Feminism in the Media: Why It Matters
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Feminism Is...
Often described as a movement which fights for greater economic, political, social, cultural and legal rights for women.

Feminism and the Media
Like others engaged in social activism, feminists have long been interested in how the media represents them. This is because the media is a key space where people find out about the world around them, and is many people’s only source of information about feminism. As a result, media representations matter greatly.

Historic treatment of female activists
• Until the last century, it was thought that not only were women uninterested in public affairs, but that it was damaging to their health and well-being.
• Regardless of what women were campaigning for, their arguments were dismissed and they were labelled deviant simply for defying traditional gender roles
• Women handing out newspapers supporting woman’s suffrage in the early 1900s were regularly ridiculed, harassed and even had tomatoes thrown at them!
• Since at least the 19th century, women who campaigned for greater access to the public sphere, or who protested in the public sphere were deemed ‘unfeminine’ and ultimately deviant.

Deviant Feminists
Much of what we see, hear and know about feminists via the media construct them as ‘militant’, ‘shrill’, ‘unfeminine’ and ultimately ‘deviant’ women. Over time this has proved to be a successful strategy because by de-legitimising the women themselves, there is no further need to engage with their arguments.

Evidence of Feminisms’ Deviancy
Perhaps the most emblematic symbol of women’s deviancy is the bra-burner – a myth which emerged at the 1968 Miss America Beauty Pageant protest, where a group of women threw items such as bras, girdles and high-heels into a trash-can of freedom. Although no bras were burnt that day, the myth of the bra-burning feminist because a symbol of feminism’s threat to patriarchal norms of femininity.

Other Strategies Used to Dismiss Feminism
• Claims that feminism is harmful for men, women, children and society in general
• Claims that women themselves do not want feminism
• Claims that feminism has gone too far, and men are in need of liberation
• Claims that feminism is over, dead, redundant or passé
• Claims feminism is interfering with other rights (e.g. freedom of speech)

‘Evidence’ of Feminism’s Harms in the Media
Real headlines from publications such as the Daily Mirror since the 1970s include: ‘Drinks Danger in Women’s Lib’ (1973); ‘Girl thugs’ (1976); ‘Menace of the gymslip bullies,’ (1971); ‘All women’s liberationists hate men and children’ (1973), and ‘It’s wrong to be equal’ (1970)

Feminist Support in the Media?
Although feminism has predominantly been ridiculed and marginalised in the media over history, there is evidence of supportive coverage. Well-known celebrities, politicians and public figures often championed feminism, helping to improve its image.

Changing News Formats
• Changes away from ‘hard’ to ‘softer’ news formats has opened up space for both feminist perspectives and issues which might not have been previously deemed ‘newsworthy’
• Softer news items are often longer than hard news stories, allowing journalists to provide more background and context, which is necessary for feminist issues

Supporting Feminism Today
Since 2011, I have witnessed a slow, but noticeable shift in coverage of feminism. While it is still dismissed, feminist campaigns such as SlutWalks and The Everyday Sexism Project are deemed to have positive benefits for society, and it is no longer taken for granted that women have in fact achieved equality.