Women’s protest and International Women’s Day in the Australian media

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Abstract

This paper examines the frequency and content of Australian media reporting of International Women’s Day between 1970 and 2005. The data presented here has been drawn from the protest events database compiled as part of the Mapping the Australian Women’s Movement (MAWM) project. While quantitative analysis of the data collected has revealed definite trends in the number and type of event recorded, in this paper I have taken the opportunity to use the materials collected for this purpose to more closely examine how the Australian media has responded to and reported women’s activism, using International Women’s Day (IWD) as a case study. Mining the material in this way also allows us to at least partially negate some of the weaknesses of using protest event analysis to examine feminist activity (Bagguley 2009). This is achieved by considering gaps in media coverage as well as the way the ‘public identity’ (van Zoonen 1992) of the women’s movement can be constructed in the media in ways that can work counter to the aims of the movement.

Keywords: feminism, protest, activism, media, gender

Introduction

This paper examines the frequency and content of Australian media reporting of International Women’s Day between 1970 and 2005. The data presented here has been drawn from the protest events database compiled as part of the Mapping the Australian Women’s Movement (MAWM) project. This ARC funded project has aimed to ‘provide data to test and build theories around social movement life cycles, shifting repertoires and sites of action, and the nature of institutional and cultural legacies’ (Mapping the Australian Women’s Movement, 2012). The protest events database section of this project was designed to construct a picture of the activities of the women’s movement, with a “focus … on the visibility of protest events [by] surveying media coverage of events rather than events themselves as a way of mapping the extent to which issues were in the public eye” (McLaren & Strong 2009: 6). While quantitative analysis of the data collected has revealed definite trends in the number and type of events recorded (see McLaren 2011), in this paper I have taken the opportunity to use the materials collected for this purpose to more closely examine how the Australian media has responded to and reported women’s activism, using International Women’s Day (IWD) as a case study. Mining the material in this way also allows us to at least partially negate some of the weaknesses of using protest event analysis to examine feminist activity (Bagguley 2009). This is done by considering gaps in media coverage as well as the way the ‘public identity’ (van Zoonen 1992) of the women’s movement can be constructed in the media in ways that can work counter to the aims of the movement.
International Women’s Day in the events database

International Women’s Day has been celebrated for over 100 years, usually around March 8 annually. While the forms that IWD activities take and the main message associated with the day have shifted over time, during the period covered by this database IWD has been closely linked to the concerns and goals of the women’s liberation movement (Stevens 1985). Data collected on IWD has been analysed here in two ways; first, in a quantitative manner by looking at the number of events reported, in which years and in which publications; and second in a more qualitative manner by using discourse analysis to examine the contents of the articles to determine how IWD was framed and how this might have changed over time. The articles in the database have been sourced from mainstream print media, particularly the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) from 1970–86 and publications available through the Factiva databases after this date. Concerns have sometimes been raised regarding the of validity protest event analysis that relies on a limited selection of ‘mainstream’ publications (Grey 2010). In response to these, the newspaper of the Australian Communist Party, *The Tribune*, was also included in the database. As will be shown below, this addition added valuable extra information about both the activities of the women’s movement and gave further insight into the media’s response (or lack thereof) to these activities.

Quantitative analysis

From 1970 to 2005, there are reports on IWD in 31 years, with a total of 104 events recorded, almost all of which were demonstrations. However, coverage in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other mainstream papers is quite sporadic, despite increasing after the Factiva databases allow searching of publications beyond the *Sydney Morning Herald*. There is coverage of IWD in almost every year; however, no mainstream publications cover IWD every year, and on only two occasions does the same publication publish on the event two years running (the SMH in 1991 and 1992, and the *Illawarra Mercury* in 2002 and 2003). Coverage in the Tribune is much more consistent, which is unsurprising given the close links between IWD and the Communist movement (Sawer 2011). The paper tends to run multiple stories on IWD each year, a minority of which are articles noting that events are upcoming. Overall, the Tribune covers 86 events until its closure in 1991, as compared to only 30 in mainstream papers across the entire time covered. The inclusion of the Tribune data here gives a clear demonstration of the way continuing feminist activity may not be at all accurately reflected in media coverage, and also of the way the agenda and background of a media source can have an impact on what it publishes. The information from the Factiva database and the Tribune shows IWD related activities occurring in diverse geographical locations across Australia, from capital cities (where events are most often reported on) to rural areas such as Taree, suggesting that the number of IWD events in the country certainly exceeds the number that have been reported in the media, possibly quite significantly.

Qualitative analysis

Given the quantity of articles collected for the database, it would have been very difficult to do any sort of qualitative analysis of the content of all of these. Using the IWD articles as a
subset allows us to examine more closely the rhetorical strategies deployed in the media when discussing the activities of the women’s movement, and how these might have shifted over time in relation to this one recurring event. The thirty-five articles from the mainstream press only have been used, as these may give us more insight into how IWD, and the women’s movement more generally, was framed in the public imaginary.

To begin with, when conducting a discourse analysis the significance of the sporadic coverage of IWD is something that needs to be addressed. Van Dijk (1993) notes that power can be measured in some part by looking at who has the ability to set agendas and decide what will and will not be the subject of discussion. The media can play this role in society and by contrasting the occasional coverage of IWD with, for example, the predictably thorough coverage of occasions like Anzac Day we can immediately see the difficulty IWD has had in developing a meaningful and consistent ‘public identity’ (van Zoonen 1992) through the media. In the case of IWD, the fact that it is an annual event may play a part in the lack of coverage it attracts. In general, protest events have ‘decreased in newsworthiness’ since the 1970s as they have become more institutionalised (Earl, Martin, McCarthy, & Soule 2004: 71), and a protest event that occurs every year may therefore lack the novelty to attract press interest.

Examining the articles reveals that there has been much variation in how IWD has been framed over the period being looked at. Although studies have shown that the women’s movement tends to be treated negatively or trivialised in the print media (Ashley & Olson 1989) the coverage of IWD did not entirely fit this pattern. Rather, the reports were more in line with the findings of Sheridan et al. (2006) in their study of reporting of women’s issues in the Australian media, where they noted that ‘media representations of feminism are plural and various, the varieties not necessarily compatible with one another’ (Sheridan, Magarey, & Lilburn 2006: 25). There were articles – in particular opinion pieces by women’s movement scholars – that were unambiguously positive, about both IWD and the women’s movement in general, and others that were clearly negative. There were also a number of ‘neutral’ articles that reported information such as where and when upcoming events would be held without any commentary, although the positioning of these sometimes had an impact on how they would be perceived.

The most coverage that was given to IWD was in 1975, which was also International Women’s Year. The *Sydney Morning Herald* (and its Sunday edition the *Sun Herald*) gave substantial coverage to the Sydney rally on 8 March that year. This included articles advising that the march was coming, including a detailed, factual piece on March 7 that outlined the groups involved in the march and the claims they were making. This apparently neutral piece appeared, however, next to an article headlined ‘Women’s Rights: Can the family cope?’ The Herald covered the actual march with a front-page headline (‘5000 Women on the March’) and an article that emphasised the inclusiveness of the march, particularly in relation to men. At the same time, however, it also included trivialising remarks from attending police officers (‘I like ladies’), and gave little space to the claims being made by the marchers. This type of coverage, that gives space to the women’s movement while at the same time ignoring or undermining its claims, has been well documented by the Australian National Advisory Committee (1976) as being a feature of the media’s response to International Women’s Year more generally. The Committee did note, however, that by the end of the year media coverage had improved, and ‘the words “sexist” and “sexism” began to be used in news reports in a way that suggested some understanding of the concept’ (1976: 65).
However, by the following year coverage had decreased substantially, and headlines such as ‘Yes, we’re still around …’ (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 1976: 3) suggested a sense of either boredom with or surprise at the continuation of protests by women activists. After 1975 IWD almost disappears from the SMH for six years. The 1979 march in Brisbane is mentioned, but only because of an incident involving a member of the Queensland police ‘rescuing’ his girlfriend from being arrested; all the coverage of the march focuses on this and the state of the Queensland police (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1979: 11; 12 March 1979: 1). This lack of coverage occurs despite marches – often with turn outs equal to that of 1975 – taking place throughout this period (as documented in coverage in the Tribune).

When reports on IWD start to reappear after 1982, there are two definite trends that can be seen to be emerging. First, there is certainly a trend towards what might be called a ‘historicisation’ of IWD that begins as early as 1984 and increases over time, whereby IWD is presented as having existed for a long period and on an international scale, and as such being responsible for forging links between women across time and space. It is these articles that present IWD in the most unambiguously positive light, and this seems to stem in part from the authors or sources for the articles. These tend to be scholars or leaders in other fields and as such are granted legitimacy and authority to speak in their own voices (for example, Sawer 1997; Mackinnon 2003). These articles also often mention other IWD related activities such as breakfasts, dinners and seminars. What may have been missed by the database, with its focus on protest events, is an increase in non-protest activities such as these that may be another indicator of an ‘abeyance’ period in the women’s movement as women gather to consolidate the legacy of what they have achieved, and maintain connections and networks in the absence of high levels of visible activity (Sawer & Grey 2008). The history-making in the newspaper articles could be seen as one aspect of this.

The second trend, particularly after 1991, is the way the events that are reported on are linked to other important current issues in the media. Although IWD marches often focused on specific current issues (for example, marches in 1979 attacked the Lusher motion, and in 1988 the Sydney march highlighted Indigenous land rights as a counterpoint to bicentennial celebrations) in the mainstream media this may have influenced decisions to cover the event. For example, the relatively well reported protests in 2002–04 had peace as their main theme, and the organisers used the marches to focus attention on the plight of women in the Middle East affected by war, particularly the War in Afghanistan and threatened war in Iraq. The women’s movement has always had strong links to the peace movement, as well as being active in promoting rights for other disadvantaged groups (Sawer, 2008). The establishment of strong connections between IWD and high-profile issues may reflect attempts on the part of organisers to increase interest in the event by tapping into topical events, or alternatively (or in conjunction with this) it may show an increased likelihood that journalists will cover a protest event involving women if it is in some way linked to other current affairs. This trend reflects the findings of Sheridan et al. (2006) in that coverage of the women’s movement is often reliant on other political trends.

One of the most interesting uses of language in the articles on IWD is in relation to the word ‘feminism’ (or ‘feminist’). The ‘f’ word crops up surprisingly infrequently in the coverage, and when it does appear it is only ever used in a negative or disparaging manner, or in a way that uses such negative connotations as presupposed readings of the word. For example, on 3 March 1976 the *SMH* refers to a rally with ‘speakers including lesbian feminists, Trotskyists and Australia Party members’, imbuing the term with a certain amount of deviancy by association. Feminism is mentioned more often in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but in a
way that is either directly attacking feminists or asking women about feminism. The former tactic sees feminists attacked for a variety of reasons that have been well documented as occurring throughout the media (for example, Ashley and Olson, 1989). For example, feminists are attacked for being too educated and out of touch with ‘ordinary’ women, or younger women (Delevecchio, 1995: 13), or for being too radical and anti-men (O’Brien, 2005: 20). The latter tactic sees feminism framed in a very negative way, and the women in question are then put in a position of either denying being feminist or having to defend feminism. Either way, this makes the supposed shortcomings of feminism the focus of what is written, even if the women being spoken to are supportive of it (Howell 2002: 4).

Conclusion

On the whole, with the exception of a period in the mid-1970s, the information we have about IWD marches is more likely to come from newspaper reports that focus on other events, or IWD is used as a type of segue-way to discuss ‘women’s issues’, whether these be to do with employment, pay or women’s identities as feminists. Detailed information on marches is rarely given, particularly in relation to the claims being made; when these are given, they are more likely to be related to other political issues (such as war) than to systematic inequalities suffered by Australian women. IWD – and the claims that women are making in relation to it - therefore tends to be sidelined, even as it is being reported. This, in combination with the sporadic coverage it attracts even when it is well-attended, may be part of the reason why IWD has never gained a strong hold in the imagination and collective memory of the Australian public. For feminists, on the other hand, the space that is made available in the media to commemorate and celebrate IWD, limited though it is, still plays a role in maintaining the movement and creating a record of it over time.

References


