come into being in interaction with our environment (West & Zimmerman, 1987): we learn how to perform our sexualities and genders. The different elements in our environment, family, friends, education, institutions like the church, and but not least media, set boundaries to how we perform. From the moment we are born, our performances are constrained by the imposition of expectations about the gendered roles that we will play. Determining the attitudes, expressions and emotive responses expected of us in any given situation, as well as providing us with gendered roles in terms of the workplace/ home continuum which have little to do with ability and competence but relate to our role in society that is determined by our assigned biological sex. However, this binary approach is problematic in that it seeks to present a person as an either/or, when that person, indeed almost every person, is on closer inspection somewhat gender fluid. This view on gender, which Butler (1990) calls the heterosexual matrix, is challenged in contemporary research and contemporary debate seems to follow suit. Never before has the LGTBQI + community had so much representation in media (GLAAD, 2020), voices from audiences on the fair and inclusive representation of all are getting louder every day. The shifting and often competing nature of identities, beliefs, ideologies and discourses have an impact upon our sexual and gendered lives and thus as we evolve in other spheres of human activity so too do our responses to, and acceptance of, gender and sexuality. In this special issue we seek to investigate media consumption with this particular lens: how do sexual and gendered identities intersect? how do audiences make sense of mediated, more fluid, representations of sexuality and gender? and how does all this relate to sexual and gender identities?

The special issue

This Special Issue of Information, Communication and Society brings together cutting-edge contributions on the themes of Gender and Sexuality and Media. It showcases the work of experienced and internationally renowned scholars as well as some fresh young voices. Hence, we aim to provide a thorough, yet accessible and enjoyable, discussion of many of the major themes pertinent to the pursuance of life in the twenty-first century. This publication encompasses a wide range of differing uses of digital and other media related to the field of Gender and Sexuality. The special issue explores the nuances of contemporary sex and gender scripts as they are played out in popular media looking at both

the more traditional and normative interpretation of gender and sexuality as well as texts that challenge and therefore move beyond the heteronormative and sexist. The path that the special issue traces, offers a rich amount of insight touching upon both 'traditional' and digital media and in some cases show that those two have morphed to a stage where it is difficult to clearly define boundaries between the traditional and the digital.

With a multi-disciplinary approach, the Special Issue focuses on research that explores the core topic not only in media texts but also in the practices of media production and consumption. In other words, the articles analyse media both in terms of representation and agency. The different articles centre on current media culture and also explore the complexly transmedial, convergent, and participatory nature of media today. Our goal is to collect a range of complementary voices that explore the tropes, definitions, and understandings of gender, sex and sexuality as played out in popular and digital media. Thus, bringing themes together in an innovative way through research, undertaken by both new and more established scholars.

The idea of this special issue was born thanks the collaboration between ECREA Gender and Communication members, in particular Cosimo Marco Scarcelli – the current Chair of the section-, Tonny Krijnen – one of the founders of the section – and Paul Nixon. In the spirit of the Gender & Communication section contributions have been selected to reflect different cultural conditions and experiences, contrasting perspectives in terms of analytical orientation, and geographically dynamic subjects, which together produce a rich and diverse collection. Involving authors from all around the world the special issue wants to show the polyphony of voices on a topic reflecting their fundamental value in any contemporary analysis of society.

Outline of the articles

The works collected in this special issue give a wide – but, of course, not exhaustive – view on contemporary studies on the field of gender, sexuality and media. Below we give a brief outline of the individual contributions, which we hope to combine to give a fascinating snapshot of gender sexuality and media.

In 'Everybody needs to post a selfie every once in a while': Exploring the politics of Instagram curation in young women's self-representational practice by Sofia Caldeira, Sofie Van Bouwel, and Sander De Ridder the authors focus their attention on one of the most popular social media platforms and its major affordances, the creation and posting of pictures. Following a feminist media studies approach, grounded in the tradition of cultural studies, the paper provides an interesting exploration, based on a qualitative analysis, of how young women (18–35 years old) understand gendered self-representational practices using Instagram. The article analyses young people's negotiations and contradictory discourses that give shape to girls' understanding. The paper underlines the importance of the cure of online self-representation and the tension that surrounds this idea. In one hand it could be an empowerment practice, but, in the other hand, the paper recognizes the users' need to negotiate the culturally prevalent negative and gendered stereotypes about selfie-taking. In the end, the article shows brilliantly another tension, between desires to engage with popular Instagram aesthetics and the sense of authenticity.

The work of Iolanda Tortajada, Cilia Willem, Luca Platero Méndez and Núria Araüna, Lost in Transition? Digital trans activism on Youtube focuses on the construction of critical

transgender narratives on Youtube taking some Spanish trans youtubers as its case material. The authors examine a channel managed by a Spanish transgender advocate Elsa Ruiz Cómica that, intertwining her personal experiences with public debate, creates an alternative narrative, which contrasts with many other trans youtubers who focus almost exclusively on physical changes and *passing* as the ultimate trans achievement. This makes possible the emerge of a new political subject that comes from the margins, which challenges and repudiates the legal and biomedical framing of transgenderism as a disorder. According to the authors, this new political subject makes possible to move the issue of transition out of the biological and medical sphere and puts it at the centre of a broader cultural debate on gender identity, cisnormativity and equal rights.

In the contribution entitled '*I mean, in my opinion, I have it the worst, because I am white. I am male. I am heterosexual*': questioning the inclusivity of reconfigured hegemonic masculinities in a UK student online culture. Craig Haslop and Fiona O'Rourke start from Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity and responses to this work to show how gendered hierarchies and relations manifest, in and through forms of online harassment, between students at a university in the North West of England. Haslop and O'Rourke consider new, emerging forms of reconfigured hegemonic masculinity that lie between patriarchal hierarchies and more inclusive masculinities.

In the article *An innocent provocation or homoerotic challenge? Mediations of the 'Satisfaction' video parody in the Russian mediascape*, Galina Miazhevich brings the reader into the Russian mediascape where Putin's conservative nation-building agenda tends to mute voices from non-heteronormative sexualities and exclude them from the official discourse. Such voices of resistance try to infiltrate public space through convergent traditional and new media. Miazhevich, in this contribution, focuses on how network society intertwines with the establishment discourse, challenging or authenticating it. The article takes as case study a YouTube video produced by male cadets from the Ulyanovsk Institute of Civil Aviation. Analysing bot visual and textual data the author explores mediations of the video and the contestations of meanings related to it at three levels: from the grassroots, via semi- official sources, to the state media and back. The analysis highlights a dramatic change in the official coverage as well as a lack of hegemonic consensus regarding representations of non-heteronormative sexualities. The paper shows the complexity of the interaction of mass and popular culture, and the struggle for 'dominant meanings' represented by simultaneous covert and overt resistance, sub- version and hybridization at various levels.

Online dating and gender scripts is the core of the article *Negotiating gender scripts in mobile dating apps: between affordances, usage norms and practices* written by Francesca Comunello, Lorenza Parisi and Francesca Ieracitano. The authors, using a gender perspective and a socio-technical framework, explore the perception and negotiation of gender representations and scripts among Italian dating app users. Through the analysis of focus group discussions, the paper describes how dating app affordances intertwine with the performance and the negotiation of gender scripts. Comunello, Parisi and Ieracitano show how users disclose and, sometime, subvert and reframe dominant gender scripts. The article highlights that affordances and constraints of dating apps shape user practices and influence the performance and 'de-inscription' of gender scripts.

Alessandra Micalizzi, in the paper *Exploring gender and sexuality through a Twitter lens: The digital framing effect of the #fertilityday campaign by female users* explores the

relationships among gender, sexuality, and media, through the analysis of a specific case study based on an initiative launched by the Italian Ministry of Health to draw attention to the country's fertility and counteract the falling birth rates – Fertility Day. Micalizzi bases the work on the content analysis of public tweets connected to the hashtag #fertilityday showing the construction of a counter-narrative around the right and the choice to have a baby. The paper focuses on women's use of narrative to reframe institutional discourse to illuminate other discourses connected to the importance of welfare policies capable of supporting maternity and facilitating gender equality.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Cosimo Marco Scarcelli is chair of ECREA's Gender and Communication section. He is assistant professor of Sociology of Media and of New Media at the University of Padova. His research deals with: youth studies; sexuality, gender, and digital culture; internet studies; and digital literacy. He is particularly interested in qualitative and participatory research. He is associated editor for The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media and Communication (Wiley, 2020), principal editor for Gender and Sexuality in the European Media (Routledge, 2020; with Chronaki D., De Vuyst S. and Villanueva S.) and author of essays for international journals such as Porn Studies and Journal of Gender Studies. e-mail: cosimomarco.scarcelli@unipd.it

Tonny Krijnen is assistant professor of media studies at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her research interests focus on popular television, morality, gender, and qualitative methods. Her current research concentrates on Big Data and TV production, gendered morality and emotions, and transnationalization of the TV industry. She has published extensively on these topics, most notably a coauthored volume with SofieVan Bauwel, Gender andMedia: Representing, Producing, Consuming (Routledge, 2015). She is currently the chair of the Popular CultureWorking Group of the International Association of Media and Communication Research and a board member of the Erasmus Research Centre of Media, Communication and Culture. e-mail: krijnen@eshcc.eur.nl

Paul G. Nixon is a Principal Lecturer in Political Science and Strategic Partnerships Co-ordinator at The Hague University of Applied Sciences, The Netherlands. He is a Visiting Professor at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. His work is situated on the interface between technology and society. He has contributed chapters to many edited collections on the use of ICTs particularly in the fields of political parties, electronic democracy and social welfare. He has previously co-edited nine collections. The most recent of which are Sex in the Digital Age (with I.K.Dusterhoft, 2018) and Digital Media Use Across the Lifecourse (with Rajash Rawal and Andreas Funk 2016.) e-mail: p.g.nixon@hhs.nl

ORCID

Cosimo Marco Scarcelli 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0384-6250

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