

## The Lessons of History: *Women's Studies in Communication Approaches* 40

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When *Women's Studies in Communication (WSIC)* was founded in 1977, the enterprise must have felt risky and daring as well as timely. The second wave of U.S. feminism was still in full swing, and the ongoing campaign for ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was a central focus of movement advocates. Yet the challenges of that goal were starting to become clear as the early signs of a backlash that would facilitate the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 emerged during the National Women's Conference held that summer in Houston. The Houston conference prompted a simultaneous gathering of Phyllis Schlafly's STOP ERA forces across town, and their keynote speaker would call the National Women's Conference delegates "sick, anti-God, pro-lesbian, and anti-patriotic" (qtd. in Evans, 2003, p. 142).

Yet at the same time women's studies was thriving in the academy. Many women's studies programs had already been founded around the country, and many more would be created in the 1980s. When I began graduate work in communication in 1985, my master's institution, the University of Kansas, had had a women's studies program since 1972. In fact, it was one of the first dozen such programs in the country. The year that I arrived at KU, my advisor Karlyn Kohrs Campbell was serving as its director. When I moved to the University of Minnesota two years later, I joined an institution at which the women's studies program was only slightly newer, having been founded in 1973. At Minnesota, from the beginning, the program was actually labeled Feminist Studies, a moniker that reflected its explicitly political as well as intellectual roots.

Those programs were important to my intellectual development, and my decision to focus my graduate work on the study of feminism—both the first and second waves—was made in the context of two institutions and two departments that supported such study, although the field as a whole was still resistant in important ways, as I would soon discover. The existence of a journal such as *Women's Studies in Communication* was a crucial part of that context as well. It validated and facilitated the study of women, feminism, and gender in a moment when such scholarship struggled to find a hearing in "mainstream" communication journals. For example, the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, at the time of *WSIC*'s founding in 1977, had had only one female editor in its 60-plus year history (as of 2014 it has had five, so we are at a

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rate of about one woman every two decades). Yet by the time I finished graduate work in 1990, communication studies had “discovered” women’s, gender, and feminist studies to the extent that each of the three universities with which I interviewed for my first job was explicitly interested in hiring someone who could teach courses on women and gender. I think I may be among the first generation of women scholars for whom it was permissible (or perhaps advisable) to self-label as “feminist” scholars (see Dow & Wood, 2006).

Now I have been doing that for almost 25 years, and the academy has changed in fairly dramatic ways, along with my own sense of self as a feminist scholar. Too often, I feel like an elder stateswoman of feminist studies, tempted to tell “back in my day” stories about the struggle to insert women and gender into curricula, about the baffling reviews of my work that I had to deal with because (mostly but not always male) editors didn’t know any feminist scholars to send it to, and about the well-meaning inquiries from my male colleagues who would ask me what I was going to study once everything had been said about women’s rhetoric, which would surely happen soon.

To address some of the questions animating this forum: Do I think that we still need a journal like *WSIC*? Absolutely, and I say that not only as a self-interested former editor and author for the journal. Like the rhetorician that I am, I see this as a question of audience, among other things. That is, the readers, subscribers, and authors for *WSIC* are uniquely interested in questions about communication and women, feminism, and gender, and the journal provides a place for essays that might be judged as overly political, insufficiently theoretical, or simply not “broad” enough to find a home in a more generally focused outlet. So, yes, *WSIC* plays a unique role, in my mind, much as more recently founded NCA journals—like those focused on intercultural/international or critical/cultural scholarship—do.

The question of a name change hangs in the air here, and this is a good moment to reflect on it, as so many programs originally labeled “women’s studies” have become “gender studies” or “gender and sexuality studies,” including the one at my own institution. I am not so worried about replacing the term *women’s* with *gender*, or with *gender and sexuality*, as I am about losing the political edge that came with the founding of the field of women’s studies as well as the founding of *WSIC*. I don’t think that changing or not changing the name of a journal will make much difference in that regard; history—and the emphases of our scholarship—will march on regardless of the labels we apply. Yet as women’s studies has morphed into gender studies and seems at times to be morphing further into queer studies, I am concerned about the ways that scholarship under those labels sometimes takes up theoretical and textual questions of difference and identity in various forms without attending to the ways that those are always already questions about power; that is, about the politics of how we think about, enact, and engage with gender and its intersections with race, class, ethnicity, and sexual identities in (to paraphrase Nancy Fraser) the “actually existing” worlds in which we live (1990, p. 56).

In many ways, this tendency to focus on theoretical and textual politics is about the institutionalization of the study of gender and the scholarly cachet it has gained from its association with critical theory. Forty years ago, you could assume that the (mostly women) scholars who studied gender subscribed to feminist politics that provided motivation for the work they did; today that is not so much the case. The changes that feminism has wrought over the past 40 years in the academy and in our field have produced that effect, among others. Feminists made the world safe

for gender and sexuality and queer and trans studies, and that is all to the good. But we also—wittingly or not—made the world safe for work that, for instance, talks about the problems hegemonic masculinity creates for men without acknowledging that those problems make women's lives worse as well. Or queer studies that use queer men as their default subject and gloss over the specificities of queer women's experiences.

We've come a long way, to be sure. And *WSIC* has been central to that progress in communication studies. But history is not (or not always) an eternally forward and evolutionary narrative, as any amount of attention to the current political climate makes clear. The increasing sophistication of our theoretical understandings of gender and sexuality has complicated our conceptions of identity categories, but those categories still operate in quite unsophisticated, even violent, ways in our daily experiences. That is, the pursuit of gender theory and the pursuit of gender justice, while importantly related, are not always the same thing (Dow & Condit, 2005). Being a feminist (or a gender theorist) does not leverage any of us out of the problems of being a woman in a context in which threats to women's health and safety, reproductive freedom, security as workers and as mothers, and rights as citizens are under attack. Just as women's studies programs were founded not only for intellectual reasons but also for specifically political ones as well—to draw attention to the conditions of women's lives—so were *WSIC* and other journals like it. I am very grateful that feminist work has been mainstreamed in important ways, but I hope that, whatever we decide to call this journal, we retain the realization that there are real political stakes around womanhood, as much today as when *WSIC* was so courageously born.

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