
Dustin Harp is a leading feminist media scholar who has written extensively on women and politics. Following her co-edited volume (Harp, Loke and Backmann 2018), this latest book examines how opposing traditional and feminist notions of gender competed for dominance in the mediated sphere during the 2016 US presidential campaign. The volume discusses how the intertwining of gender and politics emerged during the campaign and how this was ‘contested and negotiated’ (4) during a historic gendered moment in US history. In doing so, this book offers answers to one broad and complex question: how were issues such as ‘gender, the cultural struggle to define and regulate the roles of women and men, and women’s relationship to power’ (4) talked about in mediated public discourse during the 2016 US presidential election?

The book is organised thematically around five ‘gender moments,’ or points in the campaign when gender became relevant in the political conversation, including constructions of masculinity; Trump’s common refrain that Clinton did not look presidential simply because she was not a man; the ‘nasty woman’ and ‘grab ‘em by the pussy’ comments by Donald Trump; and the ‘woman card’ played by and against Hillary Clinton. These five gender moments provide an interesting perspective from which to

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look at gender, power and ideologies that were brought into the spotlight during the 2016 campaign. Through the lens of these gender moments, the book convincingly illustrates how traditional and feminist ideas about gender ‘competed for space and struggled for discursive authority’ (i). The book achieves its aim by providing readers with an effective guide to come to terms with the complex interplay of gender and politics in the mediated public sphere. However, readers who are interested more broadly in gendered language may find the book’s organisation somewhat reductive. Boiling down the mediated public discourse during the 2016 presidential campaign to five gender moments might be problematic in terms of typicality and exhaustiveness of gendered language instantiated in the media texts. Issues of gender, after all, proliferated throughout the campaign (Denton 2017), and the author herself admits that ‘the analysis undertaken for this book is certainly not an exhaustive account of every gendered perspective and conversation that appeared in the mediated sphere’ (152).

Drawing on feminist media theory and discourse analysis, Harp takes a feminist, critical and cultural stance in the book. This mixed perspective enables her to explore how various gender ideologies within the mediated political sphere of the 2016 presidential campaign are related to ‘a cultural battle over appropriate gender roles and ideals or gender hegemony’ (9). Harp’s monograph succeeds in calling attention to mediated discourse as a representation of the discursive struggles about gender in contemporary North American society. She redefines ‘mediated public sphere’ as encompassing the expansive contemporary media environment and is composed of various ‘subaltern counterpublics’ (15). It is within this broad and omnipresent mediated sphere that feminist and patriarchal ideologies form a discourse about gender, politics and power. As a result, the book undoubtedly pushes the studies of feminist media theory further by convincingly demonstrating how feminism counters traditional patriarchal norms and opens a space for competing gender ideologies. It further illustrates how gender stereotypes, expectations and ideologies were activated in mediated discourse and thus has important value for understanding gender issues that emerged afterwards, such as the Women’s March and the #MeToo movement.

Taking insight from the notion that all texts are in conversation with all other texts already in existence (Barthes 1964), the book adopts a holistic research method with regards to datasets, which ambitiously considers all types of mediated discourse, from mainstream news to social media, alternative news forms, entertainment media, television programs and satire media outlets. Harp gathered media content that specifically addressed gender or gender issues, paying particular attention to ‘gender moments,’ or points when gender became a topic of discussion in the campaign.
When one of these points was identified, she combed through the media discourse to gather a vast amount of content so she could understand thematically how these moments were most often talked about. The media content was then analysed until a ‘saturation point’ – a point when no new themes and ideas could be found in the research – was reached.

This approach, as argued by the author, allowed her to ‘consider the broad discourse within media’ (16) and gain access to topics about gender roles, power and politics in US culture. However, since gender incorporates both cultural meanings and material relations, the study of gender requires an analysis of its structure through the use and operation of gendered rhetoric, symbols and images (Budgeon 2014). Therefore, a mixed-methods approach (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie and Turner 2007) or multimodal perspective might have complemented the qualitative study that dominates the book and generated more interesting and revealing information about gender and politics in the data.

Nevertheless, the book makes an interesting and valuable contribution to the study of gender and gendered language at a specific point in time and in a specific context. It offers important and timely insights into misogyny and gender hegemony in contemporary US culture as well as what the author calls ‘feminist resistance’ in a mediated public sphere. Although this book is aimed primarily at students and researchers of gender studies, its key arguments will resonate with all those who view discourse as ‘ways of establishing knowledge, ways of thinking, and means for producing power’ (15).

References


