

fundamental concept of cybernetic theory. When an event or state is part of a chain of cause-and-effect processes within a system, then the event or state is said to 'feed back' into itself. In an electronic-mechanical heating system, for example, the feedback mechanism is the thermostat which controls the system or keeps it in balance – when a certain temperature is reached, a mechanism in the thermostat sends information to the temperature-regulating system to shut down or start up. This self-correcting process is an example of what cyberneticians call 'negative feedback,' whereby changes in output are fed back to the input source so that the change is reversed. In 'positive feedback,' an increase in output is fed back to the source, expanding the output, thus creating a snowballing effect. An example is the screeching sound that occurs when a microphone is brought too close to its loudspeaker.

Generally, the feedback process depends on certain information being present or programmed into a system. Information is defined in this case as data that can be received by humans or machines, and as something that is mathematically probabilistic – a ringing alarm signal carries more information than one that is silent because the latter is the 'expected state' of the alarm system and the former its 'alerting state.'

When an alarm is tripped in some way, the feedback process is started and the information load of the system increases (indeed, reaches its maximum). The one who developed the mathematical aspects of information and feedback theory was the American telecommunications engineer Claude Shannon (1916–2001), who showed that the information contained in a signal is inversely proportional to its probability of occurrence – the more likely a signal, the less information load it carries; the less likely, the more. Wiener's and Shannon's model is extremely useful in providing a terminology for describing aspects of communication systems, such as feedback, but it tells us little about how messages take on meaning in specific contexts.

In media studies, the term is used generally to refer to audience reactions to a program or, in advertising, to an ad or ad campaign. Such feedback is used to help producers of programs and creators of ads to tailor them to audience tastes and expectations.

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FEMINISM

[See also: *Ang, Ien; Ferguson, Marjorie; Media Studies; Pornography*]

As an interdisciplinary field, communication is home to a number of feminist theories, issues, and practitioners. These are widely different, connected centrally only by the belief that oppression of women exists in some form and that this must end. In communication, a concern with feminism may be directed at any number of media or forms of interaction, and may focus on aspects including some but not necessarily all of the following: the gendered nature of interpersonal communication, inclusion in the production process, representation of women and girls in media content, the intrinsic inequality of a media industry built around capitalism, and the contradictory implications for females in a supposedly liberational digital environment.

However, feminism itself emerged long before communication was officially recognized as a discipline. The first cohesive feminist movement, often classified as the first wave, emerged in the mid-nineteenth

century, coalescing around issues such as improvements in the education of girls and women, women's suffrage, property, divorce and custody rights, and greater access to certain professions. This was largely a middle-class movement originally based in Britain, and many of its adherents would not have described themselves as feminist at the time.

By the time the second wave rolled in, the term feminism had been in existence for a number of decades, and was embraced by a variety of women. The second wave of feminism is perhaps the one best recognized, though not necessarily understood, by the majority of North Americans and Europeans. Eventually coming into its own against the backdrop of an America whose political and social landscape was being challenged and transformed by the civil rights, anti-war, and environmental movements in the 1960s, feminism positioned itself in the mainstream, with the help of a few iconic figures who used the media to their advantage. Perhaps the best known of these are Gloria Steinem, founder of *Ms. Magazine*, and Betty Friedan, founder of NOW (National Organization for Women) and author of *The Feminine Mystique*, the book that spoke to many middle-class suburban women of a 'problem that had no name,' a lack of fulfilment experienced by women whose status as housewives and mothers overshadowed their identity. More activist figures claimed to be sidelined by the power of the press, written off as 'bra burners' or man haters following a number of publicity stunts captured on national television that depicted these women as extremists.

In their glory days, both *Ms.* and NOW commanded a large and loyal following, and some of the gains made for women in the 1960s and 1970s can be credited to initiatives such as NOW's sit-ins – complete with newspaper and television crews called in by the media-savvy Friedan, a former magazine writer – at hotels or clubs that had excluded women. On these social questions, as well as some political ones around

issues such as affirmative action or abortion rights, the second wave made great inroads. However, the second wave also came to be seen as outdated and irrelevant by some women who felt that the forms of feminism it encompassed did not speak sufficiently to their issues. In particular, second-wave feminism, which had emerged as an essentially white, middle-class North American movement, was criticized for its lack of ethnic diversity, its inattention to all classes, and its neglect of problems of global significance, including various forms of colonialism and imperialism.

This kind of critique intersected with a larger move from modernism to postmodernism, with the emphasis switching from broad social and political questions to a host of problems centred on difference and discourse. Accordingly, the concerns of third-wave feminists, coming to particular prominence in the 1990s, have been diverse and difficult to summarize. Problems of social justice and inequity are central to the third wave, yet its attention to the analysis and production of aesthetics, for instance, as well as a broad acceptance of cultures, classes, and traditions, sometimes leads to criticisms that the third wave is insufficiently united, with too much emphasis on frivolity and not enough on true activism.

While the waves metaphor may satisfy those who prefer general or chronological categorizations, in actual fact feminists, including those tagged with the second-wave label, demonstrate considerable diversity. Second-wave feminism encompassed liberal, socialist, Marxist, and radical activists, among others, and at times the differences among these groups have seemed greater than their similarities.

The liberal paradigm is perhaps the one that even casual observers would be able to identify as feminism, and it is one of the oldest, dating back at least to Mary Wollstonecraft and her eighteenth-century text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Liberal feminism seeks to correct inadequate gender representation in a variety of forms and places, a mission that often takes the

form of lobbying to alter laws, regulations, and common practices. While affirmative action, for instance, is not embraced by all liberal feminists, some have endorsed it as a measure needed to balance the number of women in the workplace, as well as certain public institutions. Other measures may be less sweeping, but they would advocate the insertion of women into spaces otherwise dominated by a masculine presence, with the hope that greater egalitarianism would eventually become accepted and a matter of form. After all, according to such a view, men and women are not nearly as different in their talents and abilities as socialization processes would have us believe.

A number of other perspectives would criticize such a view for its inadequacy in attacking patriarchy at its roots. As a system based on unequal power relations, patriarchy extends into every aspect of society, oppressing women in ways that go beyond policy and legalities. A radical feminist, as the name implies, would advocate more extreme solutions than a liberal one, demonstrating limited or no interest in fitting into an existing patriarchal structure. One central area of oppression that some radical feminists target is female biology, which can subjugate women in a society that encourages reproduction without supporting it financially or psychologically. Other areas of concern include the pressure to exhibit so-called feminine characteristics and to conform to heterosexual norms even when these may simply increase male domination of women. Examples of thinkers who could be classified as radical include Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, Adrienne Rich, and Andrea Dworkin.

Radical feminists are concerned with numerous ways in which patriarchy manifests itself, and thus some may also be Marxist feminists, placing emphasis not only on patriarchy, but on capitalism. Socialist feminism is likewise occupied with questions about the intersection of patriarchy and capitalism, but for Marxists, capitalism is ultimately the structure that contributes most substantially to women's

oppression. Marxist feminists consider that different classes of women will not experience oppression in entirely the same way. A working-class woman may experience pressures utterly foreign to the middle-class woman, who may – however inadvertently – contribute to the oppression of her less privileged sisters. While Marxism originally offered limited commentary on the unique challenges faced by women, Marxist and socialist feminists have built upon the work of Marx and Engels in highlighting women's working conditions, the inequality of their wages compared with those of men, and the need to acknowledge their unpaid labour, which allows for the continued functioning of an economic system aimed at extracting maximum profit at the expense of the lower classes. Many of these ideas also form the basis of a related school of thought, feminist political economy, which maintains a focus on power relations, production, and labour.

Post-colonial feminism may also take some of these factors into account, but it is concerned with other aspects of power, questioning the ethnocentrism of theories that do not acknowledge the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. Under the rubric of either or both, women in the developed world could be seen as contributing to the oppression of those in the developing world, or they may simply fail to understand the same, due to cultural difference and relative privilege. A feminist such as bell hooks combines more than one approach, highlighting multiple levels of discrimination that could be faced by women of colour on the basis of race, class, and gender. With her consistent criticism of what she calls 'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy,' hooks has brought particular attention to the intersection of these traits, while Chandra Talpade Mohanty was one of the first feminists to articulate clearly the question of oppression among women of different races, cultures, and perspectives.

Postmodern feminism is also concerned with difference of another kind. Unlike most of the other streams, postmodern

feminism does not look to one or two forms of patriarchal oppression. Rather, it turns a critical eye on all notions of truth, identity, and values, noting that there is no universal form of woman or self. Postmodern feminists vary widely in their approaches, which may at times be labelled post-structuralist due to great emphasis on language and on the deconstruction of prevailing categories of gender. At one point, post-modern feminism was considered a largely French phenomenon due to the towering presence of practitioners such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva, but it may also be linked to the work of North American theorists such as Judith Butler, who helped analyse gender and the gendered body as artificial constructs. Her ideas have been applied in looking at many individuals who cross gender boundaries, including notable performers such as Madonna.

Psychoanalytic feminism looks at gender and self in a decidedly different manner, addressing many of Sigmund Freud's pronouncements on the childhood development of identity and sexuality. While most psychoanalytic feminists reject Freud's apparent sexism and essentialism, nonetheless many, including Karen Horney, Clara Thompson, Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, and Juliet Mitchell, have spoken to certain Freudian concepts in their examinations of psychosexual development, and these concepts are found repeatedly in analyses of media content, particularly film. These ideas regarding development and gendered differences may also be applied to studies of interpersonal communication and how interpersonal skills may vary between men and women.

These different forms of feminist thought have applied themselves in varied ways and settings. One of the first scholars to combine a feminist approach with communication analysis was Gertrude J. Robinson, who offered a number of pioneering studies around gender and media and was perhaps most influential in her commentaries on news content and the production of

news. Drawing upon aspects of political economy, she offered statistical determinations of female underrepresentation in positions of power as well as a broader study of the symbols and ideologies found in media narratives. Her work remains some of the best known in this area and helped pave the way for subsequent discussions of biased content and production in the newsroom, such as Barbara Freeman's discussion of the unwritten rules and pressures that affected female reporters in 1960s Canada.

The news is generally characterized as a serious and worthwhile object of study, but 'women's magazines' or 'women's books' have often been dismissed as softer, frivolous, and the instrument of corporations that impose their patriarchal capitalist ideology upon a passive audience. While there may be some truth to this interpretation, writers such as Angela McRobbie, Ann Barr Snitow, and Janice Radway offered new approaches to women's reading, providing the possibility that these genres may be more complex than imagined, that they offered employment opportunities to women who are still excluded from more highbrow corners of the publishing industry, and that women may not be entirely passive or deluded when they consume such literature.

Similarly, discussions of film and television have addressed a host of issues. Feminist research on the portrayal of film covers its history, such as early, contradictory portrayals of women as plucky heroines who could only be saved by marriage, or depictions of suffragettes that alternately furthered and hindered the campaign for expanded voting rights. In the 1970s, Laura Mulvey's commentaries on film helped move attention towards a psychoanalytic framework and towards the key concept of the male gaze as the presumed spectator of many cinematic classics. Psychoanalysis still informs much of the feminist research on cinema, and to a certain extent may influence critiques of television.

Television, however, has always been a somewhat different medium from film,

particularly given its location in the home – a space that is still more commonly associated with feminine domesticity than with masculine pursuits – and the longtime success of daytime serials aimed largely at a female audience. Groundbreaking work by authors such as Tania Modleski, Mary Ellen Brown, Christine Geraghty, Dorothy Hobson, and John Fiske on the ways that daytime television may simultaneously appear to empower women and confirm dominant ideologies of women's position in the private sphere operates in tandem with research by theorists such as Michèle Mattelart, who investigates the ways in which such programs naturalize a consumerist, domestic existence for women. Theorists such as Andrea L. Press have added commentaries on class as a key component of interpretation for female audiences of prime-time television, while Ellen Seiter has looked at representations of gender and race in television and advertising. The latter plays a large role in the television industry but can be analysed in a number of settings, including magazines, newspapers, and the internet.

The internet, in particular, has given rise to new interpretations of feminist theory. Over time, the question of technology – how can it and should it be used, what are the implications, what is the potential for increasing or decreasing inequity – has come to occupy the minds of many feminist communication scholars. From Michèle Martin's work on the telephone and the ways in which it has been adopted and adapted by women, to the data collected by scholars such as Ellen Balka, Leslie Regan Shade, Dale Spender, and Sherry Turkle in their observations of the ways women use technology in domestic or professional settings, research has indicated unintended side effects when new technologies are introduced into society.

Some theorists have suggested that the prevalence of digital technology, in particular, is indicative of a seismic shift in our very way of being, and that women are uniquely positioned to exercise dominance

in the world of cyberspace, given their assumed competencies in areas of interpersonal communication. While this stance can assume a relatively liberal form, it can also assume a more radical appearance, as evidenced by Sadie Plant and Donna Haraway, who note that human beings are already moving towards a cyborg existence. The most optimistic of these perspectives is often referred to as cyberfeminism. Cyberspace is seen in these utopian formulations as a space where markers of gender, race, class, and age are all masked and thus can no longer be used to discriminate; others note that anonymity can also protect those who carry out sexual harassment, stalking, the production and distribution of pornography, and so forth.

In other words, no matter how new a technology, medium, or other form of communication may seem, similar questions assert themselves repeatedly regarding gender and equality. There is no one branch of feminist theory that answers all of these, and at times theories may operate in conjunction or they may demonstrate considerable overlap. Regardless of which perspective(s) one may endorse, feminist theory and practice are integral to the study of communication.

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FERGUSON, MARJORIE (1929–99)

[See also: *Feminism; Globalization; Magazines; Mass Communication*]

Marjorie Ruth Ferguson was a renowned media scholar who worked especially on the social implications of communications technologies and global communications, as well as on the role of women in the media around the world. Ferguson was born in Victoria, British Columbia. She attended the University of British Columbia and moved to London, England, in 1949. Her first career was in women's journalism. In the 1950s, with no formal qualifications, she joined the staff of *Odhams'* (later *IPC*) *Woman* magazine, the most widely circulated women's magazine in Britain, and quickly became the publication's associate editor.

Ferguson obtained her PhD in sociology from the London School of Economics (LSE) in 1979 and taught there from 1978 to 1988. Her first major publication was