Global Campus Europe

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF LEUVEN (KU LEUVEN)

European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation

A.Y. 2023/2024

FEMINIST MEDIA AND ADVANCING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION FOR WOMEN

The feminist movement's fight for free speech between representation and activism

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Word Count Declaration: 29532

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ABSTRACT

Freedom of expression is instrumental in women's struggle for equality, as opportunities to speak and be heard are at the heart of the feminist movement's discursive strategies for collective action. For the feminist movement, free speech is not only a means to further the feminist struggle, but a goal in itself. In the age of networked activism, media constitute a particularly prominent avenue for feminists' fight for emancipation and social transformation. The present research is interested in scrutinising the relationship between feminism and freedom of expression through an analysis of feminist media, focusing on the ways in which and the conditions under which feminist media are able to not only constitute in themselves but also actively build avenues for women's free expression. The research will justify the importance of freedom of expression for the feminist struggle through linking the concepts of free speech as self-expression and political expression to the feminist maxim "the personal is political". Then, it will execute an analysis of successes and shortcomings of feminist media in advancing freedom of expression for women and, more generally, the feminist struggle. Then, adopting a reworked version of Atton's (2002) typology of alternative media, it will operate a media analysis on two Italian feminist media, namely *Femminismo a Sud* and *Freeda Media Italy*, which will provide an empirical feedback for the previous theoretical analysis. Such investigations aim to provide insights into the workings of feminist media and their potential for the advancement of women's rights, as well as guidelines for their evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Where freedom of expression meets feminism

Freedom of expression is "central to dialogue, democracy and development worldwide" (Coudray 2015, 208). It is a prerequisite in the fulfilment of a varied range of societal objectives; inter alia, Coudray (2015, 208) includes gender equality and the empowerment of women. Indeed, the right to freedom of expression and information is a valuable weapon for women in their fight against patriarchal oppression and inequality. Free speech has historically allowed women to come together, build a feminist consciousness and discourse, and mobilise contentious political action for emancipation (Article 19 2020, 6). Thus, freedom of expression has constituted a gateway for women's struggle for equality and access to other rights, like the right to vote or the right to be equal to men in front of the law.

Women's formal access to and substantive possibilities to exercise free speech, however, cannot be uncritically asserted. Just like for any civil and political right, women have had to fight for free speech under many forms. The very fight for women's suffrage was a form of fight for free speech in the form of freedom of political expression. Since the birth of democracy and the crystallisation of the division between public and private sphere (for the most important contemporary conceptualisation of this division, see Habermas 1962), a gender-based social division of roles dictated women's place (Rosicki 2012). The public, political sphere was men's domain, whereas women were relegated to the private, domestic sphere (Lewis 2019; Kuersten 2003, xix; Kuersten 2003, 16). The private sphere became "the locus of women's subordination" (Schneider 1986, 626). Women were precluded from the possibility to publicly express their opinion (Elshtain 1982, 606-607). Women's knowledge, perspectives and experiences were dismissed as unimportant, if not outright silenced.

The ability to speak, be heard and be taken seriously is central to the feminist struggle for autonomy, for more rights, for a different positioning in society (Christman 1995, 18). Schneider (1986, 603) articulates this concisely: "Power gives people a voice and lack of power silences them". Women's silencing ultimately answers to a logic of patriarchal power, the same logic that underpins women's subordination (Schneider 1986, 603). It follows that speech becomes an integral part, if not the pivotal vehicle, of an emancipatory effort (Elshtain 1982, 605), an effort to seize the power they have been denied for centuries. If the feminist

struggle is a struggle against patriarchal power, and power is deeply intertwined with language and with the ability to speak freely, then disrupting the current patriarchal structures of power will also mean disrupting the very structures that allow, channel and regulate free expression. The way women have historically disrupted these structures was to forcefully carve their place into them, build a feminist consciousness, share their opinions and relay accounts of their experiences. The reclaiming of free speech thus becomes not only an object of contention for the feminist movement, but also part of the movement's repertoire of contention (Della Porta 2013). This means that free speech is not only a part of the larger objective of women's emancipation that the movement strives to achieve, but also a strategy through which the movement pursues its objective.

In light of these considerations, the importance of women's access to communication tools and channels cannot be underestimated (Freeman and Jones 1976, 5, cited in Crafton Smith 1989, 184). Indeed, one of the most important avenues of realisation of the right to freedom of expression is that of mass media. Measuring to what extent women enjoy free expression cannot prescind from an analysis of women's possibilities for free speech in the media. In the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action - considered as a "blueprint (...) for advancing women's rights" (UN Women 2015) - media are mentioned as central for the achievement of gender equality (United Nations Specialised Conferences 1995, 149). Gender equality and freedom of expression stand in a symbiotic relationship with each other: just as expanding women's freedom of expression is a fundamental step towards gender equality, the pursuit of gender equality itself is a means for expanding freedom of expression (Edström and Svensson 2023, 196).

Women have been denied their freedom of expression for a long time. Today, the right to free speech for women is universally acknowledged, but there are grounds to argue that such acknowledgment is merely formal, and that the right to free speech for women in practice is far from a reality (Franks 2022). It is important to recognise the shortcomings in equal access to free speech, as failure to do so risks making access to free speech more and more exclusive, as well as giving those with free speech unwarranted power over those who cannot fully enjoy it (Mannat 2018, 87). To this "free speech gender gap" (Franks 2022) corresponds a gender divide in access to media, compounded today by a gender digital divide (Article 19 2020, 16). The presence of women in the media is still patchy, and further harmed by an array of challenges: women are the subject of hate speech, harassment and silencing practices

which have a chilling effect on their media presence; harmful gender stereotyping is still detrimental to women's representation in the media; the amplification and dissemination of women-owned and women-produced media leaves much to be desired (Edström and Svensson 2023, 195-196).

This gender divide in media requires solutions that cannot be limited to fostering a bigger presence of women in quantitative terms. Indeed, even if more women have access to media in terms of production, representation or participation, it does not mean that the outreach of women's media production, the quality of their representation or the safety and influence of their participation will automatically improve (Rakow 1989, 304). Problematising freedom of expression for women, meant as a combination of non-censorship and diversity of voices (Kenyon et al. 2017; Lichtenberg 1990), means problematising women's access to, presence in and substantive possibilities of fruition of media, both as consumers and as producers of content. If the gender divide in media shall be addressed, it will require fostering the representation and the participation - as producers and consumers - of a diversity of women's voices (Gibbons 2012, 19; Edström and Svensson 2023, 199). The message Rakow (2001, 44) directs to women is that they must insist with "our argument that our speech must be freed, freed for each of us to represent ourselves".

A fundamental channel through which women have and continue to represent themselves, foster the diversification of voices, share experiences, opinion and information and pursue feminist collective action is feminist media. Today, feminist media is more than ever intertwined with feminist activism, to the point of almost wholly encompassing contemporary strategies of feminist collective action. The very existence and not only structural but also ideological integrity of feminist media hinges on women's freedom of expression, which plays arguably the most important role in the advancement of women's rights. Free speech proves once again to be the gateway to the fruition of many other rights. However, the relationship between freedom of expression and feminist media is biunivocal, as it can be argued that feminist media are themselves instrumental for advancing women's freedom of expression. The research avenue of this symbiotic relationship between feminist media and freedom of expression remains fairly unexplored and could benefit from more attention.

The present study intends to venture into the field of feminist media and freedom of expression in order to understand how this relationship takes shape, and specifically in what

ways and under what conditions feminist media are able to not only constitute in themselves but also actively build avenues and opportunities for women's freedom of expression. I strive to investigate the defining features of feminist media as well as the practices that feminist media allow women and feminists to carry out, in order to identify the improvements that they make possible but also the shortcomings that they suffer. I ultimately intend to single out the features of feminist media that work in favour of freedom of expression and those that work against it, which can prove helpful to understand how to use feminist media to their full potential.

1.2. Research question

This academic work will strive to answer questions lying at the intersection between feminism and feminist movements on one hand, and freedom of expression on the other hand. Firstly, it will answer the following preliminary question: what is the relationship between freedom of expression and the feminist struggle? More specifically, what is its nature, and how does it translate into practice? The answer to this question will pave the way for the main research question, which relates to the relationship between feminist media and freedom of expression. Do feminist media - meant as structures, content and most importantly practices - advance freedom of expression for women? In what ways, and under what conditions do they succeed in doing so? In what ways and under what conditions do they instead fall short? Answering this question will involve investigating the features of feminist media and of feminist representational and activist practices, focusing specifically on differences between mainstream and alternative media, in order to identify which features and practices are positive for the advancement of freedom of expression for women and which instead risk constituting a hindrance to it.

1.3. Thesis structure

This research is going to be structured in three chapters. Whereas the first two chapters are going to have a mainly theoretical focus, the third chapter is going to present a practical application of the theory, which will help develop some of its elements. In the first chapter the author is going to justify and elaborate on the theoretical framework by detailing a feminist interpretation of free speech theory: the author is going to apply a feminist reading to two of the three main justifications for free speech, namely free speech as self-expression and

as political expression, and argue how, through the ever-topical feminist postulate of "the personal is political", the relationship between feminism and freedom of expression takes on a new, enhanced meaning. The author is then going to explain the link between self-expression and political expression on one hand, and women's representation and feminist activism on the other hand. In the second chapter, the author is going to introduce the concept of feminist media as a tool for the advancement of women's rights and then analysing on the one hand how feminist media advance freedom of expression for women in terms of both representation and activism, and on the other hand how they might instead constitute a hindrance on freedom of expression for women in those same terms. In the third chapter, the author is going to execute a comparative media analysis of two Italian feminist media, i.e. the blog *Femminismo a Sud* and the page *Freeda Media Italy*, borrowing analytical categories from Atton's (2002) typology of alternative and radical media; the author is then going to discuss the case studies in light of the findings of the previous chapter. Finally, the author is going to discuss the mainstream/alternative dichotomy by introducing a problematisation of said dichotomy and proposing the application of different frameworks of evaluation of feminist media, such as the integration of Sandoval and Fuchs' (2010) critical theory of alternative media to the appraisal of feminist media and the conceptualisation of mainstream and alternative feminist media practices.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

The answer to the preliminary question on the relationship between feminism and freedom of expression will draw from two of the most prominent theories of free speech: the autonomy theory of free speech, which identifies free speech with self-expression, and the democratic theory of free speech, which identifies free speech with political expression. These two theories will be linked, respectively, with the topics of women's representation and of feminist activism. From this parallelism, the reasoning will follow that advancing possibilities for women's agency in their own representation as well as greater opportunities for feminist activism equals advancing women's avenues for free speech. The reasoning will be corroborated by the connection to the feminist axiom that "the personal is political". The above argument will provide the justification for the theoretical framework which will be employed to answer the main research question - a theoretical framework which employs representation and activism as main analytical categories.

The answer to the main research question will be structured in two parts. In the first part, the role that feminist media have in women's struggle for greater freedom of expression will be scrutinised through an analysis of the features of feminist media that have a positive impact versus those that have a negative impact on women's freedom of expression. This part of the study will operate a literature review on a number of selected sources relating to one or more of the following topics: the feminist movement, freedom of expression, feminist media, women's representation and feminist activism. The research process will involve a thorough scouring of resources of varied nature, including books, journal articles, opinion pieces in selected newspapers, reports from institutions or from independent think tanks.

The criterion directing this research will be the objective of pinpointing cause-effect patterns that link features of feminist media and practices to avenues of advancement or retrogression of freedom of expression for women in terms of women's representation and of feminist activism. The categories of representation and activism will be instrumental in the analysis of successes and shortcomings of feminist media.

In the second part, a comparison will be made between two Italian feminist media, namely the blog *Femminismo a Sud* and the page *Freeda Media Italy*. The present work will operate a media analysis of the two case studies, which will base its analytical framework on Atton's (2002) typology of alternative and radical media. Specifically, it will borrow the typology's analytical categories, but adapt them so as to make them applicable not only to alternative media, but to any kind of media, so as to make the two case studies comparable. The two pieces of media will be analysed through the following categories, as borrowed and re-adapted from Atton's typology: distributive use; form; content; social relations, roles and responsibilities; communication processes (Atton 2002, 27). As one can note through a comparison between these categories and Atton's original typology, two main changes have been made. The first change concerns the omission of the category of reprographic innovations and adaptations. As reprographic processes refer to the process of reprinting and reproducing printed material, the category has not been deemed relevant to the analysis of two pieces of digital media. The second change concerns a difference in wording: the adjective "transformed" has been expunged from the original categories "transformed social relations, roles and responsibilities" and "transformed communication processes". This methodological choice is to be explained with the intention to extend this typology, which is meant for alternative media, to media pieces whose mainstream or alternative character is not

a priori determined or presumed, but rather it is problematised. The elimination of the adjective provides for a neutral basis for the analysis that will follow.

A methodological caveat is necessary before this research is presented. Due to the limits of the available information, as well as to the academic perspectives and empirical case studies examined, the present research will mainly refer to perspectives on Western feminist movements. For the sake of brevity and clarity, the research will often refer to a single "feminist movement". This is not intended to imply that one should be inclined to make generalisations about the global feminist movement. It would be an oversimplification to make generalisations on different strands of the feminist movement based on Western experiences and perspectives (Ferree and McClurg Mueller 2004, 576). When this research refers to the "feminist movement", one should interpret it to refer to feminist movement formations operating in the European or occasionally Northern-American context. The exploration of non-Western feminist perspectives and movement formations, while of the utmost importance, remains unfortunately beyond the scope of this work.

3. THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL: TRANSLATING FREE SPEECH THEORY INTO FEMINIST THEORY

3.1. The personal is political: overturning the public/private dichotomy

"It is at this point a political action to tell it like it is, to say what I really believe about my life instead of what I've always been told to say". Thus speaks Carol Hanisch (1969), in an essay whose title was to constitute the most consequential and solid mantra not only of the second wave of feminism, but also of the entire future of the feminist movement, and whose theoretical core delineates a feminist theme that remains ever topical: the separation of public and private sphere and the way that women's subordination is perpetuated through this separation. A disclaimer must be made that, while some of its features can be encountered at the global level, this separation between public and private sphere - and the consequent gendered division of labour and social roles - developed as a result of phenomena that took place specifically in Western contexts (Bailey 2002, 18). As a result, the mantra "the personal is political", though universally applicable to a certain extent, does as well retain a markedly Western connotation.

Women's subordination was crystallised in gendered structures of society (Fiorentine 1993) and in a gender-based division of roles and of labour (Rosicki 2012). Historically, the gendered division of labour emerged, more starkly than in other historical periods, in the wake of the industrialisation in Europe and North America between the mid-18th century and the early 19th century, when the individual substituted the family as economic unit and the reorganisation of economic production meant that work moved outside of the home setting (López-Garza 2002, 176). Society's gender stratification prescribed that the public sphere would be men's domain, whereas women would be relegated to the private sphere (Lewis 2019; Kuersten 2003, xix; Kuersten 2003, 16). Men took up professions and concerned themselves with political matters, while women were in charge of the domestic realm and took care of the family. In such manner, men and women fulfilled separate and complementary roles: men took on the economic burden while women took on the emotional work (Fiorentine 1993, 342-343).

Because women's entire *raison d'être* was to be found in roles belonging to the private sphere, there was a disassociation between interests of the public sphere and any issue that specifically pertained to women. The private sphere became "the locus of women's subordination" (Schneider 1986, 626). Despite being embedded in the structural foundations of society, gender stratification was not a matter of public concern because, in a contextual sense, it did not happen in public. Not only did women's subordination concretely materialise in the private sphere, but it was, to all intents and purposes, privatised as an issue. The domestic sphere, the realm of the family and the sphere of sexuality, which are the social environments that reproduce women's subordination, were both regarded as private (Schneider 1986, 638). In light of the fact that matters relating to women's lives were considered private, they didn't enter into public discourse and thus never became a political issue (Lauretis 1990, 115).

The legal order contributed to women's vulnerability. Women-related issues were not a political matter, but they were not under any legal authority's jurisdiction, either. Taub and Schneider (1982, 122) note that "the law has been in large part absent from the private sphere and that absence has contributed to male dominance and female subservience". Women were not afforded legal protection, but the problem lay at the root: women were not afforded access to the same set of rights as men, or more precisely they were not afforded access to

rights that did not depend on their affiliation to a man, be it their father, husband or male relative of other kind (Weitz 2016, 249).

The very concept of women's rights, in fact, was oxymoronic - at least when it came to political rights. Indeed, political rights are public by nature, and women had no place in the public sphere, therefore talking about women's political rights would be a contradiction in terms. However, women's rights claims were also limited in the realm of civil rights: upon marriage, women experienced a sort of "civil death", whereby they could not access many basic civil rights such as the right to own property or the right to keep or manage wages that they earned (Weitz 2016, 249). Before the first developments of human rights doctrine theorised that human beings possess rights by the sole virtue of being human, the attribution and protection of rights was predominantly based on national citizenship (Gómez Isa 2009, 22). Women have been long excluded from political citizenship, and as a result they have been long excluded from the possibility to claim the same rights as men (Lister 2000, 99). In other words, for a long time women have not been full citizens.

Emblematic of this subordination is the way domestic violence was regarded and handled. Domestic violence against women was also privatised. Domestic violence was, indeed, domestic: it happened behind closed doors and, as such, away from the scrutiny of public opinion. By virtue of its private nature, it was not considered to deserve recognition as a matter of public interest, so much so that women who were victims of domestic violence were granted no legal relief (Schneider 1986). Women were even discouraged from opening up about it and from denouncing it, because it was a private matter and airing "dirty laundry" in public was frowned upon (Thorne-Finch 1992, 4), but also because it was normalised as an integral part of daily domestic life, an established component of the hierarchical relationship between man and woman and especially between husband and wife (Fox 2002). The privatisation of domestic violence rendered it socially invisible and impeded the recognition of how it was not merely a private, contingent fact, but a structural problem of society (Galtung 1969, 171; Sinha et al., 2017).

By not being subjected under any political scrutiny or legal jurisdiction (Schneider 1986), and by generally not being questioned or even discussed at all (Eisenstein 1986, 26), women's subordination was perpetuated and systematised. Women's absence from the public sphere prevented them from denouncing the problems and injustices they faced. In fact, women were

precluded from the possibility to publicly express their opinion (Elshtain 1982, 606-607). Women's knowledge, perspectives and experiences were dismissed as unimportant, irrelevant, when they were not outright silenced.

The pervasiveness of patriarchal oppression made women complicit in their own subordination (Garcia 2021, 111). Women were complicit because they were unable to speak up and question the patriarchal order. This happened not only because they didn't have the political opportunity to do so, but also because they often didn't have consciousness of their own oppression. Women's endeavours and experiences were not considered worthy of being recorded in historical accounts, nor were their opinions and intellectual works considered worthy of being disseminated (Kiernan 2016). This constitutes part of the reason why feminist consciousness throughout history is difficult to trace, but could also be used as an argument to infer that a feminist consciousness among women was, at least before the emergence of the feminist movement, indeed quite scarce, precisely because it had little means of forming and of spreading, except among restricted circles of middle-class educated women (Kiernan 2016).

Women's complicitness in their own oppression, then, is a direct result of women's internalisation of their own oppression. Garcia (2021) explains that "submission is the result of women's alienation, which occurs through their objectification, especially their sexual objectification" (Garcia 2021, 111), and further relates this form of alienation to women's "transformation into an Other" with regards to men. Women's otherness with respect to men leads to the exclusion of reciprocity and of equality, and thus to men's failure to recognise women as on the same level as men and to women's failure to demand such recognition (Garcia 2021, 121). As a result, the horizon of equal rights for women is not simply unreachable, it is unreached for and inconceivable. Women, not only throughout history but even in the contemporary world, are often found to reinforce sexist attitudes and patriarchal norms. This happens by cause of natural psychological responses to systematised oppression, which lead the oppressed to develop "adaptive preferences" for situations of oppression, because they are what the oppressed has been systematically imposed and thus what the oppressed has come to know as natural or familiar (Knowles 2021, 1318). Women internalise their own oppression and reinforce it because oppression has become an integral part of societal structure and has, in a way, been removed from the realm of free choice.

The perpetuation of male dominance has “mystified patriarchy by making it historic, eternal, invisible, and unchanging” (Lerner 1986, 37). Part of the power of patriarchy originates from this ability to mystify itself, to make itself invisible in the structure of society, to conceal its nature of a politically determined fact. As Eisenstein (1986, 26) articulates, “rather than depend on a biogenetic inevitability, the state institutionalises patriarchy by establishing the public and private domains of sexual hierarchy between men and women as an ideology at the same time that the ideology erases the existence of patriarchy”. In other words, the perpetuation of the separation of public and private sphere mystifies patriarchy into a natural social occurrence, thus effectively dissimulating the fact that patriarchy itself is not ontologically prior to the state and society, but rather it is constructed by the state and politically and economically institutionalised. The separation of public and private sphere, mystified as natural, is removed from the domain of rational questioning.

The impossibility of questioning the separation of the public and private sphere equals the impossibility to question patriarchy itself. On these grounds, it can be understood why the mantra “the personal is political” is so powerful and momentous: because it steers women - and not only women - to challenge the separation of public and private sphere. Questioning this separation is a gateway to questioning patriarchy itself, and to exposing its mystification, to exposing it as a structure of power which is not natural but constructed, and as such can be dismantled. Questioning the patriarchy, then, leads to mobilise in order to dismantle it and build from its ashes a new, alternative system that entrenches women’s emancipation.

When feminists of the first wave started to mobilise for the right to vote, they still moved within the confines of the system that kept them oppressed, merely trying to carve out a space for themselves in that system (Elshtain 1974, 453, 468-469, cited in Rifkin 1980, 85; Reis, n.d.; Sabbarwal 2000, 269). It is from the second wave onwards that the feminist movement starts to develop its narrative and mobilisational strategies from the theoretical basis that there is no true feminist emancipation without the demolition of the patriarchal system of power relations (Thornham 2001). The “the personal is political” catchphrase has been instrumental in that. The feminist movement’s insistence that “the personal is political” intends to elucidate the dynamics that patriarchy renders invisible, that is, “that structures of power circumscribe individual actions and experiences” and “that seemingly private concerns and situations are symptomatic of systemic injustices” (Clark-Parsons 2022, 42; see also: Butler, 1988; Hanisch, 1969)”. By revealing the power relations that family matters are

infused with, feminist activists transform what used to be thought of as individual issues into political, and thus public, issues (David 2003, 28). They brandish issues related to family, marriage, sexuality and reproduction, they politicise them and they bring them under public scrutiny (Prokhovnik 1998, 86).

What women and the society as a whole were used to regard as merely private matters are permeated by a logic of power (Enloe 1990, 195). The distinction between public and private loses its meaning because it cannot rely anymore on the exclusion of politics from the domestic sphere. Indeed, if the private sphere is, too, infused with power, and if any matter subject to an underlying power logic is inherently political, then the domestic sphere is political as well and as such must be a public matter, and must be subjected to principles that govern and limit said power. Demands of feminist activists, indeed, involve subjecting women's issues to the same political mechanism of checks and balances and rule of law (Prokhovnik 199, 86). One must remember that the second wave of feminist activism is still predominantly Western, which means that second wave feminists operate in Western contexts which are typically liberal democracies; hence, the reference to liberal political principles in their claims.

Feminist activists do not limit themselves to denouncing the power politics that are present in women's issues and in the domestic sphere - they denounce the peculiarities of the specific form of power that traps women in their subordination: it is a form of "gendered power", derived from the gender stratification but also dependent from it (Lee and Pratto 2018). Feminists claim not only to erase the separation of public and private sphere, but also to rectify and provide an alternative for it. This alternative must be able to address the problematic elements of the public/private dichotomy, which are twofold: not only does this dichotomy imply that "the private realm is exempt from liberal principles and political accountability" - as explained through the concept of gendered power - but it also causes work carried out in the private sphere to not be considered as work, and therefore to be devalued (Prokhovnik 1998, 87). The gendered division of labour correlates the distinction between public and private with the distinction between men's paid work and women's unpaid housework (López-Garza 2002, 176; Sacks 1975). Feminists, then, assert the production of value of their own domestic work and demand not only political but also economic recognition of said value. Through pushing for a place in the public sphere, a reform of the private sphere, and recognition of women's contributions (Griffin 2006, 74),

feminists aspire to subvert patriarchal gendered power through the subversion of the public/private dichotomy.

Power basis theory applied to gendered power enlightens on the different affordances of women with regards to power: whereas women may be likely to reach equality to men with regards to certain kinds of power, for instance power based on knowledge, they encounter many more hardship in trying to gain equality with regards to other kinds of power, for instance power based on force (Lee and Pratto 2018, 152). Relying on the power granted by knowledge, in fact, is how feminists undertake their contestation of the public/private dichotomy and their pursuit to dismantle patriarchal structures of power. The development of women's autonomous organisations and the efforts spent in consciousness-raising practices have been a way to on the one hand legitimise the need to integrate women into the public sphere and make up for the absence of women in said sphere, and on the other hand uncover the actual happenings of the private sphere and how the relegation of women to it perpetuates their structural subordination in society (Desai 2006, 458).

The consciousness-raising activist practices of feminists and the efforts of feminist theorisation have strived to unearth the underlying patriarchal power dynamics behind social and economic structures, and to make as many women as possible privy to these mechanisms. Feminist consciousness-raising has been a major source of feminist theorisation as well as mobilisation strategy for the feminist movement (MacKinnon 1982, 519). Its power lies in knowledge that derives from self-reflection and grows through dissemination. Consciousness-raising is a process of self-reflection through which women's personal experiences are rendered political (Law 1986, 1784) and transformed into feminist narratives, which then fuel mobilisation efforts. The process of learning follows the same direction, in that it "starts with the individual and personal (the private), moves to the general and social (the public), and then reflects back on itself with heightened consciousness through this shared group process" (Schneider 1986, 602). Women on the delivering end of consciousness-raising efforts strengthen their narrative in a dialectic fashion through the accounts of other women and through a shared process of signification and construction of feminist narratives. Women on the receiving end of consciousness-raising efforts learn to recognise in their own experiences the systemic character of their oppression, its features and the ways it is perpetrated.

“The personal is political” has exactly this purpose: it builds awareness in women of the fact that their experiences are not only their own, they are shared by many other women, and they are political in that they result from certain power dynamics. The importance of the personal as a pathway to the political is corroborated by the peculiarities of women’s experience of knowledge production and acquisition, which, contrary to that of men, is marked by subjectivity (Traversa 2016, 25). Relating the personal to the political is a starting point for women to build their feminist consciousness. Moreover, along with the practice of consciousness-raising, it has proved to be a discursive and strategic strong point of the feminist movement even within the third and fourth wave see Clark-Parsons 2022).

The fact that consciousness-raising and feminist theorisation are at the basis of the development of a feminist consciousness underscores the relationship between feminism and freedom of expression. The feminist goal of demystifying patriarchy is rendered possible by virtue of the ability and willingness of women to speak about their own experiences and reflections, and to be heard by other women. Free expression is what bridges the gap between self-reflection for its own sake on the one hand, and consciousness-raising and feminist theorisation on the other hand. Women reclaim the power and the strength of their own voice and seek to redeem it from the trivialisation that it was subjected to in its entrapment in the private sphere (Schneider 1986, 602). Freedom of expression is a bridge between the private and the public, which makes it a pivotal means for emancipation. It allows women to transform a private experience of discrimination into a public rights assertion (Schneider 1986, 626), and the feminist movement to overturn their own oppression by turning it into an experience of community-building, meaning production and activist mobilisation. It can be argued that it is on freedom of expression that feminists primarily draw in the pursuit of their objectives.

3.2. (Expressing) the personal is (expressing) the political: a feminist critique of free speech theory

The role of freedom of expression as a bridge between the personal and the political is the core of this research’s argument for a feminist critique of free speech. Feminist critiques of free speech theory most often address the three main theories of free speech, that is, the truth theory, the democracy theory and the autonomy theory (for the most notable feminist critiques of free speech theory, see Williams, particularly: for a feminist critique to the truth

theory of free speech, see Williams 2009; for a feminist critique to the democracy theory of free speech, see Williams 2011; for a feminist critique to the autonomy theory of free speech, see Williams 2004). The present work aims to provide a critique of free speech theory that brings together discussions on free speech as justified by democracy and on free speech as justified by autonomy.

The democracy theory postulates a connection between democracy and free speech in the terms of freedom of political expression: free speech is a core component of democracy because it is necessary for popular sovereignty, in that it lays the foundations for public opinion (Bhagwat and Weinstein 2021, 84-85). Free political expression carries out an informing function, whereby it ensures that the electorate is well informed enough to make decisions and express their opinions (Bhagwat and Weinstein 2021, 90-91) and a legitimating function, whereby institutions are seen a legitimate because they are freely chosen by and subjected to the scrutiny of public opinion (Bhagwat and Weinstein 2021, 93-94). The autonomy theory conceptualises a functional role for freedom of expression in the realisation of different aspects of individual autonomy (Mackenzie and Meyerson 2021). Among said aspects, self-expression is worth mentioning: freedom of expression allows the individual to engage in self-expression as a form of self-definition and of self-fulfilment (Baker 1989, 52).

This work has previously highlighted the ways women and feminist activists can harness freedom of expression in order to bridge the gap between public and private sphere and between personal experiences and political claims. Drawing from this assertion, one can infer that freedom of expression attains a double meaning and thus a double value in feminist efforts of consciousness-raising, community-building and contentious mobilisation. Indeed, these efforts become realisable when women are free to express themselves, to speak their minds and share their experiences, and when women seize their voice to express their political stances and their feminist beliefs. However, they find their utmost strength by virtue of the convergence between the two kinds of expression. In order to understand how this happens, it is pertinent to elaborate on the specific features of self-expression and political expression that come into play.

Consciousness-raising and feminist theorisation start from self-reflection. Women's possibility to express themselves and to be heard, to talk about their experiences with other women and to discuss with them is what allows self-reflection to bear its fruits. If

self-reflection remained confined as a single woman's reflective experience, it would have no way of serving as the foundation of a feminist consciousness or narrative nor would it be capable of growing and developing into more complex knowledge and awareness of the patriarchal systemic oppression. The practices of women and feminists in this regard can be ascribed to two different conceptions of free speech as related to autonomy and self-expression: one concerns self-expression as self-fulfilment and self-realisation (Mackenzie and Meyerson 2021, 68-69), while the other concerns a relational conception of autonomy that is involved in identity formation and in knowledge production and acquisition (Mackenzie and Meyerson 2021, 74-76).

Baker (1989, 47) develops a conception of free speech - in the form of "non-violent", "non-coercive", self-expressive speech - as valuable in itself for the individual because it allows the individual to pursue "self-fulfilment" and "self-realisation". In his concurring opinion in the Procunier v. Martinez case (1974), jurist Marshall defines free speech as a "need (...) of the human spirit - a spirit that demands self-expression", and asserts that "to suppress expression is to reject the basic human desire for recognition" (Procunier v. Martinez, 416 U.S. 396, Marshall T. concurring opinion 1974). Before any other purpose, women's need to express themselves and to be heard serves the purpose of finally having their voice heard in a world that systematically silences it and trivialises it. Their need for self-expression is a need for recognition of their voice and their experience of oppression and struggle. Borrowing Baker's words, women claim and harness their freedom to make "self-expressive" and "value-expressive" choices (Baker 2011, 254), which corresponds to formal autonomy or liberty (Baker 2011, 252); feminists employ this self-expressive liberty to advance their substantive autonomy, which is understood as the "actual capacity and opportunities to lead the best, most meaningful, self-directed life possible" (Baker 2009, 143). Thus, for women and feminists, self-expression is both a tool and an end goal. The feminist movement relates to freedom of expression as self-expression in a dynamic fashion: feminists use the avenues for freedom of expression that they have conquered in order to advance the conquest itself of more freedom of expression.

The relational conception of autonomy derives from feminist theorists' critique of free speech as autonomy. They argue that autonomy should be reconceptualised as relational because the process of formation of the capacities needed for autonomy as well as of individuals' identity and values is socially constructed, in that it is shaped by the individual's social relationships

and by the social environment in which the individual lives . Williams (2004) builds from this relational autonomy theory to develop her narrative theory of autonomy. Williams conceptualises autonomy as an activity based on "interpretation, narration, self-construction, and meaning-making" (Mackenzie and Meyerson 2021, 75). This activity of self-reflection and narration is inherently relational and dialogical (Mackenzie and Meyerson 2021, 75), because the narrative construction of oneself happens through sharing of one's narratives with others. This activity is at the core of the process of identity formation. Williams (2004, 158) asserts that "our identity - formed through the process of narrative autonomy - is deeply implicated in our knowledge of the world". Thus, it is only by relating to others and by involving oneself in narrational activities that one comes to know the world and oneself.

In conformity with this theory, women's and feminists' activities of knowledge production and acquisition are narrative and relational. Women tell stories to other women, they share their opinions and narratives and together they build a shared knowledge of the dynamics of patriarchal oppression and of how this oppression plays out both in their personal lives and in the public spheres of politics and society. It is this shared knowledge which shapes their feminist ideas and identity. At the core of the success of practices of consciousness-raising and of feminist meaning production stands their dialectic fashion. Indeed, while the process of formation of a feminist consciousness and identity may start with individual self-reflection, it cannot be complete if women's and feminists' own narrations do not reflect back into their communities, thus evolving and perfecting themselves (Schneider 1986, 602). Free self-expression thus comes to be instrumental to women's identity formation - not only to the formation of their feminist identity, but also to the development of their own social and cultural identity as people.

Although consciousness-raising and feminist meaning production practices start from personal experiences and opinions, their potential for the feminist struggle comes to fruition in the political arena. The very origins of feminist activism are found in a struggle for the right to political expression. First wave feminists conquered the right to vote, which constitutes the most basic form of institutionalised freedom of political expression, but it does not encompass all avenues covered by said freedom. Having acquired the right to vote, it is only natural that women try to expand their freedom to encompass other avenues of political expression. One of the most important outlets of political expression, especially in a democratic context, is public opinion (Bhagwat and Weinstein, 2021, 85). Public opinion is

said to represent one of the most important mechanisms of checks and balances for institutionalised power in a democratic society (Madison 1791), because it is the prime channel of expression of popular sovereignty. In a democracy, the government's power is bridled through mechanisms of checks and balances that avoid concentration of power in any one branch of government and ensure political legitimacy and accountability (Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica, n.d.). It is partly through these mechanisms that popular sovereignty exercises control over the government. The avenue of public opinion is arguably more decisive than that of political elections: whereas elections are "an intermittent mechanism", public opinion is permanent and "constantly active" (Bryce 1888, 1013). Indeed, the outcomes of political elections are themselves symptoms of public opinion. Women of the second wave and of subsequent waves join their efforts to make women's rights and women's discrimination a public matter because they, too, realise the importance of public opinion and they strive to further their access to it.

Freedom of expression meant as political expression encompasses different subtypes of freedoms. For the sake of the present argument, attention will be mainly paid to freedom of expression meant as freedom of expressing one's political opinion in the most literal sense, as well as freedom of political association (Bhagwat and Weinstein 2021, 82). Feminist activism represents women's main avenue for political expression. It is the means through which they bring their issues under public scrutiny in civil society and mobilise to push for the inclusion of these issues in the government's political agenda, with a view to achieving political change (Maiguashca 2014, 86).

Consciousness-raising is an integral part of this. Women both on the delivering and the receiving end of consciousness-raising experience it as an occasion to dialectically and relationally build their personal identities (Williams 2004). Consciousness-raising, though, is first and foremost an activist practice (MacKinnon 1982, 519), and any form of activist struggle is inherently political. Indeed, through consciousness-raising women do not merely build their personal identity, but most importantly they build their political, feminist identity. Feminist consciousness-raising is the mobilisational moment in which women's personal struggles converge into the feminist collective struggle. Therefore, it is the moment in which women's personal struggles become political.

As a form of expression of women's collective struggle, feminist consciousness-raising is not merely a form of political expression, but it also qualifies as a form of political association. Indeed, besides converging into the construction of feminist discourses, consciousness-raising practices also fulfil the feminist movement's community-building needs. Community-building in social movements involves a range of practices aimed at building the movement's capacities, strengthening community ties among constituents and reinforcing the constituents' adherence to the principles and objectives of the movement's collective action (Staggenborg 2013; Walter and Hyde 2012, 79). A social movement's strength and potential but also its legitimacy depends on its constituency (Owen 2019). Expanding its community is especially fundamental for the feminist movement because, unlike some other social movements, it cannot take its constituency for granted, in light of the fact that women as a constituency are not by default predisposed to identify themselves as having "politicised grievances" whose solution warrants collective action (Buechler 1993, 228). As a result, the feminist movement must continuously work out ways to mobilise its constituency's collective action and strengthen community ties. Practices of political association such as consciousness-raising provide the feminist movement with a way to tend to its constituent base while also furthering its contentious purpose.

The informing and legitimating function of free political expression both play a role for feminist activism. The informing function is especially important, as it provides the foundation for the effectiveness of feminist consciousness-raising. The primary purpose of consciousness-raising is to build in women the awareness of their oppressive condition, of the power dynamics that shape said condition, of the visible and invisible ways their submission is perpetuated. The purposes of the informing function can be divided into three categories: informing with a view to conscious voting decisions, informing for participation in public discourse, and informing representatives about the views of the electorate (Bhagwat and Weinstein 2021, 90). While all three purposes can be included in the scope of feminist consciousness-raising, the purpose of participation in public discourse has arguably the biggest impact for the feminist movement, in light of the already highlighted importance of the inclusion of women's issues in public discourse. Besides public discourse, the informing function of consciousness-raising is also instrumental in fostering participation in collective action.

The legitimating function is at the basis of the potential of feminist activism for effective political change. Subjecting women's issues to public scrutiny means subjecting gendered power to the scrutiny and control of public opinion. Consciousness-raising can therefore constitute a channel through which women can push for and obtain limitations on gendered power. They can do this by establishing links between their claims and the integrity of political institutions' legitimacy. Thanks to feminist consciousness-raising, women's issues become public matters, which means that they become linked to political legitimacy. Indeed, political legitimacy depends on the extent to which the government is able to guarantee its citizens' rights (Buchanan 2002, 703) and provide satisfactory outcomes for its citizens' demands (Easton 1957). If, thanks to political expression, women's rights and women's issues come to be included under the claims of public opinion, then the government's legitimacy will also depend on whether it is able to satisfy these claims. On the whole, harnessing freedom of political expression gives women the instruments to form political claims, to make them heard and to make them relevant in the political arena.

The previous analysis of the relationship that feminist consciousness-raising and theorisation have with self-expression and political expression has demonstrated how both have a prominent role in feminist mobilisation. Without either form of expression, these practices would not come to fruition to their full potential and they would not fully be able to produce the changes that they aspire to. Self-expression gives women tools for self-reflection and identity formation, while political expression paves the way for political traction and relevance of women's claims. In the context of the feminist movement, self-expression and political expression mutually complement each other. The possibility of self-expression without political consequences may lead to the drawback that any positive implication of self-expression remains circumscribed to the individual sphere, thus nullifying prospects of social change because there is no social change that is not collective change. Vice versa, forms of political expression that do not draw from or connect to personal experience and identity open the movement up to vulnerability as they may weaken not only the discursive bases of its claims but also its constituency's commitment and attachment to the cause. In the context of the feminist movement, not only do self-expression and political expression enhance each other, but one could not be effective without the other.

The present research seeks to argue that the singular importance of freedom of expression in the context of the feminist movement and the advancement of women's rights should be

recognised precisely in light of this intersection between self-expression and political expression. This intersection proves fruitful for the feminist movement not only in the discursive field - pertaining to how the movement internally conceives and theorises its cause and to how it discursively frames said cause in its contentious practice (Baumgarten and Ullrich, 2012) - but also in the strategic field - pertaining to the available resources and strategic tools for mobilisation that the movement uses to pursue its objectives (Kriesi 2004; Edwards and McCarthy 2004). The case of how freedom of expression fuels and broadens possibilities for the feminist movement is paradigmatic of how important this interconnection and concerted effect of self-expression and political expression can be for the advancement of the rights of any marginalised group. Marginalised groups can gain awareness of their own oppression, strengthen community ties and discursively develop their claims through self-expression, and then bring those claims to fruition and give them political traction through political expression.

The maxim "the personal is political" evidences that the feminist movement has recognised the powerful interplay between the personal sphere and the political sphere and has overturned what used to be an avenue of perpetuation of women's subordination into a powerful tool to call for an end of said subordination. It is straightforward in capturing the interplay between personal and political sphere which plays out, inter alia, in the realm of freedom of expression. The above-mentioned interdependence between self-expression and political expression is mirrored by the interdependence of women's activities and position in the private and public sphere. Women from the second wave onwards learned that their subordination in the domestic realm could not end if their exclusion from the public arena did not end as well (Nicholson 1981, 91); similarly, they learned that seizing the - newly-conquered and arguably still to be fully secured - opportunities to express themselves without turning them into political utterances aimed at questioning and subverting the patriarchal norms that still sealed their submission - as they had done up until that point (Nicholson 1981, 89) - would only work to keep them entrenched in said submission. "The personal is political" marks the very moment that women and feminist activists truly seize control of their narrative, which in turn marks the beginning of a decisive phase in their fight for emancipation.

The present critique is not arguing for conceptualising self-expression and political expression in the feminist movement as a single form of free speech. Rather, it is arguing for

the recognition of how the assets of one are able to advance the other. In fact, this critique wishes to highlight that the different scopes of action and potentials for transformative change that self-expression and political expression have can be best realised by being harnessed in a combined fashion. It follows that, if one wishes to analyse women's affordances feminist activists' efforts in terms of freedom of expression, the best lens to adopt in order to do so is one that takes into account the specificities of freedom of self-expression, freedom of political expression and their interplay.

3.3. Representation and activism: transforming the feminist critique of free speech into a theoretical framework

The feminist critique of free speech that this work proposes aims to highlight the relevance of self-expression and political expression, but most importantly of their interplay and its outcomes on the advancement of feminist objectives. It also, however, aims to provide a functional byproduct in the form of a theoretical framework to be potentially applied to the analysis of topics or case studies related to the feminist movement under the lens of freedom of expression. In order to devise such a framework, freedom of expression needs to be operationalised. This requires a translation of the concepts of self-expression and political expression into analytical categories that are applicable to the study of social movements and, in particular, of the feminist movement. This research is proposing to adopt the categories of women's representation and feminist activism. The present section will attempt to justify this proposal, with a keen eye to its relevance in light of its situation within feminist media studies and of this work's focus on the third and fourth wave of feminism. This era of feminism has been chosen for the peculiar elements that bring together the two waves: the use of information and communication technologies, the invigoration of feminist cultural politics (Gill 2007), the use of networked activism as a community-building strategy and of cultural production as a consciousness-raising strategy (about the third wave, see Garrison 2000; about the fourth wave, see Clark-Parsons 2022, 4).

Women's possibilities for self-expression are largely bound by the means through which this self-expression is made possible. In a world where communication is increasingly mediated, the avenues they use to express themselves are, too, often mediated (Byerly and Ross 2006, 3). Women's struggle in the media is split between their dissatisfaction with the way they are portrayed and their strife over the chances to be agents of their own representation. In her

feminist critique of media and free speech, Rakow argues that women do not like the representations they see of themselves, but their claims are not limited to demanding different representations - women are now seeking "a different system of creating representations of women" (Rakow 2001, 43). The problem, then, is not merely a lack of representation for women, but the unpunished existence of misleading or treacherous representations.

Friedan identifies this problem as the "discrepancy between the reality of [women's] lives as women and the image to which [they are] trying to conform" (Friedan 1963, 9). Friedan refers to this image as "the feminine mystique" (Friedan 1963, 9), thereby underscoring the mystification of women and the visible invisibility they are subjected to: women are visible in that they are extensively represented in the media, but they are invisible to the extent that their portrayal does not correspond to their reality, as well as because they are not fully in control of their own representation.

Rakow warns women about the risks of letting stereotypical or even just unsatisfactory representations exist unquestioned, which she finds to be dangerously related to the lack of women's economic, social and political position (Rakow 2001, 43). The importance of women taking control of their own representation is directly related to their efforts to advance their avenues for self-expression. Becoming agents of their own representation can be a way for women to reclaim their right to self-expression. Hence, analysing women's affordances in terms of representation constitutes a valid perspective on the relationship between feminism and self-expression.

The correlation between political expression and activism finds its foundation in the relevance, for social movements, of creating, maintaining and continuously fueling discursive fields and discursive spaces (Van Dijk 2023). This is especially the case for the feminist movement. The importance of consciousness-raising and feminist theorisation has previously been extensively highlighted in this work. It is through activism that women translate their claims for more rights, for the dismantling of patriarchy and for an alternative structure of society into action. The relationship between activism and media, though broadly recognised as important, has been unduly disregarded in feminist media studies (Byerly 2012, 15). Activism constitutes, however, a significant segment of women's media presence. It is interventionist but also self-reflective. Feminist activists use media not only as avenues for their activism, but also as spaces to reflect on the effectiveness of their discursive frames and

strategies of contention (Zobl and Reitsamer 2014; Dean 2011, 14). When this reflection is shared and made to be participatory through media, it becomes a dialectic activity through which the feminist movement collectively develops and improves its political stance, strengthens community ties, builds on and fuels its discursive fields and devises new or improved strategies of contention. Mediated activism constitutes the mediatic counterpart of feminists' in-person engagement in public discourse. Hence, analysing the mediated activism of the feminist movement can provide relevant insights on the relationship between feminism and political expression.

Analysing the relationship between media and the feminist movement from the perspective of representation and activism has a precedent in the analytical perspectives adopted by scholarship on the cusp between social movement studies and communication studies. McCurdy (2012) identifies two approaches to this type of research: "representational" and "relational" research. Whereas representational research has concerned itself with the framing of social movements in the media, relational research has focused on the relationship between social movements and media strategies for contentious and discursive action (McCurdy 2012, 250-251). These two approaches perfectly mirror the double focus on representation and on activism that the present work is proposing for the study of the feminist movement and freedom of expression in the media.

The interaction between women's representation and feminist activism can play out in multiple ways and can hence be analysed from multiple perspectives. Representation can be activist and activism can be representational. Representation can intersect with activism in that women's representational endeavours can have an activist purpose or advance activist claims as a collateral effect. Indeed, representation of women and even representation by women is not necessarily enough in itself to foster social change and emancipation. Representation that wants to enact change has to be critical: it has to question the canons of the mainstream representational system, denounce the subtle ways in which patriarchal power mystifies and crystallises itself, represent normally excluded subjectivities. On the same note, the representational aspect of activism can be detected in how activism works towards either creating new possibilities for women's representation or improving the quality of said representation.

When thinking about how these two elements combine, it is useful to keep in mind the distinction between feminist interests and women's interests (Molyneux 1985, 232-233): just because a certain type of content or representation responds to certain women's interests, it does not mean that it responds to or is helpful for the interests of feminist activism. Hence, analysing how the two elements influence each other can give precious additional insights.

A post-structuralist perspective on women's presence in the media can be instrumental in understanding why it is relevant to analyse the overlap between representation and activism in contexts related to women and free speech. Post-structuralist theory critiques the idea that media can constitute a mirror of reality, on the grounds that it would imply that women exist as a factual reality that can be reproduced, in an either accurate or distorted fashion, by media images (Van Zoonen 1994). Instead, post-structuralist theory sees representation as a social practice of meaning production (Minić 2007) and an integral part of feminist cultural politics. Through media, feminists propose alternative representations of women and gender in consideration of how these very representations are not so much reproductions of the realities of women and gender, but rather sites for the production of the cultural meanings associated with women and gender. The media are "seen as a field of a cultural and political struggle between advocates of dominant and marginal definitions of reality" (Minić 2007, 296; see also: Curran 1991; Hall 1997; Murdock 1992). Moreover, this perspective offers a vision of media as constructing reality and thus gives new impetus to calls for more agency for women in the media (Mendes and Carter 2008, 1705). As such, representation and activism are two elements that converge into women's expressive experience in the media. Analysing them, both separately and in the ways they overlap, leads to a comprehensive picture of women's enjoyment of the right to free speech in the media.

4. FEMINIST MEDIA, ADVANCEMENT OR HINDRANCE? AN ANALYSIS OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN FEMINIST MEDIA THROUGH THE LENSES OF REPRESENTATION AND ACTIVISM

4.1. Networked activism, DIY feminism and feminist media

The feminist movement, especially in its third and fourth wave, espouses the methods and structures of networked activism, which encompasses the use of new media technologies for communication, cultural production and political activism needs (Atkinson 2010, 10;

Garrison 2000). The main characteristics of networked activism are decentralised movement structures that make power distribution diffused instead of hierarchical (Atkinson 2010, 10) and a shift from collective action to what Bennett and Segerberg (2013) refer to as "connective action". They define connective action in relation to sets of political claims presented in the form of "personalised action frames" and disseminated through "personal communication technologies" (Bennett and Segerberg 2013, 37).

The association of the concept of connective action to the feminist movement evidentiates both the decentralised and personalised basis of third wave and fourth wave feminism and the centrality of media for "feminist tactics, discourses, identities, communities, and organisational structures" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 22). Feminist media practices are so deeply rooted into the contemporary feminist movement that one can assert that "in the age of networked feminism, media are the movement" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 24). Networked feminist media practices allow the movement to grow, to the extent that they lay the foundations for new feminist communities or they render already existing communities more visible or accessible (Clark-Parsons 2022, 21). Connective action allows movement members to reconcile their own personalised vision of a certain social cause, shaped by their personal experiences and beliefs, with the conventional requirements of political participation in collective action (Clark-Parsons 2022, 54). This is paradigmatic of the feminist movement's efforts to combine the personal with the political, and more specifically - one can even go so far as saying - forms of self-expression with forms of political expression.

The present research aims to delve into the domain of feminist media through the previous chapter's analytical framework based on representation and activism. The expression *feminist media* refers to any kind of mediatic content created by feminists, from a feminist perspective and/or to pursue feminist objectives (Drüeke and Zobl 2012, 11). Though women's use of media can be traced back to the first wave of feminism - with suffragettes' use of cartoons, posters and pamphlets -, feminist publications peaked during the second wave of feminism (Gunnarsson Payne 2012, 56). Feminist media, or women's movement media, started organically developing in the late 1960s, both as a reaction to women's representation in mass media and as a consequence of feminists' disillusionment about the media's coverage of the feminist movement (Crafton Smith 1989, 281). In the eyes of the feminist movement, women's movement media had a double purpose: they would constitute avenues to fight for

social change, but also alternative forms of communication among women and feminists (Crafton Smith 1989, 278).

Women's movement media are recognised to have been instrumental in the feminist struggle as "part of a global networking, consciousness-raising, and knowledge-creation project" (Gallagher 2014, 28). They, as well as feminist media research, have been known to challenge mainstream assumptions about gender and media (Rakow 2001, 42). Especially since the third wave of feminism, feminist media have been and continue to be the main avenue of women's mediated presence in public spaces (Gunnarsson Payne 2012, 56). Feminist media are intended not only as cultural products and as communication channels but also as a particular repertoire of feminist practices which is shaped by the structures, mechanisms and logics of media and adapts feminist values and objectives to these structures, mechanisms and logics (Clark-Parsons 2022, 57).

Feminist media full-fledgedly incorporate the assets of networked activism; while enjoying its benefits, however, they also deal with the same challenges that networked activism faces (Clark-Parsons 2022, 19, 25). A full overview of these assets and challenges will be the focus of later sections of the chapter. Two aspects of the feminist movement's use of media are worth elaborating on: the feminist ideational justification for the use of feminist media, and the implications of the inevitable obstacles between this theoretical justification and the reality of media systems.

Feminist media respond to various needs of contemporary feminism: they serve as channels for critiques of dominant patriarchal narratives, they make the symptoms and patterns of women's oppression visible, they facilitate the negotiation of feminist principles, they foster collective solidarity, and they promote free expression for women (Clark-Parsons 2022, 21). Particularly, Clark-Parsons (2022, 20) acknowledges feminist media's role "as outlets for free expression" in laying the groundwork for the development and growth of "feminist actions, identities, politics, theories, and histories". Beside these objectives, feminist media generally serve as channels of information and means of mobilisation (Drüeke and Zobl 2012, 12).

While feminist activists and academics can vouch for the efficacy of feminist media in fulfilling these functions, their use is not unproblematic nor devoid of obstacles. Attempts at making the ideal potential of feminist media come into fruition clash with barriers posed to

feminist media by the very features of the system that feminist collective action tries to dispute. A problematic implication of a reality where women are forced to find their space and their voice within economic, societal and political structures that have been designed by and for men is that these structures, though they are increasingly evolving to accommodate women and their claims, are still fundamentally infused with gender biases (Franks 2022). The same applies to systems of media production and distribution. The mechanisms and logics of validation and of amplification of such a system are bound to respond more favourably to men, because as a consequence of an ubiquitous gender bias they have been designed with men's experiences and peculiarities in mind (Shor, Van De Rijt, and Fotouhi 2019).

This gender bias has also repercussions on the assertion of women's rights. Though it may be formally an inalienable right, women still experience obstacles when they wish to claim their right to free speech. As Franks (2022) denounces, "while free speech is often promoted as a neutral and objective good that everyone can access equally, it has been shaped by long-standing, structural bias in favour of male subjects in its development and application". The structural nature of this bias means that it will not be appreciably affected by contingent or localised progress. Therefore, a mere increase in the participation of women in mediatic processes of production and communication is not enough to upend the gender bias that permeates these processes, because this gender bias is not merely a function of a numerical imbalance, but rather it concerns the quality of women's mediatic presence, from the amplification of their voices to the reception of their messages to the reaction not only to their content, but to their very presence.

This structural issue, however, far from rendering the use of feminist media pointless, in fact corroborates the feminist movement's rationale for the use of feminist media. In conformity with Franks' (2022) assertion that "it is the system that must change, not women", but also as a proactive reaction to the sentiment of such statements, through their media presence and agency women are progressively retorting to gender-biased media systems with the creation of a mediatic micro-system where patriarchal hierarchies of power are upended in favour of a different rationale of media production and distribution based on women's control of autonomous forms of media and women-defined output in the form of media content (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1996, 234). This is in line with a kind of prefigurative politics whereby feminists are trying to pioneer their ideal of feminist emancipation by creating

microcosms where structures and mechanisms but also relationships resemble this ideal, to the extent that they are "characterised by symmetry, that is, reciprocity in power, influence, and attention" (Polletta 1999, 11).

Among the different solutions devised to overcome the challenges posed by gender-biased mediatic systems, one deserves an in-depth analysis by virtue of its link to feminist cultural production. DIY feminism (Chidgey 2014a, 75) is a feminist approach that developed under the aegis of networked activism and is defined as a form of "feminist expression centring upon grassroots politics and autonomous cultural production" (Kempson 2015, 462). DIY feminist practices are configured by objectives of feminist cultural politics to be producers of knowledge (Kempson 2015, 464). The DIY ethos prescribes practices based on cultural activism, inclusivity and participation, the development and strengthening of communities, and the construction of alternative spaces for interaction and information (Chidgey 2014a, 75). These practices focus on "emancipatory bottom-up processes" of autonomous cultural production, and the sharing of knowledge through "learning by doing" and "skill-sharing" (Calmbach 2007, 17; Zobl and Reitsamer 2014, 242). What draws together all DIY feminist practices is their highly mediated nature (Clark-Parsons 2022, 35, 37; Chidgey 2014b; Orton-Johnson 2014, 141).

Women's movement media and women-produced media are an indispensable framing tool for the feminist movement. The core of the DIY ethos, made up of "emancipatory bottom-up processes" based on self-organisation, autonomous production and cultural agency (Zobl and Reitsamer 2014, 242), establishes a solid interweaving between DIY feminist practices and the production of feminist media, particularly alternative media. Feminist alternative media are small scale, with a DIY aesthetic and based on participatory practices (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 25, 29). They have a heterotopic nature, in that they serve as "countersites" for women's interaction and creative and political expression that pose themselves as alternative to conventional mediatic fora (Lievrouw 2011, 63). Relatedly, they adopt peculiar processes of production and distribution through the construction of "alternative economies" that refuse commodification of media content and elude conventional commercial channels of media distribution (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 39). Alternative feminist media have a "subcultural quality" (Lievrouw 2011, 65) which stems from the reconciliation between, on the one hand, a distinctive "local embeddedness" (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 31) that links cultural production to

specific reference communities through cultural tropes, symbols and languages, and, on the other hand, an activist orientation towards bigger prospects of enacting broader social change. They employ irony and humour as a means to subvert traditional meanings and images of gender and femininity (Lievrouw 2011, 66).

A substantial proportion of the literature on feminist media focuses on their conceptualisation as alternative feminist media (see: Chidgey 2009; Chidgey 2014b; Gunnarsson Payne 2012; Lievrouw 2011; Rousseau 2021; Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012). However, can it really be asserted that feminist media are exclusively alternative? Perhaps, when feminist activists were starting to employ media as means of communication and cultural production and feminist discourses were first gaining ground in mediated public fora, one could more easily make a case for *alternativeness* being an inherent character of feminist media. However, especially after the rise of new information and communication technologies and the approximately concomitant evolution of the public perception of feminism - which saw the emergence of post-feminism followed by its overturn through the popularisation of feminism in the years between the third and the fourth wave (Clark-Parsons 2022, 8) -, it is difficult to make such a case anymore.

One then comes to wonder what kind of spaces feminism occupies today in the media. Whereas there is a stark correlation between DIY feminism and alternative media, the more general domain of networked activism encompasses feminist mediatic action and production both within alternative media channels and within mainstream, corporate-owned media channels (Clark-Parsons 2022). Moreover, not all women's movement media and women-produced media have the same characteristics in terms of content, production processes and channels of distribution.

A distinction between mainstream and alternative feminist media could be helpful in the explanation of these differences. Mainstream media are often associated to mass media (Duignan 2024), and they are recognisable through their "public and corporately owned and/or controlled" nature (McCurdy 2012, 245). They are often regarded as a reflection of power structures (Chomsky 1997), and they are able to reach decision-makers and influence political agendas by virtue of their "power of definition" (Meyen 2020, 249). Alternative media, on the other hand, are defined as "any form of media which constitutes an alternative to, or positions itself in opposition to, widely available and consumed mass media products"

(Waltz 2005, 2). They are distinctive by virtue of their counter-hegemonic character (Downing 2001, v) and of their subversion of conventional dynamics of production through participatory processes (Dagron 2004, 48) and of conventional dynamics of distribution through an anti-capitalist approach and alternative economies (Atton 2002, 21).

Interestingly, the definitions of some of these authors can be perfectly conjugated in terms of freedom of speech: whereas Downing (2001, v) adopts a vision clearly informed by political expression through the use of concepts such as "radical" and "counter-hegemonic", Traber (1985, 3) pivots to a conceptualisation informed by the ideal of self-expression and self-fulfilment when he describes alternative media as aiming to effect such change that the individual is able to find "fulfilment as a total human being".

The very distinction between mainstream and alternative media, however, is quite contested, especially in light of the problematic and reductive nature of the binary opposition behind it (Gunnarsson Payne 2012, 57). Downing (2001, ix) even goes so far as contesting the very usefulness of defining media as alternative and denouncing the elusiveness of such a definition by saying that "everything, at some point, is alternative to something else". Downing's (2001) provocatory statement leads to the edifying realisation that *alternativeness* depends on the context. What seems to be detrimental, then, is not the act itself of distinguishing between mainstream and alternative media, but the fact that such a distinction implies the possibility to unequivocally and perfunctorily identify a certain medium as either mainstream or alternative, without conceding that the same medium might assume one or the other character based on the context, on how it is used, or even on which specific feature of said medium is analysed. A further complexifying element stems from the fact that old and new media can be linked to different structural features, opportunities of expression and implications in terms of power distribution (Akar 2011, cited in Esiyok 2018, 156). These can affect the characterisation of media as either mainstream or alternative.

Still, distinguishing between mainstream and alternative media can be recognised as useful under certain aspects. What can be, then, a possible way to complexify the distinction between mainstream and alternative media so that these critiques are taken into account, without having to forgo the distinction altogether? Following this chapter's assessment of how feminist media advance and/or hinder freedom of expression, this work will try to derive useful insights on this dilemma.

Ultimately, feminist media across the board are bound by the way that they embody, both in their content and in their practices, the feminist equation between personal and political. Clark-Parsons (2022, 53) states that through feminist media, feminists "make the personal political by using common media tools to expose and transform the everyday, everywhere systems of gender-based oppression". Through the daily practice of networked activism, feminists make the use of feminist media an everyday practice (Clark-Parsons 2022, 37), which means that they make a daily occurrence not only out of their reclaiming of their right to free speech, but also out of their practice of making the personal political. Sharing personal stories in the media becomes, for women, a way to reclaim the power of their own narrative and their agency in their own story as well as to publicly seek recognition for their oppression (Cermele 2010). The process of retelling one's own story is also a way to provide narratives of women's oppression that offer an alternative interpretation to that of the very system that perpetrates the oppression. The link between feminist media and the "personal is political" maxim is a reminder of feminist media's role in women's claims for the right to freedom of expression.

4.2. Analysis of how feminist media advance and/or hinder freedom of expression

The main ambition of this paper is to present an analysis of the successes and shortcomings of feminist media when it comes to the realisation and advancement of freedom of expression for women. In order to do so, the concept of the right to freedom of expression will be operationalised so that it becomes detectable in the realm of feminist media. Applying the framework presented in the previous chapter, women's presence in the media will be evaluated based on the categories of representation and activism. The present analysis will list and elaborate on phenomena and dynamics that relate to the advancement or to the obstruction of women's right to free speech, with special consideration to whether they relate to the domain of representation, activism or a combination of both. This analysis is meant to take into consideration the general realm of feminist media. Therefore, if one were to operate the same analysis on any specific case of a feminist medium, it may be possible that not every single phenomenon or dynamic present in this analysis would be detected. However, the generality of this analysis is precisely meant to be functional to its applicability to any empirical case of feminist media. Consequently, the presence or absence of any one of these phenomena, as well as the degree to which the phenomenon can in fact be observed, will

constitute an element of evaluation of the ability of the medium to be an enhancer of women's free speech.

Besides its relation to representation or activism, several elements will be considered in the analysis of each phenomenon. The phenomenon will be analysed in terms of women's empowerment. Women's empowerment can be seen as a process that involves the advancement of women's position in different domains. In order to measure women's empowerment, Charmes and Wieringa (2003, 423) identify the domains of awareness/consciousness, choice/alternatives, resources, voice, agency and participation. Adopting the consideration of these elements as a measure of progress in women's empowerment, the present research will evaluate whether certain features of feminist media advance or hinder freedom of expression for women based on whether or not the same features are causally related to progress in one of these domains. Furthermore, among the elements being considered will be whether the phenomenon or dynamic under analysis can be considered to be affiliated to mainstream media, alternative media or both, as well as whether it can be detected in traditional media, new media or both. The analysis will first focus on the positive contributions of feminist media to women's freedom of expression, then on the obstacles for women's free speech that feminist media harbours, and finally it will reflect on the findings.

4.3. Successes of feminist media for women's freedom of expression

4.3.1. Women's agency: representation and social change

Women's agency in the media is a substantial element of feminist critical views of free speech and the media. Zittlow Rogness (2015, 72) asserts that "free speech scholarship and gender intersect at questions of agency". Agency in terms of free expression can be defined as the "capacity to act, that is, to have competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognised or heeded by others in one's community" (Kohrs Campbell 2015, 3). Women's voice has for a long time not been heeded in the public arena, which is why the fight for women's agency is a constitutive part of the fight for women's emancipation. The agency afforded by free speech is, in the words of Butler (1997, 160), both a constitutive element of identity formation and instrumental in "political contestation and reformulation of the subject". Thus, the affordance of agency stands at the intersection between self-expression

and political expression. Women's agency in the media realises itself on the one hand as women reclaim agency over their own representation, on the other hand as women discover their agency for social change.

Rakow (2001, 44) urges that women "must insist on [their] right to be "representors", not just the represented". In other words, it is important that they reclaim agency over their own representations rather than allow themselves to be represented by other people. This reclaiming entails the conversion of "a media system of representation "of"" into "one of representation "by" the disenfranchised and the subordinated" (Rakow 2001, 44). The change in the media system that feminists aspire for cannot be achieved merely by a bigger presence of women in the media, without there being a way to dictate the criteria for such presence. Rakow (2001) prefigures a collective emancipatory endeavour whereby women strive to occupy more space in the media not as represented objects, but as representing subjects, and manage to set the rules of their own representation, thus altering the convention of the media system itself. One can argue that this is what feminists have been striving to model their media presence around. Thanks to the use of feminist media and feminist media practices, women can reclaim their agency over their own representations insofar as they become producers of meaning and content rather than mere subjects.

A fundamental process in this sense is women's process of retelling of their own stories: women propose their own framing and perspective on issues and experiences that concern them and thus effectively remove from others the power to set the parameters of the dominant narrative over these issues and experiences (Clark-Parsons 2022, 81). Clark-Parsons (2022, 81) formulates it in terms of "wrest[ing] agency of their own narratives away from dominant frameworks". This can be defined as a feminist media practice through which reclaim the power of their own narrative, and thus of their own expression. Feminist campaigns on social networks are an example of this practice (Clark-Parsons 2022); furthermore, any form of women-produced media content on women's issues, such as sexual violence or gender-based discrimination, brings this practice to fruition. This practice can be carried out in both mainstream and alternative media channels, though women's control over their representation is often greater in alternative channels.

Women's agency ensues also in terms of the ability to be agents of social change (Lievrouw 2011, 68). On the one hand, the very act of regaining agency over their own representation is

a way for women to enact social change by changing both the conventions of women's media presence and the way that the media system hosts and reacts to women's media presence. On the other hand, feminist media can be another channel through which feminists can carry out their everyday repertoire of contentious collective action. This means that women's agency in the media does not have to limit itself to questions of representation, but it can be an all-encompassing form of political agency that the media, and most of all feminist media, are the facilitators of. Through feminist media practices, feminist activists can work on community-building, develop a feminist discourse and actively push for change through contentious action. As evidence thereof, it is widely attested that media are instrumental in enacting social change geared towards greater gender equality (International Media Support et al. 2020).

4.3.2. Furtherance of media accessibility for women

Analyses on women's presence in the media have extensively attested the worrying presence of a gender divide in access to media and, in the age of new media, of a gender digital divide (Article 19 2020, 16). The gender divide in media access relates to women both as consumers and as producers of content (Global Media Monitoring Project 2020). Fraser (1990, 119) demystifies the idea according to which formal guarantees of free speech are enough to actually afford women free speech by arguing that even when such formal guarantees are in place, "informal impediments to participatory parity (...) can persist". These boundaries to participation are most noticeable in traditional media, but even digital media, which were initially presumed to have the inherent ability to democratise speech, in reality merely afford the potential for a democratic speech culture, which can only be realised through active endeavours aimed at social change (Balkin 2004). All things considered, the fight for free speech remains a fight against the "everyday systems of power that structure participation in the public sphere" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 132).

Feminist media practices, both in traditional and in digital media, make the media more accessible for women and more permeable for feminist thought (Clark-Parsons 2022, 124). The affordances of feminist media in terms of accessibility respond to a politics of visibility (Clark-Parsons 2022, 72) pursued by the feminist movement with the purpose of making the personal political and thus visible. The question of media accessibility concerns women in at least three senses: accessibility of information, accessibility of protest, access to alternative

images and narratives. Tactics geared towards greater accessibility in these senses can be found both in mainstream and alternative feminist media spaces.

Broadening accessibility to information for women is intended not only in the general sense of information about the world, but also in the more distinctively feminist sense of information by women about women and about feminism. Feminist media, especially alternative media, help particularly in this last sense, as they function as "institutions of counter-information" (Rauch 2007, 997). Any advancement in this sense is an advancement of freedom of speech to the extent that it includes freedom of information.

Feminist media also make contentious action more accessible, thus furthering political expression in the form of activism. New media technologies and connective action play a significant role in the mobilisation of protest (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). The contentious actions made possible by the Internet make for an accessible form of protest because they are low cost and low effort, yet can still yield high results by virtue of the sheer extension of collective solidarity that they enable (Clark-Parsons 2022, 79). These actions, which include *inter alia* hashtag feminism and social media campaigns, mostly fall under the domain of popular feminism. Popular feminism has the potential of making feminist action more accessible and of offering a space for feminist resistance within capitalist hegemonic spaces, though at the ever-present risk of watering down feminist claims and ideological integrity (Clark-Parsons 2022, 17). Not only popular feminism, but also DIY feminism offers ways to make feminist activism more accessible.

Alternative feminist media provide women with access to alternative images and narratives about themselves, but also with low cost opportunities to be the ones in charge of these images and narratives (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012), thus furthering self-expression in the form of representation. More accessibility thus also means more inclusivity, and indeed alternative feminist media make feminist media production accessible for marginalised voices. Accessibility to alternative images and narratives also depends on gatekeeping mechanisms, which will be discussed further on.

4.3.3. Consciousness-raising and community-building

As the features of feminist consciousness-raising and community-building and the relation to free speech have been detailed previously, the focus here will be on how they are boosted by feminist media. Feminist media are a prominent avenue for feminist activism as they give feminists the possibility to strengthen both the internal solidity and the external impact of the movement. Feminists can pursue consciousness-raising practices through feminist media in order to pursue social change in the form of cultural change, not only in women but in society as a whole (Staggenborg 1995, 341). Feminist media help by virtue of their public character and their outreach, which reaches a peak in mainstream media but even in alternative media it is functional to a deeper connection with audiences (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012). Feminist media function as public fora which, thanks to the capillarity of new media, guarantee that feminist activist content reaches an ever-growing number of people.

Feminist media, as prime example of networked activism, also aid the movement in network-building, because they keep alive the connection between the various feminist formations and they ensure a constant flow of community-building practices, both online and offline (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 31). Through feminist media, bonds are strengthened among movement members, new feminist communities are built, and a constant dialogue occurs which helps the movement radicate in society and grow (Dean 2011). Feminist media broaden the resources available to the movement in terms of its strategic repertoire and of its human capital. The affordances of feminist media allow women to enjoy free speech both inside and outside of feminist communities (Clark-Parsons 2022, 101). Often community-building rather than direct collective action is the prime focus of certain feminist media, especially alternative feminist media (Dagron 2004). Both types of feminist practice can anyway be seen as a way in which the feminist movement advances free expression through feminist media.

4.3.4. Feminist communities and safe spaces

The feminist practice of safe spaces originates within second-wave feminism, when feminists built women-only consciousness-raising groups that served as separatist spaces of deconstruction where free self-expression and political expression could prosper (Sarachild 1978). Feminist media repurpose this practice through the construction of feminist safe spaces in the media (Clark-Parsons 2022, 100). Networked feminist safe spaces are a less visible feminist media practice, but just as more visible ones they are fundamental for

feminist activism. Their political impact is threefold: they protect members from misogyny within their boundaries, they experiment with new organising strategies and more empowering modalities of social engagement, they foster open expression for members and especially for more marginalised voices (Clark-Parsons 2022, 103). They are spaces for women to connect with other women and share their personal experiences and perspectives - in other words, for them to speak freely without fear of harassment or discrimination and with the guarantee of being heard and taken seriously instead of silenced and criticised. They constitute safe bubbles in mainstream media that protect women from the "silencing practices" (Shaw 2013, 94) of networked misogyny. These feminist safe spaces are "internal communities" of the feminist movement (Clark-Parsons 2022, 100) which constitute "spaces of withdrawal and regroupment" (Fraser 1990, 68).

In light of their purpose, their most fundamental characteristic is the safety that can be fostered within these spaces thanks to the affordances of digital media and social networks, which make it possible to connect women based on interests or group belonging and to guarantee a certain degree of privacy (Clark-Parsons 2017). Another political contribution of safe spaces is that the feminist practice has developed within them of sharing stories and strategies of "navigating unsafe spaces" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 117), so that women become equipped with strategies to deal with the misogyny they may encounter outside safe spaces. Indeed, feminist safe spaces have always facilitated the design of strategies for feminist resistance (Kenney 2001, 24). In these ways, safe spaces incorporate a "politics of validation and care" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 140) for women, and they also constitute "prefigurative groups", that is, groups that prefigure the ideal society that they are seeking to build by modelling their structure and dynamics around it (Polletta 1999, 11). This prefigurative politics then feeds into direct feminist activism for social change.

4.3.5. Visibility of feminism: mainstreaming feminist thought

Thanks to feminist media practices and practices of networked activism, women's issues have become increasingly central in public debate (Desai 2006). Feminist media - be it mainstream or alternative, traditional or new media - bring to the fore women-related issues that would otherwise not be part of the public discourse (Allen 1987, 20; Kessler 1984). They do so by creating fora for debate and opening these fora to voices that would otherwise be marginalised in public arenas for debate (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 21). Such

debates not only influence public debate but also benefit the ideological growth of the movement itself. Indeed, feminist media constitute spaces where feminist discussions and confrontations can flourish, which foster the movement's internal reflection and thus allow the articulation of feminist identities (Chidgey, Gunnarsson, and Zobl 2009).

Feminist media take advantage of the fragmentation of the public sphere by positioning themselves as "disaggregated deliberative" spaces and thus sealing the legitimacy of feminist discourse even when it develops detachedly from dominant discourses (Mansbridge 2006). Creating public arenas for feminist debate works towards an objective that is imperative for the social change that the feminist movement is trying to propel: the objective of mainstreaming feminist thought. Even though they may first develop and spread within alternative arenas for debate, through these channels feminist ideas and discourses can spread to mass media and thus reach larger audiences (Allen 1987, 20; Kessler 1984; Crafton Smith 1989, 292). This serves not only to spread awareness of certain women's issues but also to make feminist debates in themselves acceptable and, indeed, mainstream.

Mainstreaming feminist thought also means advancing women's and feminists' visibility. Discussions in public debate are among more visible forms of feminist activism. In conformity with a "politics of visibility", mainstreaming feminist thought does not mean merely increasing the presence of women's issues in public debates, but also fostering critical engagement with these issues which can be finalised to social change. Indeed, whereas the first type of intervention constitutes a form of representation for its own sake, more accurately defined through an "economy of visibility", a "politics of visibility" uses representation as functional to the feminist collective struggle for emancipation and social change (Clark-Parsons 2022, 76). Feminist media constitute a way for women and feminist activists to amplify their own individual visibility through the connection with other people's ideas and mediatic engagement, but also to amplify the movement's collective visibility through the connection of more voices (Clark-Parsons 2022, 80). Feminists' visibility is fundamental because the visibility of feminist ideas means the visibility of the patriarchal system and gendered power dynamics.

Mainstreaming feminist thought means enabling it to get past the filters of gatekeeping. Feminist media enable content production in a way that bypasses conventional media mechanisms of censorship and gatekeeping (Mukherjee, Shah, and Dexter 2023, 365).

Mechanisms of gatekeeping govern the media and filter the information and content that is made available to the public (Lewin 1951; White 1950; Shoemaker and Vos 2009). Since the system of power that governs the public sphere is patriarchal and capitalist, such will be the criteria that regulate gatekeeping mechanisms. Today's "networked public sphere", within the confines of which networked feminism acts, affords much less gatekeeping power to mass media than the conventional modes of meaning production of the early mass media age (Benkler 2006). Feminist media, especially in digital platforms, are thus means through which women's and feminist concerns sidestep gatekeeping and enter into public discourse.

4.3.6. Intersectionality: giving a platform to marginalised voices

From the third wave onwards, the feminist movement has embarked on a journey of self-reflection and self-critique that has brought about the movement's ideological renaissance. Feminists have started questioning some basic tenets of the movement, not least among them the naturality of concepts of woman and womanhood, which they counter with arguments about the socio-cultural contingency of said concepts (Griffin 2006, 81). Feminist rhetoric departed from essentialist arguments on the fundamental differences between men and women and began focusing on the situations that befall people that are discriminated against based on gender in light of their specific identities (Griffin 2006, 81). From these reflections developed what is today one of the major aspirational principles of feminism: intersectionality.

Crenshaw (1989, 140) formulated the theory of intersectionality to show how an individual at the intersection of different marginalised groups suffers a kind of discrimination and violence that is different in nature from the sum of the experiences of each separate marginalised group. As Hines (2020, 708) has shown, the experience of some groups of women risks being excluded by a vision of feminism, womanhood and women's interests that is both essentialist and non-intersectional. Intersectional critiques of feminism point out the dangers of focusing on the experience, narratives and claims of white, heterosexual, middle-class, educated women, while failing to take into account the perspectives of marginalised women (Zakaria 2022; Trevisan 2022, 2596).

Feminist scholars call for an "intersectional approach to community-building" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 110), based on honouring the constitutive rather than additive nature of multiple

identities (Christoffersen and Emejulu 2022) - meaning that one should not think of identity features in a person as separated from one another, but as mutually shaping each other and thus building a whole new identity - as well as on "politics of coalition" that attempts to build solidarity through the commitment to fight a shared system of oppression rather than through "principles of homogeneity or sameness" (May 2015, 4). The framing of putting aside differences that "arise at the intersection of marginalisation" in the name of women's common fight, regardless of its benevolent intentions, effectively works to erase those differences by erasing "the systems of oppression that specifically perpetuate violence against minority communities" (Trott 2020, 1136). This approach to the feminist struggle requires feminists to, first and foremost, recognise the ways in which the patriarchal "matrix of domination" works to discriminate and subdue people through overlapping and "interlocking systems of oppression" (Collins 1990, 221). Only then can they mobilise and strategise to effectively dismantle those systems of oppression.

As intersectionality has made its way into the ideological foundation of feminism, feminist activism and community-building have made efforts to mainstream intersectional thought in society and to create more inclusive and intersectional feminist communities (Clark-Parsons 2022, 109; Trott 2021, 1139), as well as to find ways to theorise the feminist struggle so that no erasure of differences among women is imposed in the name of a common fight (Lugones and Spelman 1983). Intersectionality and free speech are intimately linked because the possibility to speak one's own truth is at the core of demands for marginalised identities to be included in the public discourse (Dean 2011, 78). Especially for movements like feminism, fostering free expression is integral to centralising marginalised voices.

Intersectionality has been a driving factor of the turn towards networked activism, because among the affordances of a networked public sphere are more opportunities for marginalised voices to speak and be heard (Benkler 2006). Particularly, the use of digital media offers channels to highlight the intersectionality that shapes social injustices and to call for a critical appreciation and an active intervention towards them (Mukherjee, Shah, and Dexter 2023, 364). These affordances are especially actionable thanks to the alternative media practices of DIY feminism (Clark-Parsons 2022, 54-55). Feminist media are incorporating practices that address debates about intersectionality and social inequality instead of erasing them. Among such practices is the practice of "unbracketing" social inequalities, especially common in feminist safe spaces, which essentially means making social inequalities explicit so that they

can be problematised and tackled instead of being normalised (Fraser 1990, 64). This not only serves feminist activist purposes, but also advances women's opportunities to control their own representation.

In general, DIY feminist communities are committed to the prioritisation of inclusivity and to critical engagement with issues of gender, identity and power (Clark-Parsons 2022, 44, 110). Networked media activism is functional to this aspirational intersectionality because it enables feedback mechanisms that feed into the feminist movement's internal reflection and evolution (Clark-Parsons 2022, 55). In short, feminist media pursue intersectional aspirations not only by representing platforms that can host debates about intersectionality both within the movement and in public fora, but also by adopting practices geared towards greater inclusivity and the fostering of free expression for marginalised voices.

4.3.7. Amassing counter-hegemonic power

Reflecting on the entrenchment of language and discourse in gendered power relations, Elshtain (1982, 605) urges feminists to move "toward speech as part of an emancipatory effort". Feminist emancipation must move through language because it is the very patriarchal domination that works its way in societal structures through language. As Rowbotham (1973, 33) proclaims: "Language is part of the political and ideological power of rulers (...). We can't just occupy existing words. We have to change the meanings of words even before we take them over". Hence, part of the feminist struggle is challenging the language of domination, and part of this challenge in turn is finding, or better yet creating, avenues where feminist thought can be expressed freely and where a feminist language can develop and free itself from patriarchal schemes of thought. This entails not simply expanding arenas for free speech, but creating opportunities, thanks to free speech, for participation in meaning creation and contestation, as well as critically engaging with the ways in which social power is complicit in the marginalisation of voices (Dean 2011, 153). Feminist resistance, in short, entails a discursive uncovering of oppression.

Feminist media are instrumental in this. Feminist media carry a long tradition of discursive activism and deconstructive discourse aimed at "promoting new grammars [and] new social paradigms" (Young 1997, 3) through which to look at the world. In other words, feminist media promote the creation and dissemination of a feminist counter-hegemonic discourse

which challenges dominant patriarchal narratives and offers "oppositional interpretations of [women's] identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1990, 67). Feminist media can be described as a form of counter-cultural production (Zobl 2009; Piepmeier 2009) because they offer alternatives to commercial media products offering traditional representations of women and narratives on women and feminism. Counter-hegemonic discourses and practices are the sources of a feminist counter-hegemonic power, which is exactly the kind of power that the feminist movement wields to enact socio-political change. Castells (2012, 15) defines this power as "counterpower", as it "challenges the power embedded in the institutions of society for the purpose of claiming representation for [a marginalised group's] own values and interests".

The spaces that feminists occupy in the media propose alternatives to the dominant public discourse as well as opportunities to enact alternative media practices. This feeds into a feminist "networked counterpublic" (Keller 2016, 80) where connections and interactions feed the counter-hegemonic discourse. Feminist counterpublics are to be seen in activist terms as a strategic tool for mobilisations to give a voice to the marginalised, but also in representational terms as sites where the marginalised themselves can be in control of forms of knowledge and of representations of themselves (Jackson and Foucault Welles 2015, 934). Thus, feminist counterpublics doubly enhance freedom of speech in the form of both representation and activism.

The fostering of a counter-hegemonic discourse is strictly linked to the heterotopic nature of - especially - alternative feminist media, which act as "countersites" for feminists' expression and explicitly position themselves as disaggregated from mainstream public fora (Lievrouw 2011, 63). Countercultural production is typical of the DIY ethos of alternative feminist media (Clark-Parsons 2022, 36). Feminist media practices, when they subscribe to a feminist counter-hegemonic discourse, take on the shape of feminist media tactics. To refer to these dynamics, Garcia and Lovink (1997) use the term "tactical media", which refers to De Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategy and tactics, where tactics refer to methods and tools that subordinated groups use in order to bypass or challenge dominant structures. Feminist media tactics are forms of "cultural and political jamming" (Kuni 2012, 98) that appropriate and "rearticulat[e] elements of the dominant culture so as to subvert their meanings" and to visibilise the contingent and thus mutable character of the patriarchal culture and norms (Gunnarsson Payne 2012, 65). They subvert the precepts of dominant

cultures by “subversing the meaning of signifiers” and thus make space for the marginalised to question these dominant cultures (Gunnarsson Payne 2012, 64). Feminist media tactics, therefore, enable feminists’ reappropriation of language, images and narratives.

4.3.8. Political identification, participatory culture and cultural citizenship

Engaging with the feminist struggle means engaging in cultural processes of identity formation and political identification (Klaus and Lünenborg 2012, 202). Culture is entrenched in power politics, and as such is an integral element of any social struggle. Feminists are making available their own cultural capital to the service of the feminist struggle, and at the same time are dialectically receiving the feminist struggle as an identitary experience. Free expression is fundamental for the free flow of such cultural resources and the functioning of such processes. Feminist media further freedom of expression to the extent that they allow feminists to take part in these processes. Feminist media are indeed considered as spaces and practices where feminist identities and connections can be articulated (Chidgey, Gunnarsson, and Zobl 2009).

Rodriguez (2001) explains how engagement in the feminist struggle converges into identity formation. By reprising Mouffe’s (1992, 372) reflections about the multiplicity, contingency and heterogeneity of identification of social subjects, Rodriguez (2001, 18) refuses the notion that social subjects’ identity and interests are predetermined on the basis of their belonging to a socio-historically determined group. Instead, “interests do not precede political action, but are constituted in political acts” (Gunnarsson Payne 2012, 66). It follows that the constitution of a subject’s feminist interests and identity is a gradual and dialectic process that happens through engagement in feminist struggles. Feminist media are one of the channels through which this political identification happens and feminist media practices are constitutive of feminist political identities and interests. In this sense, identitary expressions often overlap with political expressions, which means that identity expression through feminist media is not only a mode of political identification, but also of representation.

One way for feminism to make the most of its cultural capital is the building of feminist cultural memory. Feminists create sites of feminist identification in the form of cultural memories (Chidgey 2014a, 87) through practices like disseminating feminist ideas and documenting the mobilisations and successes of the feminist movement. These cultural

memories harbour a discursive and mobilising power but also serve community-building purposes (Chidgey 2014a, 95). They also ensure that the movement stays in a constant dialogue with its past and its ideological foundations.

Functional to the media's potential for identity formation is their participatory culture, which emphasises access and knowledge-sharing but also politics of validation and dialectical exchanges (Jenkins et al. 2006). Political identification and participatory culture culminate in the conceptualisation of cultural citizenship and in Rodriguez's (2001) concept of citizens' media. The concept of cultural citizenship conjugates individuals' cultural agency with their socio-political identities, and thus in a way bridges the gap between the personal and the political. Cultural citizenship proposes a definition of citizenship which is shaped by the "everyday practices of sharing space and forming and exchanging ideas" (Lim 2010, 221), or in other words by people's cultural contributions to the cycle of meaning production (Drüeke and Zobl 2012, 16), which is a dialectical concept because people create meaning through their cultural agency but also are shaped by their own meaning production and engagement in identity politics.

As much as free expression is fundamental for traditional ideas of citizenship, it is even more essential for cultural citizenship. As fundamental tools for cultural production and identity formation, media are among the arenas where cultural citizenship develops (Klaus and Lünenborg 2012, 204). They are spaces "to actively construct meaning and make sense of the world" (Drüeke and Zobl 2012, 15). Because media are essential to cultural citizenship, it follows that they are essential to freedom of expression as well. Thus, when conceptualising a feminist cultural citizenship, it becomes clear how feminist media and freedom of expression are interlinked and how the former advance the latter. This is true for both mainstream and alternative media. Rodriguez (2001, 20) proposes a conceptualisation of media as citizens' media so as to take into account the transformative potential of cultural media practices (Rodriguez 2001, 20), which is essential when devoting these practices to a social struggle such as the feminist struggle.

4.4. Shortcomings of feminist media for women's freedom of expression

4.4.1. Dangers of visibility: amplification of violence and silencing practices

The visibility that feminist media afford feminists and their struggle also has its downsides. Networked activism has been a way for feminists to broaden their outreach and increase their capillarity in the media space, but this has also meant more exposure to the many aspects of the backlash of one's mediatic exposure (Clark-Parsons 2022, 25). Networked activism brings feminists' media presence in spaces that are rife with opportunities for networked misogyny to materialise, such as in the form of hate speech and digital gender-based violence (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016). The amplification of feminists' voices opens them up to vulnerabilities as it comes with the risk of a consequential amplification of violence, both online and offline (Clark-Parsons 2022, 153-154).

For the visibility afforded by feminist media practices, feminists have to pay a price in the currency of safety. In traditional media, like print media, feminists are more in control of the criteria of their own visibility and of the people they share their cultural products with. Paradigmatic is the case of the feminist zine community. Feminist zinesters are constantly involved in boundary work, as they are in charge of their own distribution policy and they have higher control over the choice of their audience (Clark-Parsons 2022, 124). Traditional media like zines are safer by virtue of the unilateral flow of communication that they establish (Clark-Parsons 2022, 124). Zines' limited distribution and the absence of interactive mediatic functions mean that zinesters have a limited contact with their public, which, notwithstanding its downsides, is linked to more safety for zinesters as it protects them from any backlash that a closer contact with their audience might expose them to (Clark-Parsons 2022, 120). Modern-day zine-making is a bit different, as it is a hybrid mediatic form that fuses together traditional printed zines and distribution practices that also involve digital media (boyd 2008, 125). However, some degree of control remains in the form of zinesters' policies on online publication (Clark-Parsons 2022, 124).

Digital media, on the other hand, leave their users much more vulnerable to backlash. On social networks, feminists receive the most clamorous backlash as they experience high levels of violent threats and sexual harassment (Duggan 2017). During and as an aftermath of the social media campaign #MeToo, people who spoke out were the targets of hate speech and harassment, they were shamed or dismissed as liars, and many people even refrained from speaking out for fear of the consequences (Clark-Parsons 2022, 83-84).

Even the practice of safe spaces, though, intended to create more protection, has its flaws. Safe spaces are maintained through discursive and technological boundaries, but the latter are subjected to the structural limitations of the available technology. In safe spaces constituted on social networks, such as the Facebook group Girl Army, though social media settings afford some degree of privacy, the lack of anonymity and the insufficiency of privacy guidelines expose members to some degree of danger nonetheless (Clark-Parsons 2017, 2135-2136). Overall, digital media - more so than traditional media - expose women to silencing practices that curb their enjoyment of free speech (Bladini 2020, 5). These silencing practices have a chilling effect on women's free speech in the media (Article 19 2020, 6) which is particularly worrying when it affects women who are journalists and human rights defenders (UNESCO 2021; DanChurchAid and ActAlliance 2023), as well as in light of its reverberation in real life as part of an online-offline "continuum of sexual violence" (Kelly 1998).

4.4.2. Challenge of visibility: when visibility isn't enough

Visibility of women in mainstream media has been referred to as "mediated invisibility", an expression which accentuates the fact that women are not absent from the media altogether, but their presence is dissimulated by biases, misconceptions and stereotypes to the point that this misrepresentation becomes more problematic than a lack of representation would be (Gallagher 2014, 23). Feminist media partly answer this problem, but even the visibility that feminist media afford is lacking under some aspects. Notwithstanding the dangers of hypervisibility for feminists, there are some criticisms to be waged in terms of limitations to what feminism's visibility can achieve. The pursuit of a politics of visibility carries the risk of degenerating into an economy of visibility, feeding into consumer culture and individualism, which are typical values of popular feminism and post-feminism. In economies of visibility, representation is for its own sake and doesn't advance true feminist political action or emancipation (Clark-Parsons 2022, 76). Hence, representation becomes performative: "rather than making the personal political, economies of visibility constrain political action to an individual's performance of self" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 77). The performativity of economies of visibility is individualistic and shallow and risks dampening the movement's political efficacy (Clark-Parsons 2022, 77). Indeed, because of this limitation, feminist networked activism reaches a conundrum between visibility and ability to enact institutional and societal change (Banet-Weiser 2015; Fraser 2013; Clark-Parsons 2022, 164). By making the personal

political, feminists aim to enact change at both personal and structural level; however, the limitations of networked activism make it so that, while change at personal level may be easier to achieve, change at structural level risks staying out of reach.

Feminists' visibility through feminist media cannot be assessed as a homogenous dynamic. Even within feminist media, possibilities for free expression are not the same for all women and feminists. Not all those who engage in feminist media production or participatory and interactive feminist media practices have the same outreach. A limitation of media visibility in terms of free expression is that both access to public discourse and outreach are highly variable based on elements like race, sexuality and class (Clark-Parsons 2022, 85), which means that even within feminists there are subgroups that tend to benefit from more or more positive visibility than others. This can be seen through phenomena such as the "professionalisation of feminism" (Dean 2011, 48), and is mostly a problem of feminist media practices within mainstream media. Because visibility in mainstream media is a kind of marketplace visibility that subscribes to consumer culture, only those who belong to the dominant side of cleavage identities are best positioned to benefit from it (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017) - most often than not white, cis-heterosexual, middle class or rich, educated women from Western countries. With all these limitations, the visibility afforded to feminism is a partial visibility - only certain aspects of feminism and only certain feminist voices are visibilised, at least with positive connotations.

4.4.3. Feminist echo chamber

One of the limitations of feminists' networked activism, and especially of networked community-building, is that they tend to silo feminist discourses (Clark-Parsons 2022, 103). Community-building practices, designed to strengthen the movement's internal ties and to cater to its needs of safety and ideological growth, at times tend to isolate movement members from external dialogue and interactions. This does not happen without reason, as feminists are aware of the dangers that they incur because of their activism and thus they may on occasion prefer to engage in feminist media practices that minimise those dangers. This, however, can lead feminist discourse to develop in closed-off public arenas where its impact is limited because it does not reach new audiences but rather it bounces back among already convincingly feminist audiences. Thereby, feminist discourse cannot be challenged by the contact with oppositional views, but it also does not have the opportunity to truly challenge

hegemonic patriarchal discourses and the views of the people who adopt them (Nguyen 2022). Feminist discourses risk becoming trapped in an echo chamber which prevents the exposure to different ideas and informations about feminism and gender equality for people who might actually be new to the subject, have limited access to relevant information, or outright not know that there are alternative conceptions of the role of women in society (Pitaksantayothin 2023, 11). In short, the danger is that of a fragmentation of the public sphere (Habermas 1962) which would undermine feminism's counter-hegemonic power and hinder the movement's potential for societal change.

The feminist echo chamber is especially a problem of alternative media. The counterpublics of alternative feminist media risk "creating a release valve for the oppressed, a counterpublic sphere where women can freely critique systems of power without actually disrupting them" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 133). This would further perpetuate the marginalisation of already marginalised voices. The inward orientation of alternative feminist media may lead them to become "individualistic spaces of withdrawal" (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 143) which are not conducive to societal change. An example of this limitation are feminist safe spaces. Their prioritisation of safety from networked misogyny leads to the natural consequence of forming boundaries from the outside world, but these boundaries might cause the group to become a feminist echo chamber (Clark-Parsons 2017, 2135). Feminist echo chambers do not advance freedom of expression as they do not try to conquer avenues for free speech outside of those they already constitute.

4.4.4. Failures in inclusivity and intersectionality

Despite distinct aspirations towards inclusivity, at times the environment fostered in feminist media is not truly conducive to the incorporation of truly inclusive and intersectional practices. Acritically asserting that feminist media make free speech possible for women is insidious if one does not ask oneself who it is really genuinely free for. Adopting the perspective of complications to intellectual property, it has been argued that free speech in the media is linked to the invisibilisation of the work of marginalised communities (Dean 2011, 50). This invisibilisation is ever more severe as it would constitute a double marginalisation: marginalised communities are subjected to silencing once by reason of their disenfranchised standing in society, twice because of appropriation of their truth and of their work to the

benefit of other, often privileged, groups. In the case of the feminist movement, for instance, one of the themes of Dean's (2011) work is the appropriation of the work of women of colour in feminism. Issues like this may often lead to the retreat of some members from the public discourse, out of "continuing frustration with feeling ignored and mistreated by dominant participants in the dialogue" (Dean 2011, 52). It is clear then how the marginalisation of already marginalised voices does not simply come from dominant voices in society, but even from dominant voices within a debate that is supposed to be counter-hegemonic. Even within feminist communities and debates, some voices enjoy more free speech than others. This imbalance in the enjoyment of free speech in feminist media is one of their most glaring shortcomings as it is endogenous.

Although feminist media can be generally said to broaden women's accessibility to media, there are some criticisms to take into account. For instance, a common problem of participation in alternative feminist media is that the "degree of counter-cultural capital" that enables participation in these media environment is quite high, which may make it inaccessible to some (Clark-Parsons 2022, 122). The subcultural quality of some feminist media projects has been criticised for the mechanisms of exclusion that it validates (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 32). Indeed, some women are precluded from the very possibility to participate in certain debates or to join certain communities in light of their scarce feminist literacy which constitutes a barrier to entry (Clark-Parsons 2017). Many women who wish to join these arenas for discussion may not be able to find adequate tools for their education, and feminist media, particularly alternative media, though supposed to also fulfil an informing function, at times sacrifice this informing function for the sake of further development of the feminist counter-hegemonic discourse. These barriers to entry are found, for example, in feminist safe spaces such as the Facebook group Girl Army (Clark-Parsons 2017).

Another problematic aspect of the practice of feminist safe spaces is how they deal with the objective of inclusivity. The boundary work that feminists have to carry out in order to ensure safety within these spaces makes it so that exclusionary mechanisms have to be in place in order to maintain those boundaries. However, in practice these exclusionary mechanisms often go to the detriment of some members of the feminist movement, as they tend to, though inadvertently, privilege cis-womanhood and practise exclusion along the cleavages of race and class (Clark-Parsons 2017, 2137-2138). This potential exclusion is inherent to the

practice of safe spaces, but is often not recognised and addressed critically. From this point of view, mainstream media like social networks can be positive as they give feminists - especially those at the intersection of marginalised communities - the advantage of a platform where they can criticise exclusionary activist practices (Noble and Tynes 2016).

The challenge of intersectionality is one that feminists have to deal with both in representational and in activist terms, both in the media and outside of them. Often feminist practices and discourses, no matter how well-intentioned, fail to properly address and tackle issues of intersectionality and even run into the trap of reproducing racial and gender hierarchies by failing to truly challenge them (Crenshaw 1991, 1266). However far the feminist movement has come in terms of inclusivity and intersectionality, it is important to acknowledge that the struggle to "decolonise feminism" is still open, and that feminists belonging to privileged groups will have to do more than acknowledge their privilege and extend their resources to their fellow movement members (Lukose 2018, 40). This also mean critically reconsidering some aspects of feminist media practices and how these incorporate reflections on and improvements towards intersectionality.

4.4.5. Popular feminism and post-feminism

Participatory approaches in feminist media can be praised for the spaces they create for women's free speech, but they expose feminism to the vulnerability of co-optation. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010, 144) recognise in participatory approaches to media the danger of being used to promote conservative content or co-opted by profit-seeking media producers and thus "subsumed under capital interest". These phenomena fall under the category of so-called popular feminism, or pop feminism. In the new century, with the era of post-feminism at first and with the rise of popular feminism later, public discourse has witnessed the vilification and then commodification of feminism. First, the framing of feminism has degenerated into post-feminism (McRobbie 2004, 255). Then, it has fallen into the arguably opposite but equally insidious trap of popular feminism, which has caused the commodification of feminism and its consequent trivialisation (Fraser 1995, 163).

McRobbie (2004, 255) describes post-feminism as a "double entanglement": on the one hand, social commentaries are overcome by the sentiment that feminism has reached its objectives, that finally a feminist consciousness has been achieved in society, but on the other hand this

is seen as a pretext to state that feminism is not needed anymore, that it has become irrelevant and obsolete (Gallagher 2014, 26; Gill 2007, 268). The obsolescence of feminism is justified by the assertion that feminism isn't needed anymore because now women are the same as men, but the argument is not purely one of equality between men and women (Griffin 2006, 85). Women are portrayed as violent, powerful, sexually liberated; they are seen as worthy only by virtue of their association with men. Women are seen as equal to men not by virtue of a true feminist emancipation, but according to the same heterosexist standards that underpin the patriarchal system. The post-feminist era has channelled anti-values of consumerism, individualism and the depoliticisation of issues, all of which have significantly hindered and challenged the efficacy of feminist collective action (Griffin 2006, 84-85).

Clark-Parsons (2022, 13) argues that, though the phenomenon of post-feminism is over, the challenges of post-feminism and those of popular feminism are quite similar. The "double entanglement" mentioned by McRobbie (2004) can be applied to popular feminism to define the ambivalence between the assets that can be attributed to it for the advancement of feminist ideals and the dangers that befall feminist discourses and contentious actions because of it. On the one hand, popular feminism has made the feminist movement more visible, feminist activism and ideas more accessible, and feminism itself more accepted if not internalised by more people (Clark-Parsons 2022, 10). Overall, popular feminism has contributed to a greater outreach of feminism. On the other hand, however, popular feminism is decidedly problematic for the societal impact and ideological integrity of the movement, as well as for its members' ability to form connections and alliances (McRobbie 2009, 26). To sum it up, "relying heavily on notions of women's individual choice, empowerment and personal freedom", popular feminism "fits perfectly within a vocabulary of neoliberalism" (Gallagher 2014 26-27).

The era of popular feminism is the era of consumerism and individualism (Gallagher 2014, 27), and its main channel is the media system, especially through new media (Clark-Parsons 2022). Feminist media constantly run the risk of degenerating into avenues of reproduction of popular feminism, at times without properly realising it. Popular feminism emphasises individual identity and agency, individual choice, personal stories, empowerment narratives (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017, 884). If these were successfully converted into political discourses and collective action, then popular feminism would be an unproblematic asset for the movement, but this is far from the reality. These elements are instead

instrumentalised for the benefit of capital accumulation. Empowerment discourses create the illusion that feminist emancipation can start from individual emancipation, and in the process they perpetuate social inequalities and invisibilise power dynamics based on gender, race, capital (Volčič 2008, 16), which influence not only agency but the very fruition of free speech. This individualism and subjugation to capitalistic logics feed into the degeneration of feminism through consumer culture, which dangerously substitutes collective action (Clark-Parsons 2022, 7).

Coupling feminism with consumer culture means decoupling it from critical perspectives on structural inequalities (Clark-Parsons 2022, 11). The result is a watered-down version of feminism - one that formally upholds feminist values and narratives while in reality it only appropriates them to the extent that they serve capitalist ideologies and objectives; one that covertly enables and reproduces oppressions based on gender, sexuality, race and class (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017, 886). Zeisler (2016, xiii) refers to this kind of feminism as "marketplace feminism" because it incorporates marketplace values and distributes to the public a "more palatable, depoliticised version of feminist ideas and rhetoric" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 11). The link to post-feminism is clear, as this type of feminism creates the illusion that feminist values are by now an integral part of society, while in reality distorting them and hijacking the feminist struggle. If feminist free expression is only tolerated as long as it answers to marketplace values, then it is no free expression at all.

A sub-phenomenon of popular feminism in new media, hashtag feminism is the perfect example of how popular feminism is a double-edged sword. Hashtag feminism is the feminist use of hashtags on social networks to virtually bring together feminist communities, rally women around a common cause and provide opportunities to both contribute to political discourse and participate in collective virtual mobilisation (Chen, Pain, and Barner 2018, 199-200). While it makes feminist ideas and collective action more accessible to a broader public, this comes at the cost of watering down the claims that the hashtags channel (Clark-Parsons 2022, 12). Moreover, the personal engagement required by hashtag feminism can take a high emotional and mental toll on the participants (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, 2018, 244), especially when they are forced to recall traumatic stories of gender-based violence and discrimination. Not only can hashtag feminism be costly, but its ability to enact fundamental social change has also been significantly questioned (Desai 2006; Jane 2016), as well as its ability to incorporate intersectional aspirations (Trott 2020, 1134).

The presence of elements of popular feminism in feminist media not only endangers their potential for social change and for enabling women's free expression, but, all things considered, it also leads one to question whether certain mediatic spaces or practices which are considered feminist do, in fact, uphold feminist standards or are just a form of appropriation of feminist values for profit and mediatic clout.

5. THEORY AND PRACTICE OF FEMINIST MEDIA: CASE STUDY ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Case study analysis: Femminismo a Sud and Freeda Media Italy

The peculiarities of feminist media features and practices described in the previous chapter can be better understood by empirically contextualising them. For this purpose, two case studies have been chosen, both belonging to the Italian feminist media landscape. The choice of media pieces belonging to the same national context is functional to enabling a comparison also based on the national political context. This work will operate a media analysis on the two platforms, and to do so it will understand media as content, structures and practices, and draw analytical categories from an adaptation of Atton's (2002) typology of alternative and radical media.

Conceiving media as content means focusing on the finished cultural and/or communicative product, that is, on elements such as communication styles, meanings and discourses, the message that is being conveyed (Dwyer 2019). Understanding media as structures, instead, means understanding them as economic structures of production, but also as cultural structures of production and as communicative structures (Paxson 2018, 22; Dwyer 2019); it means working from the assumption that the medium itself, not only its content, shapes and determines the message that is being sent (McLuhan 1964, 7). Couldry (2004) theorises the concept of "media as practice" as an alternative to the first two readings of media. Understanding media as practices shifts the focus of the media analysis on "the whole range of practices that are oriented towards media and the role of media in ordering other practices in the social world" (Couldry 2004, 115). In other words, studying media as practices means studying the interpersonal and social, but also political, economic and cultural practices that people carry out when it comes to media.

Atton (2002) constructs a typology of alternative and radical media that looks at dimensions such as: distributive use; form; content; social relations, roles and responsibilities; communication processes (Atton 2002, 27). The dimensions of this typology take into account economies of distribution, media forms and contents, the role of media producers and consumers, and the structure of communication processes. This typology, though conceived for alternative media, can be adapted to analyse any kind of media, and thus can be employed to construct a complex interpretation of media through what is no longer a strict mainstream/alternative dichotomy, but rather a model where mainstream and alternative are no longer dichotomic but two extremes of a continuum, and they are used as categories to be assigned to each of the dimensions that make up the model.

5.1.1. Femminismo a Sud

Femminismo a Sud (*FaS*) is an Italian feminist blog run by the Italian activist collective Fikasicula. It is one of the first Italian web spaces where feminism and anti-racism are explicitly linked and where feminist critical analysis travels through content in diaristic style (Traversa 2016). At the time of writing, the blog is inactive; from a reconstruction of its virtual activity, one can detect that it was active between 2008 and April 2015 (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 41; Fikasicula, n.d.). All information contained in this analysis, unless stated otherwise, is collected from various pages of the blog (Fikasicula, n.d.; for a detailed list of specific pages consulted, see the bibliography).

FaS incorporates an attempt to devise an alternative economy of distribution even within the confines of a commercial virtual channel. The collective uses "NoBlogs", a blogging platform designed to provide an alternative to corporate-owned platforms, which only hosts blogs that share "principles of anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobia, anti-transphobia, and anti-militarism" and the same non-commercial nature (Autistici/Inventati 2020). This choice in terms of distributive use corresponds to the anti-commercial standards of alternative media but displays an intention to feed into an established tradition of distribution. The platform collects digital content in the form of articles, but is also a hub for feminist dialogue in the form of comment interactions.

In its About us section, the collective behind the blog defines the blog as “anti-sexist, anti-fascist, anti-racist, anti-speciesist and not tameable” (Fikasicula, n.d.; my translation). The blog subtitle swiftly sums up the blog’s editorial line: “Storie di egemonie culturali e pretese uguaglianze. Dal margine: nel tempo in cui tutti dicevano di avere capito!”, which translates into: “Stories of cultural hegemonies and alleged equalities. From the margins: during the time when everyone said they had understood!” (Fikasicula, n.d.; my translation). *FaS* thus positions itself explicitly as an alternative (“from the margins”) feminist platform and espouses a feminist counter-hegemonic rhetoric that offers critiques to the dominant narratives and power structures. Traversa (2016, 24) describes it as a knowledge path that “start[s] from what is constructed as marginal and partial” and “show[s] the possibility of imagining different ways of knowing”.

The blog adopts and encourages its users to adopt a “postcolonial and an intersectional perspective towards society, culture and politics” (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 41). A blog’s self description, retrieved from Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl (2012, 41), recites as follows:

> “Our blog is called Femminismo a Sud because the whole blog has a postcolonial view on reality. We locate ourselves at the South of the hegemonic bio-territoriality. We think that in our society, particularly in Italy, there is a use of power which controls women, immigrants and all persons who don’t want this type of system and its use of power. We think that sexism, racism and fascism are different aspects of the same hegemonic situation. And therefore we can’t fight against sexism if we don’t understand how sexism is interwoven with racism and fascism.”

This excerpt makes explicit the blog’s raison d'être, which is interrogating and elaborating on the intersecting forms of oppression that people experience by reason of their gender, sexuality, race, class and other identity features. The focus is especially on the double oppression of women from the South of Italy, experiencing sexism as women but also racism as “terrone” (a derogatory word used from people from Northern Italy to address people from Southern Italy). This double oppression is often explicitly discussed - in articles such as “After foreigners, now away with the Southerners. The racist North in action” and “Those Southern women no one wants to see” (Fikasicula, 2009a, 2009b; my translation) - but also often becomes entangled in discussions on other topics.

Traversa (2016, 32) has operated a thematic and sequential analysis of social interaction in a corpus of posts and comments relative to the year 2009, which has detected and categorised the most common topics tackled by articles and comments: inter alia, the blog deals with Southern Italy issues, gender violence, sexism, women in politics and feminist activism, sexism in the media (Traversa 2016, 29). Moreover, a link can be detected between the discussion of Southern Italy issues and mentions of an anti-racist, anti-fascist and anti-sexist rhetoric, which according to Traversa (2016, 32) is in conformity with the emphasis today's feminist movement puts on intersectionality.

FaS is constantly engaged in its own self-definition. Numerous articles engage in the question of "What is *Femminismo a Sud*" (Fikasicula 2011a; my translation), but also of "What is NOT *Femminismo a Sud*" (Fikasicula 2012; my translation), showing a dialectical and critical engagement with self-definition as well as with feminist and intersectional conversations. The blog has encountered extensive critique, but displays critical engagement with the outside, especially its detractors, as shown by articles such as "*Femminismo a Sud?* Take it down" (Fikasicula 2011b; my translation).

Besides these debates, many articles focus on feminist critiques of current events and reflections on hot topics - be it women's issues, such as abortion, or other issues, such as migrants' rights. Many contributions show an interventionist rhetoric which resembles a call to action for users, aimed at fostering solidarity and stronger feminist collective action, as shown in articles such as "Our "r-esistenza" (existence-resistance) has just begun!" (Fikasicula 2010; my translation). Many articles relay users' personal experiences. Others contain advice and strategies for self-empowerment.

The language used in articles and comment strives towards inclusivity, as demonstrated by the use of the character @ as a gender-neutral alternative to gendered word endings. A peculiarity that can be noticed about the tone of many articles is the use of irony, a typical practice of alternative feminist media that has been referred to as "strategic frivolity" (Bazzichelli 2006).

In the Contacts section of the blog, a link is available which directs users to an old blog, dating back to before the transition to a new blog platform. However, as of today (June 2024),

when one clicks on this link, an error page is shown, meaning that the website cannot be reached.

As there is a collective behind the blog, the collectivist organisation of the platform is evident. Users, who may or may not be part of the collective, are invited to contribute to the blog both through engagement in discussions in the comment section of posts and through the production of articles. The blog thus embodies peculiarities of alternative media: a DIY ethos (Chidgey 2014a, 75) and the fact that the distinction at the actor level between producer and consumer is annulled, meaning that every user becomes a "prosumer" (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 145). Access to the platform is open, but there is a barrier to entry in the form of the necessity of registration in order to enjoy certain features, such as some content and the ability to comment.

The main mode of communication enabled by the blog platform is represented by the comments section of the articles. Traversa's (2016, 32) thematic and sequential analysis of social interaction has detected that comments are generally in line with the posts in terms of content and general opinion. However, it should be noted that in many of the most recent posts, comments have been disabled. The "prosumer" role of users enables a different type of communication: every user communicates on an equal footing with others, and is aware that through every contribution - be it through posts or comments - they are collectively feeding the body of feminist knowledge and discourse that the blog houses. The communication is non-hierarchical and functional to the creation and strengthening of a feminist networked community. In its About us section, the blog recognises the utmost importance to its community and to the interactions and dialogue with the collective, both through comments and through channels such as the collective's e-mail and the mailing list.

The collectivist production politics of the blog enable "free sharing of ideas as free access to political participation" (Traversa 2016, 26). In accordance with this, the blog is published under a Creative Commons Licence. This means that all of its content is open for everyone and can be used, perused, cited and redistributed by anyone as long as due credit is given to the authors. The blog comments this licence as follows: "Sharing, letting ideas circulate, recognising credit to those who had those ideas, without appropriating knowledge" (Fikasicula, n.d.; my translation). This is a valuable contribution to the global feminist debate on appropriation of credit for the work of marginalised communities.

5.1.2. Freeda Media Italy

Freeda Media Italy (or *Freeda*) is an Italian-born social-media based media company, focused on producing relatable media content for women. It was founded in 2016 and is active as of today on most social networks. All information contained in this analysis, unless stated otherwise, is collected from the media company's active social media pages (Freeda, n.d.; for a detailed list of specific pages consulted, see the bibliography).

Freeda Media Italy's choice of channels for distributive use is perfectly aligned to an orientation towards marketability and maximisation of outreach. Indeed, *Freeda* is present on different social media, such as Instagram, TikTok, Youtube, Facebook, LinkedIn (Freeda, n.d.). The LinkedIn page differs from the other pages as its main objective is not connection with the audience, but networking with brands and companies in view of potential commercial partnerships. Freeda's choice in terms of economy of distribution displays the intention to subscribe to the market-driven and algorithm-based logic of traditional, corporate-owned social media channels.

Freeda Media Italy repurposes the same content on each active social media platform, adapting it to the formats that the various platforms support. The content proposed by Freeda is mostly visual and audio-visual content in the form of posts on social media. These posts have different formats also based on the platform they are repurposed for. While the Instagram and Facebook pages often have a mix of captioned pictures and videos, the TikTok and Youtube pages exclusively have videos. Only more recently, Freeda has also experimented with audio content in the form of podcasts. The formats of these posts are designed in such a way that the *Freeda* platform resembles a lifestyle magazine targeted to women. The type of formats proposed include illustrations, quotes, interviews, as well as impromptu fora where the platform content creators ask questions for the audience to reply to in the comments. This constant rotation between the content formats ensures the optimisation of the posts' performance because it provides the audience with variety but at the same time with familiar content that the audience can find easy to relate to and interact with.

Media Makers Meet's (2023, 26) report describes *Freeda*'s content as "relatable" and geared towards "making a positive impact on the world", and identifies its assets in the community

of women built across Freeda's platforms and on the media company's mastery of technological tools and content formats that makes it able to keep up with media trends.

Freeda's Instagram description provides a short summary of the rationale behind its content: "We are here to tell stories about women, to inform, to have fun, and to change things a little" (Freeda, n.d.; my translation). *Freeda*'s LinkedIn description encapsulates its co-optation of feminist values through an emphasis on women's empowerment (Freeda, n.d.):

> "Freeda is the #1 media brand for entire generations of women. Inspire, represent and speak to them through unique content and experiences is what we care about the most. Our mission is to spread real women's stories to inspire positive change and impact society at large. We do that by promoting women's achievements, inspiring personal style and celebrating sisterhood. We create original premium content designed for all screens and social platforms dedicated to passions, cultures and news relevant to young women."

Both from its self-descriptions and its editorial line, two main motifs can be identified. On the one hand, *Freeda* places great emphasis on representation. It describes itself as "the voice of the new generations of women, of men, and of humans who do not recognise themselves in traditional gender categories" (Freeda, n.d.), thus showcasing not only a commitment to people's free expression, but also an - at least declaratory - aspiration towards intersectionality. This is evident also in *Freeda*'s goal, which is "to open a window to the real world and give a voice to those who feel underrepresented, addressing and representing them in a powerful, innovative way" (Freeda, n.d.). The editorial line reflects these statements to the extent that Freeda's posts deal with a various range of topics that different people can relate to - from women's reproductive issues to sexually transmissible diseases, from sexism and homo-transphobia to racism and fatphobia, from hobbies to mental health and the struggles of growing up - and interviews include women and men of different sexualities, races, and life stories. Arguably, however, this representation can be criticised as a "token" representation because it is merely a symbolic appeasement to demands for diversity but does not challenge the structural inequalities that cause those demands (Kanter 1977, 208; Kurt Yilmaz and Sürgevil Dalkılıç 2019, 206).

Another theme which is pervasive in *Freeda*'s editorial line is the celebration of personal achievement. *Freeda* mentions "achievement" and "personal style" among its core values (Freeda, n.d.). Bernardoni (2017), *Freeda*'s editorial director, has declared in an interview

that the company focuses on stories of women who "broke barriers and improved society by virtue of their strength". *Freeda*'s editorial line is full of quotes by or interviews with famous people or people with impressive personal stories. The intent is to market women's personal success as a feminist success, to make women's success into profitable stories of self-empowerment, which become wrongfully equated to success stories in the fight for gender equality (Gallagher 2014, 27).

Freeda's content includes a quite balanced mix of weighty topics - such as gender stereotypes, women's empowerment, sex education, women's success stories - and more frivolous content - such as makeup, relationships, relatable stories about teenage, young adult and adult life. For instance, it is easy to find formats like "Define love in a word" and "Describe your 20s in a word" juxtaposed to questions like "How can we talk about sustainability to kids?", "What is the state of the art of sex education in Italy?", "Are you afraid of going home alone?" (Freeda, n.d.). Formats such as "Let's talk about: …" have a clear informing function, while most of the time illustrations are meant to fulfil the audience's interest in relatable, frivolous content. A slight imbalance within the content is represented by the coexistence of inclusive and intersectional content and content adopting a gender-essentialist perspective.

As a media company fully inscribed within the commercial media system, *Freeda* adopts a social media interface that reproduces the traditional producer-consumer dichotomy, where there is a stark juxtaposition between the platform's content production team and the audience who is engaging with that content (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 145). More specifically, the content production team mass-produces a copious amount of content, to be consumed regularly by a big audience. *Freeda* has, in fact, amassed big numbers across all its platforms: it counts on a cumulative following of more than 4 million users across all of its Italian platforms (as of June 2024), whereas at the global level its content is consumed by around 150 million people each month (Media Makers Meet 2023, 10). Thanks to its outreach, it has expanded its following from its native Italy to the UK and Spain as well. The technological and structural affordances of social media enable a two-way flow of communication: the comment section of posts enables users to not only consume media content, but also engage with it. Some formats that Freeda uses are intended to encourage this communication even further, as they pose questions for the audience that are meant to spark discussions. This flow of communication, however, is two-way only outwardly. The reality is,

however, that it can be observed that interactions between content producers and users are quite scarce, though on the other hand interactions among users are more common. In addition, users are not even fully privy of exactly who the content production team is composed of, as the posts provide no signature or identification. These elements warrant the conjecture that *Freeda*'s choice of format is functional to mimicking interaction between media producers and consumers, which gives consumers the illusion of more genuine and relatable content, without this interaction actually materialising.

A characteristic that stands out in *Freeda*'s approach is its orientation towards business and the marketisation of content. *Freeda* has declared that "as a business [they] strive to be the best possible partner for all brands and organisations who want to connect with" the younger generations (Freeda, n.d.). Part of their mission is to "help brands have a positive impact and build more authentic relationships with their customers" (Freeda, n.d.). *Freeda* has also launched Freeda Platform, a technology marketing platform that analyses data on consumers' engagement and uses findings to advise brands on how to be more relevant for and connected with their audiences. In order to boost their own media performance, *Freeda* "uses machine learning to spot trends in the data they collect on what social content drives engagement" (Media Makers Meet 2023, 13). These elements show how *Freeda*'s media presence and activity is driven less by an ideological mission and more by data, consumer engagement and feedback. *Freeda* thus reveals itself to be more a business enterprise than a women-focused media platform.

5.2. Discussion on case studies

The two examples of media analysed here represent paradigmatic cases respectively of an alternative and a mainstream medium that incorporate feminist topics, values and/or objectives. While they are peculiar in their own right, it is also interesting to compare them in light of the two different approaches to the employment of the personal as means to the political that they embody.

FaS exemplifies how women claim their agency as representors through the use of feminist media, as it gives platform users the chance to be producers of the very content they want to see in media. It operates with various objectives, ranging from information sharing and consciousness-raising, to community-building, to the activist aims of fueling the feminist

ideological debate and inciting solidarity and collective action; in doing so, however, it also accompanies these pursuits with more frivolous discussions that wisely mix the personal and the political (Harris 2008, 486), through a strategically crafted "hybrid of party and protest" (Traversa 2016, 27). In order to define this modality of engaging in collective action, Traversa (2016) uses the term "micropolitics": Femminismo a Sud's micro-political approach to the feminist cause involves combining personal experiences, creative expression and political analysis (Traversa 2016, 46), which is a perfect embodiment of what "the personal is political" means in terms of women's free expression. The blog centres marginalised voices, crafts an environment where they are free to express themselves and facilitates the linkage between personal experiences of oppression and their political interpretation. This is a testament to the blog's inclusivity, dedication to intersectionality and pursuit of counter-hegemonic power in the form of a feminist counter-hegemonic discourse.

The blog contributes to its own identitary definition, thus feeding into cultural processes of identity formation and political identification of its users. It is the proponent of a critical approach to identity, in that it "question[s] traditional identity constructions" and builds upon a concept of identity as "exist[ing] at the intersection of multiple identity categories" (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 42). This emphasis on identity is corroborated by the participatory processes that users can engage in, which ensure a dialectic understanding of the very process of identity formation. The blog's cultural input also materialises in the form of subcultural capital (Lievrouw 2011, 65), as the blog combines local embeddedness and broader political ambitions through the proposition of lenses for interpretation of local and national events. What the blog achieves only an ambiguous success in is the formation of cultural memory: while it remains available to the public even after it has become inactive, a portion of its repository is unavailable due to the malfunction of the provided link.

FaS serves as a safe space for all its users to connect, share their experiences, and learn from their peers. Not many technological boundaries are in place, but due to the alternative character of the blog there is very little interference from the outside. This, however, implies that the blog has achieved a moderate to scarce outreach, as is the case with many alternative feminist media (Lievrouw 2011, 62). While this is often intentional and a consequence of alternative media's choice to privilege community-building over collective action, it still means that the blog runs into the trap of being a feminist echo chamber and it risks not being able to have much potential for socio-cultural change outside of its community's confines.

Moreover, the blog's lack of economic resources cements its small outreach and keeps it from pursuing more ambitious activist purposes.

Freeda's distinctive feature is its markedly business-oriented nature. Its dedication to engagement maximisation has enabled *Freeda* to obtain an extraordinary outreach, which has in turn opened up the path for an expansion of *Freeda*'s activity in countries other than its native Italy. *Freeda*'s objective is driving up engagement, and it seems to succeed at it. Their approach, however, works to the detriment of personal interaction and of the development and pursuit of a solid ideological mission. Despite its commitment to being the voice of new generations and their appropriation of ostensibly feminist values and objectives of representation and community-building, *Freeda*'s main objective is not the furtherance of the feminist struggle. In fact, *Freeda* entirely abstains from either identifying as a feminist platform or mentioning feminism in its content; it merely appropriates feminist values and issues at surface-level. In her analysis of *Freeda* as an example of mainstream feminism in the media, Boraso (2019, 45) argues that "*Freeda* seems to exploit some characteristics of pop feminism without ever making explicit or using the word "feminism"". In fact, Freeda is a perfect example of what the rise of popular feminism means for feminism: feminism becomes sellable (Zeisler 2016, xii), it is made into a brand that can be sold and drive engagement. The very ideas that are sold are often not even truly feminist: women's empowerment, success, power of individual choice are framed as victories against gender inequality (Rottenberg 2014, 22) without challenging the patriarchal and capitalist structures and the socioeconomic inequalities that perpetuate and exacerbate gender inequality, and instead fully subscribing to many of the logics that underpin those structures, not least the commercial logic of profit (Banet-Weiser 2018, 11).

Gender inequality is only formally antagonised, but substantially perpetrated and institutionalised through the commodification of feminism, which nullifies women's agency and empties feminist activism of meaning and of ability to enact social change towards emancipation (McRobbie 2007, 718). Moreover, the use of tokenism creates the illusion of intersectionality and diversity, while actually being detrimental because it invisibilises marginalisation by uncritically representing marginalised groups without effectively giving them a voice (Kanter 1977, 210). *Freeda*'s approach to story-telling has the advantage of boosting visibility for women, and though that does not necessarily equate to more visibility for the feminist movement, the latter could still happen as a positive externality. An emphasis

on individual stories of empowerment, however, carries the collateral damage of individualising the feminist struggle, which in turn nullifies the collective power of the feminist movement.

Freeda embodies many elements of Sandoval and Fuchs' (2010, 145) ideal-typical image of a mass medium. There are only a few content producers, juxtaposed to a huge consumer audience; participatory processes are completely absent, and there is only a mere simulacrum of producer-consumer interaction. Both *Freeda*'s content and its media expertise are commodified for the audience's and brands' fruition; the content, especially, is delivered in standardised form, through formats that are repeated and adapted to new topics or to the contingent demands of the audience. *Freeda*'s example shows that even mainstream media and forms of pop feminism can portray progressive representations of marginalised groups, as well as empowering languages and narratives. Those representations and narratives are not necessarily distorted just because they are appropriated by mainstream channels, but they are deprived of their critical and counter-hegemonic power and exploited for objectives that do not necessarily pertain to the feminist struggle, such as, in this case, profitability. It is not enough to have a symbolically positive representation if that representation is not critical.

Based on the previously analysed elements, some may be reluctant in calling *Freeda* a feminist medium, and may prefer to call it a women-oriented medium. However, though it may be controversial, one could argue in favour of also defining *Freeda* as a feminist medium, to the extent that the type of feminism embodied is popular feminism. As such, *Femminismo a Sud* and *Freeda* represent emblematic examples of, respectively, an alternative feminist medium and a mainstream feminist or women-oriented medium.

They are significantly different media projects, but they still share interesting similarities. They share a tone of "strategic frivolity" (Bazzichelli 2006), whereby they mix frivolous and serious topics to pursue their social purpose. Both share some form of alignment with the maxim "the personal is political", though they completely differ in terms of approach. *FaS* incorporates the traditional feminist interpretation of the relationship between personal and political by having women speak about their own personal experiences and tie them to broader political claims related to the feminist struggle for emancipation, though its limited outreach dampens the possibilities of these claims translating into broader social change. *Freeda* bets almost entirely on the personal experiences of the women it gives space to,

without truly being able to translate them into political claims, despite a declared ambition to do so. They also share an attempt to relate to their national context by including discussions on relevant issues at national level in their content. *FaS* roots its discussions in critical analyses about the national context, especially in light of the North-South debate, and its participatory nature enables a significant level of capillarity also at the geographical level. *Freeda*, while it does include specific reflections on the Italian case in its informative content, arguably does not manage to reach the same level of local embeddedness.

The two media projects embody advantages and disadvantages of feminist mainstream and alternative media. As such, they are paradigmatic of a trade-off that can be observed in the feminist use of media. More specifically, *FaS* trades off visibility for safety and ideological depth, while *Freeda* trades off ideological depth for outreach and marketability. One could be tempted to write off *Freeda* as completely detrimental to the feminist cause due to its exploitation of feminism for market value, but some positive points must be recognised. Firstly, Freeda does make an attempt at presenting positive and diverse representations of women and other marginalised groups, though they may not be critical. Moreover, though their approach might be criticised, media like *Freeda* can still be praised for helping bring certain issues, like feminist issues, to the attention of the public eye (Crafton Smith 1989, 292). On the other hand, one can celebrate *FaS* as a success story of an alternative feminist medium managing to gain traction while producing alternative content and employing alternative, non-commercial methods of distribution, but it cannot be forgotten that *FaS*' experience was a short-lived one, and that it had much more success in terms of community-building than it could arguably have done in terms of institutional or social change.

5.3. Discussion on theoretical framework

Both the previous chapter's analysis of successes and shortcomings of feminist media and the case study analysis have evidenced how, in the feminist use of media, there seems to be a trade-off between visibility and safety, between outreach and ideological depth and integrity. This trade-off partially overlaps with the difference between mainstream and alternative media. Mainstream feminist media grant feminism and feminist movement members greater visibility and outreach, leading more numerous and diverse groups of people to come into contact with feminist ideas. Whether these ideas result compelling and fully take root or they

are welcomed with scepticism and hostility, the outcome is in both cases that feminist ideas are disseminated and enter public discussion. Sometimes, this comes at the cost of sacrificing the integrity or complexity of these ideas for the sake of their amplification. Alternative feminist media preserve the safety of feminist communities and enable a richer development of feminist discourses. Though the community-building endeavours are commendable, the feedback in terms of activism is lacking as their influence outside of feminist community is limited. The two previously analysed case studies exemplify this juxtaposition.

It is difficult to evaluate whether mainstream media or alternative media are best for advancing the feminist struggle and specifically women's freedom of expression. The latter benefits both from mainstream media, because they are accessible and allow more and more women to reclaim their right to free speech in the media, to speak and be heard by an increasing amount of people, and from alternative media, because they foster safe environments for free speech and the healthy development of feminist discourse.

This research sets to argue that one should appraise the very distinction between mainstream and alternative media critically. This is not to say that one should do away with the very distinction. It is important, however, to recognise the dynamicity of the relationship between the attributes of representation and activism present in a given feminist medium on the one hand and the classification of the medium as mainstream and alternative on the other hand. In other words, this research is proposing a theoretical perspective that abstains from indiscriminately classifying mainstream media as negative and alternative media as positive for women's representation and feminist activism, but rather problematises the evaluation of mainstream and alternative feminist media.

The reworking of Atton's (2002) typology to complexify the classification of specific media features as mainstream or alternative serves exactly this purpose. Depending on the case study under analysis, this reworked framework may find that the medium presents a coexistence of mainstream elements and alternative elements. While the two case studies analysed are paradigmatic of the two extremes of the dichotomy, it is striking that even these examples show the dynamicity of the aforementioned relationship. The case of *Freeda* shows that positive forms of representation can find fertile ground in mainstream media as well, though one should still reserve a watchful eye to the lack of critical meaning behind the representation. Representations that are in fact critical, however, are not necessarily absent

from mainstream media channels, just as engaging forms of feminist activism. Indeed, critical messages can be conveyed successfully even through capitalist channels of media production and distribution (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 146). A glaring example is the phenomenon of hashtag feminism, which despite its drawbacks remains a powerful tool (Trott 2020).

The binarism between mainstream and alternative media is to be problematised in light of the significant overlapping that occurs at times between their defining features. Feminist media producers often describe their products as countersites to mainstream media (Zobl, Reitsamer, and Grünangerl 2012, 30), but it would be inaccurate to assert that any and all feminist media are entirely alternative in every feature. The case of feminist zines is an example. While they can be regarded as the epitome of alternative feminist media (Zobl 2009, 2), modern feminist zine-making is increasingly networked, which has the effect of "blurring the boundary separating zinesters' alternative discourse from the mainstream" (Clark-Parsons 2022, 123-124). Ultimately, the mainstream/alternative binarism in feminist media can be questioned both because mainstream media can still deliver alternative narratives, and because alternative media can also use corporate-owned channels for their purposes. Moreover, it is difficult to reconcile the concept of alternative economies with the prevalence of digital media, because it would be challenging to argue for the identification of the Internet as an alternative platform.

A possible solution to these dilemmas is represented by Sandoval and Fuchs' (2010) conception of alternative media. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) develop a critique of the conception of alternative media as participatory media and propose a conceptualisation of alternative media as critical media. They problematise Couldry (2003)'s postulate that the "emancipatory and progressive potential of alternative media lies in opening up access to media production to a broad public" (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 142, paraphrasing Couldry 2003). They recognise the importance of participatory processes but put into question the idea that they are enough to constitute a viable alternative to mainstream, corporate-owned media (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 142). Participatory media constitute an ideal-type media model based on an economy of production which attempts to pose as an alternative to the capitalistic economy of production that is typical of the commercial model of mainstream media (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 145). The authors argue, however, than under the current economic and societal conditions, such an ideal model of alternative media is destined to fail due to not being able to reach a broad enough audience, which is needed in order for

alternative media to be politically effective (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010, 146). What it means for media to be alternative, then, is not to be participatory, but rather to be critical: the *conditio sine qua non* of alternative media is their critical content which feeds into a counter-hegemonic discourse and broadcasts marginalised voices and alternative ways of structuring society, the economy or the political system and thus of pushing towards transformations in these directions (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010, 146).

It can be argued that Sandoval and Fuchs' (2010, 146) assertion that, in order for media to be considered alternative, they must not necessarily employ alternative means of distribution may represent a solution to the aforementioned trade-off in feminist media. Sandoval and Fuchs (2019, 148) themselves recognise that, for alternative media to be successful, they have to "do more than preach the converted", and this is obtained through greater public visibility. Indeed, if the problem of alternative media lies in their limitations in terms of visibility and political effectiveness, then conceiving alternative media as critical in content but not necessarily alternative in distributive use provides a formula of alternative feminist media that combines their assets in terms of ideological complexity and counter-hegemonic power with the visibility and political effectiveness granted by mainstream media channels.

In its application to feminist media, Sandoval and Fuchs' (2010) critical theory of alternative media can be integrated with this research's theoretical framework of women's freedom of expression as interpreted through women's representation and feminist activism through Couldry's (2004) concept of media as practices. The "media as practices" approach is arguably the most appropriate approach to employ if one wants to operate a media analysis in the context of the study of a social movement, like the feminist movement. Indeed, the "media as practices" approach allows one to situate media as a part of a social movement's strategic repertoire, and to interpret its use as the use of tactics of contention, signifying practices and mobilisational practices, which are some of the key features of a social movement's agenda (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001, 14).

This research wants to propose a conception which is parallel to the mainstream/alternative dichotomy but may be more efficient in the evaluation of the aptness of feminist media to advance women's free speech. Because there is often an overlap between mainstream and alternative features in pieces of media, instead of summarily classifying a piece of media as mainstream or alternative, it may be more useful to talk in terms of mainstream or alternative

media practices. Through this formulation, one can avoid the generalisation of referring to a media piece as mainstream or alternative and instead identify specific practices that can be referred to certain media and that can be recognised as mainstream or alternative.

This distinction becomes useful in the analysis of feminist media if it is integrated with the framework based on representation and activism. Indeed, one can distinguish between representational and activist feminist media practices in terms of mainstream and alternative. This relates to Sandoval and Fuchs' (2010) critical theory of alternative media to the extent that the criterion to identify alternative media practices lies in the critical nature of the produced content. Thus, a representational feminist media practice is alternative when it incorporates a critical form of representation - one that is substantially inclusive, intersectional, made by women on their own terms, apt to amplify marginalised voices and to serve forms of feminist critique. It is mainstream when it embodies a form of representation that, whether or not it is symbolically progressive and inclusive, does not in fact derive from nor lead to a critical appraisal of women's presence in the media or manage to put marginalised voices in control of their own representation. An activist feminist media practice is alternative when it successfully channels forms of feminist activism that is able to mobilise for change, spread feminist ideas, strengthen the movement and optimise its outreach without compromising its integrity. It is mainstream when it channels a form of feminist activism that disregards community-building, deranges into neo-liberal co-optation and commodification, lacks intersectionality and inclusivity, and overall does not manage to challenge the hegemonic patriarchal system.

Employing such a distinction makes a judgement of value on feminist media much easier: feminist media are successful in their advancement of the feminist struggle and of women's free speech when they are able to incorporate representational and/or activist feminist media practices that are alternative, and they are less successful or even detrimental when they incorporate representational and/or activist feminist media practices that are mainstream. As any piece of feminist media may be related to more than one feminist practice, the evaluation can be rendered more complex by separately assessing each practice and considering the implications of each assessment altogether.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to propose an analysis of the role feminist media play in the advancement of the feminist struggle and particularly of the opportunities for women's freedom of expression by analysing the practices that feminist media incorporate and how they are beneficial or detrimental to these purposes.

Firstly, this work has attempted to detail the relationship between freedom of expression and the feminist struggle, and it has done so based on the concepts of free speech as self-expression and as political expression, as well as on the feminist maxim "the personal is political".

There is an interlinkage between women's personal experiences of oppression and the social structures of the patriarchal system. Within a patriarchal system, personal oppression and systemic oppression mutually feed one another, and they are crystalised also through the silencing practices that for years have kept women from voicing their oppression and from even identifying it as such. Reclaiming their voice is for women a political act because it leads to the demystification of the artificial *naturality* of patriarchy, it jumpstarts processes of feminist community-building and it builds a feminist consciousness which can be harnessed as a transformative force for feminist emancipation. Self-expression and political expression find an intersection in the feminist act of consciousness-raising, through which women share their experiences with other women, connect with them and collectively build their personal and feminist identity, and through which they channel their political agency in the form of mobilisation for social change. This joint importance of self-expression and political expression finds a translation in the concepts of women's representation and feminist activism.

Secondly, using the concepts of women's representation and feminist activism as guiding notions, this research has delved into the analysis of successes and shortcomings of feminist media in terms of promoting women's free speech.

Feminist media are successful in promoting women's agency, which unfolds both as agency of women over their own representation and political agency to be spent on the enactment of social change. They further women's accessibility to the media both as a consumer and a producer, and they promote participatory practices through which women can be increasingly involved in their representation and in collective action for their emancipation. They promote

women's and feminism's visibility and bring feminist thought into public discourse. They provide platforms for feminist consciousness-raising and an environment where feminists can build and strengthen their communities and take up boundary work for the creation of safe spaces to find protection from misogyny and silencing practices. They foster inclusive and intersectional practices and contribute to the creation of a feminist counter-hegemonic power by giving feminists arenas for discursive activism aimed at uncovering patriarchal oppression. They serve as countersites where feminists can exercise their cultural citizenship through building their political identity, creating meaning and shaping their interests through political engagement.

Feminist media, however, also present many challenges and pitfalls. Engagement in self-representation and feminist activism through the media can expose women to silencing practices, hate speech and amplified misogyny and violence. Greater visibility equals potential exposure to more violence, but it also represents a challenge both for the risk of relapsing into sterile performativity and because often dynamics of media visibility reproduce the marginalisation of minority voices. Practices of community-building and of safe spaces, while beneficial for women's safety in media environments, risk transforming these communities into echo chambers and nullifying the movement's outreach and potential for social change. Despite their commitment to inclusivity and intersectionality, feminist media have been often found to be lacking in these aspects, if not actively harmful to marginalised communities and to the integrity of the movement. Finally, the double-edged sword of popular feminism and the challenge of post-feminism are looming over feminist media and significantly diminish their potential to foster free expression.

The comparative media analysis between *Femminismo a Sud* and *Freeda Media Italy* has given an empirical illustration of the trade-off present in feminist media, which had resulted from the previous analysis. Feminist media present a trade-off between visibility and safety, between outreach and ideological depth and integrity. An outlook into Sandoval and Fuchs' (2010) critical theory of alternative media provides a possible way to overcome this trade-off, in the form of a virtuous conception of alternative media that are able to preserve their counter-hegemonic potential and ideological integrity, but at the same time are willing to exploit corporate means of media distribution for their own purposes, thus securing better opportunities in terms of outreach and visibility.

Sandoval and Fuchs' (2010) criterion to identify alternative media proves useful for devising a framework of evaluation of the aptness of feminist media to foster free expression for women. This research proposes the employment of the categories of representational and activist feminist media practices. Identifying the meaning of alternative media practices through the criterion of their critical character, and thus also deriving the meaning of mainstream media practices as opposed to alternative media practices, one can evaluate alternative and mainstream feminist media practices without necessarily implying that they only occur in, respectively, alternative and mainstream media. Furthermore, one can assign a generally positive value to alternative media practices and a generally negative value to mainstream media practices, without necessarily implying a judgement on alternative and mainstream media themselves.

This framework can be applied to most of the features of feminist media that this research has identified as related to freedom of expression. For example, the promotion of intersectionality and the amassment of counter-hegemonic power can be classified as alternative feminist media practices because they incorporate a critical understanding of women's condition in the media and in society. Popular feminism, feminists' exposure to more visibility and feminists' use of commercial channels for media distribution receive a mixed judgement: they can be classified as alternative feminist media practices insofar as they convey forms of representation and activism that have a critical value, but they should be considered as mainstream when the representation and collective action that they channel are stripped down of their critical approach and transformative potential. Other features of feminist media can be evaluated through a more straightforward perspective that does not require them to fit into the categories of mainstream or alternative feminist media practices. For instance, the practice of feminist safe spaces shows the feminist movement's devotion to community-building and to fostering safety for women, and should be evaluated positively regardless of whether or not it has critical substance. On the other hand, the fact that feminist media expose women to silencing practices, hate speech and networked misogyny should be considered as a failure regardless of whether this exposure is derived from an alternative or mainstream feminist media practice.

This research has purposefully excluded avenues of research that would have gone outside the scope of the research question, but that would complement an understanding of the relationship between freedom of expression and the feminist struggle. While this research has

focused on the topic of feminist media, there are various other horizons of research where feminism and freedom of expression intersect that would deserve a deeper exploration. For instance, one could explore the feminist movement's fight to claim freedom of expression through the lens of the legal progress that has been or still needs to be achieved. The topics of women's representation and feminist activism in relation to free speech could benefit from a separate exploration: for instance, women's representation could be further researched in relation to gender stereotypes or to women's opportunities to be representors rather than represented; feminist activism could be further researched in terms of political participation or of the evolution in people's perception of themes like gender equality and feminist collective action. Moreover, whereas this research has focused on an analysis relative to the Western context, the understanding of how the feminist movement contributes to freedom of expression for women could be enhanced by explorations that branch out to non-Western contexts. Lastly, because this thesis is mainly based on a literature review, the research area of feminism and freedom of expression could be further explored through quantitative or qualitative research projects.

The usefulness of the present work's research question lies in its normative potential. Identifying which features of feminist media work in favour of freedom of expression and which work against it can provide an interpretative guide for any specific feminist medium or feminist media practice, through which it will be possible to make a judgement of value on the ways in which said medium or practice has positive or negative effects on women's representation or feminist activism. Singling out specific features will allow a more complex analysis and judgement that shy away from a simple, dichotomic evaluation of a feminist medium or practice. Ultimately, what the present research has strived for is to provide a useful framework for feminist media analysis that can be helpful in order to understand how to harness feminist media to their full potential. This type of analysis could then pave the way for normative prescriptions on how to improve feminist media and feminist media practices and on how to strategise in order to direct their assets towards objectives of social change where there is more potential for positive transformations through them.

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