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Transgendering the media:

**Trans Media Watch and the struggle over representations of transgender in
the British media**

By Carolina Silva de Assis

Submitted to
Utrecht University
Gender Studies Programme

Master Thesis

First Supervisor: Dr. Marieke Van Eijk
Second Supervisor: Prof. Gilberta Golinelli

Utrecht, Netherlands
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ABSTRACT

Researchers and scholars have been discussing media representations of gender and their impact on audiences over the last fifty years in the Western context. However, most studies on this subject have taken “gender” and “woman” as interchangeable terms, overlooking how various gender identities are depicted in the media. Most work on media representations of transgender is carried out by activist groups of trans persons and allies, and one such group is Trans Media Watch (TMW), a charity founded in 2009 that aims to improve media coverage of trans issues in Britain. It was the awareness of the devastating effects of media representations of transgender that ridicule and dehumanize trans persons that brought the group together to tackle the struggle over representations of transgender in the media. This study explores how TMW is challenging the media, discussing what the group understands as “problem coverage” and the alternatives they propose, as well as their methods and strategies to get their message across to media professionals of how they would like trans persons to be represented. The study also discusses the group’s position in the British context of media and trans activism, further problematizing the notion of representation by looking at how they negotiate their position as liaisons between trans persons and media professionals and institutions. This study is based on a series of nine in-depth interviews with three members of TMW’s core team. This thesis positions Trans Media Watch as an instance of a social movement – the trans movement – that emerged to tackle a gap both in theory and in practice. The struggle of trans persons over representation and self-definition takes place in the realms of theory and academia as well as in political activism, connecting the symbolic and the material in the struggle for full citizenship and social acceptance.

SUMMARIO

Sin dalla metà del XX secolo sono stati realizzati numerosi studi dei discorsi mediatici sul genere e del loro impatto sul pubblico nel contesto occidentale. Tuttavia la maggior parte degli studi su questo tema ha considerato i termini “genere” e “donna” come sinonimi, trascurando i modi in cui le varie identità di genere vengono rappresentati nei media. L'analisi dei discorsi mediatici riguardanti persone transgender è stata portata avanti quasi esclusivamente da gruppi di attivisti trans. Trans Media Watch (TMW) è uno di questi gruppi: fondato nel 2009, TMW punta a migliorare la copertura mediatica delle persone transgender nel Regno Unito. È stata la consapevolezza degli effetti devastanti di discorsi mediatici che mettono in ridicolo e disumanizzano le persone trans che ha portato alla formazione del gruppo, con l'obiettivo di promuovere rappresentazioni positive delle questioni trans nei media. Questa tesi esplora come TMW mette in discussione l'approccio dei media britannici e ciò che il gruppo considera una “copertura problematica” delle questioni trans. Vengono inoltre considerate le alternative proposte da TMW, così come i metodi e le strategie utilizzate al fine di comunicare ai professionisti dei media come il gruppo vorrebbe che le persone trans venissero rappresentate. La tesi esamina infine il posizionamento del gruppo nel contesto dell'attivismo trans e mediatico nel Regno Unito, problematizzando ulteriormente la nozione di rappresentazione e considerando le modalità attraverso cui il gruppo negozia il suo ruolo di mediatore tra persone trans, media e istituzioni. Questo studio è basato su una serie di nove interviste con tre membri del consiglio direttivo del gruppo. Esso posiziona Trans Media Watch come un esempio di movimento sociale – il movimento trans – apparso per colmare una lacuna sia teorica che pratica. La lotta delle persone trans per il modo in cui vengono rappresentate e il loro diritto all'auto-definizione avviene a livello teorico e accademico così come nell'attivismo politico, collegando aspetti simbolici e materiali nella lotta per la piena cittadinanza e accettazione sociale.

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2013, I was in Utrecht, the Netherlands, almost halfway through my second year in the GEMMA programme. A friend asked me to lend a hand in the preparations to the event in honor of the 15th International Transgender Day of Remembrance¹ in Amsterdam. The date is observed at the end of November every year since 1999 as a tribute to trans persons who have been victims of homicide or driven to suicide by transphobia. My task was to help gather information on the 238 persons whose deaths were registered by Transgender Europe's Trans Murder Monitoring project between November 2012 and November 2013. What I found in the few hours I dedicated to the chore was absolutely appalling. Google searches led me to news resources reporting on many of the murders, and it became obvious how the press can be disrespectful and even dehumanizing when it comes to covering violence against trans persons. Misgendering (referring to someone as the gender they were assigned at birth, instead of as the gender they identify with) was the least of the problems – what I found horrifying was how the violence was justified and even excused by many of those news outlets.

Theorist George Gerbner postulated that representations of violence on television “are not violence but messages about violence” (Gerbner cited in Hall, [1973] 2006, p. 166). The news reports I encountered on that November evening led me to ponder on what messages such media stories were trying to communicate through their representations of violence against trans persons. Accounts of episodes of violence which often ridiculed and used inappropriate language to refer to the victims and even sought to explain or justify the murders led me to believe that the messages such media coverage was trying to convey amounted to blatant transphobia.

As someone who has a keen interest in the study of the media and who has worked in different positions in the media industry over most of the last ten years, I am well aware of the impact media images and stories can have on the public at large. As a feminist and LGBTQ activist, I have always been utterly interested in how media and gender

¹ http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en_US/tvt-project/tmm-results/tdor-2013.htm - accessed on 19 July 2014.

discourses intertwine and influence one another. My biggest interest in the intersection between media and gender is precisely the work and the politics of representation: “the politics of what, or who, gets represented, through what devices, to what effects, at what costs, to whose benefit or deprivation” (Jay, 1994, p. 14).

Media discourses on gender and their impact on women’s (and men’s) lives have been widely addressed by researchers and scholars in the last fifty years in the Western context. Most studies on gender and media, however, have focused on women – as if “gender” and “woman” were interchangeable terms. The establishment of gay and lesbian studies and queer studies have opened the field to the investigation of how various gender and sexual identities are depicted in the media. Still, most work on the media representations of transgender is carried out by independent and activist groups of trans persons and allies. In Britain, one such group is Trans Media Watch (TMW), a charity founded in 2009 that aims to improve media coverage of trans issues. It was the awareness of the effects of media representations of transgender that ridicule and dehumanize trans persons that brought the group together to tackle the struggle over representations of transgender in the British media.

My interest in Trans Media Watch emerged from a concern with the impact of media coverage of trans issues – the messages conveyed through media images and stories – on the lives of trans persons. What is the situation in Britain, and what is TMW doing about it? How is the group addressing the challenges of intervening in media discourses and representations of transgender? Those were my initial questions, and they are part of the overall investigation I put forward with this thesis. As I deepened my research, I realized that Trans Media Watch is part of a much bigger context, connected to a broader struggle for representation on the part of trans persons. In the realm of academia, theories of transgender have been historically developed by people who do not identify as trans. In the realm of activism, the trans movement has been historically taken as a “strand” of the lesbian and gay movement, and while both movements share overlapping interests and demands, there are limits to such alignment (Connell, 2012, p. 872). The gaps in representation in theory and in activism, plus the very material conditions of trans lives, marred by varied discriminations and exclusions, led to the emergence of the trans movement as a social movement in and by itself, demanding their right to self-definition and to be represented in their own terms.

My study of Trans Media Watch is thus concerned with how the group takes trans persons' struggle for representation to the media: what are the issues they observe in the media representations of trans, and what are their strategies and methods to address such issues? This study is situated in a bigger frame comprising the struggle of discriminated groups over their media representations and the debates on the role of the media in the struggle for social justice. This thesis comes as well as a contribution to fill a gap in feminist research on media, which commonly reserves little attention to activists engaged in efforts to change the media representations of specific groups with the purpose to foster more egalitarian societies (Byerly, 2011, p. 17). By exploring TMW's endeavor against negative and harmful media representations of transgender, I intend to delineate a path to be followed by other social movements and discriminated groups struggling with prejudicial media coverage and intent on promoting positive media representations, as a means to attain social justice and cultural and material recognition.

Defining trans, representation and media

Theorists and authors usually try to define "trans" in ways that draw from the trans community and acknowledge the disputes around the term, while also serving their own purposes in research and writing. For the purposes of this thesis and as I have already done throughout the previous pages, I will mainly use the word "trans", adopting Trans Media Watch's definition of the word as "an umbrella term describing people who experience the need to present themselves as, and/or who identify as other than the gender they were assigned at birth" (Trans Media Watch, n.d., p. 02). Both "transgender" and "transsexual" usually fit this description. Nevertheless, the latter is traditionally connected with medical discourse and interventions (a transsexual person taken to be someone who makes use of hormones and/or surgical procedures to attain a bodily gender presentation more attuned to their gender identity), while the former is often associated with a more political connotation of resistance to medical pathologization (Bettcher, 2007, p. 46). Lived experiences, however, often challenge such precise demarcations: some persons may not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth and also not identify as trans; some trans persons may seek hormonal treatment or surgical procedures and identify rather as transgender than as transsexual;

some trans persons may not seek any kind of medical intervention and identify as transgender without that being a political stance against trans pathologization, or may even identify as transsexual, undermining the common association between the term and medical discourse.

To some extent, Trans Media Watch's use of "trans" (and mine throughout this thesis) is an attempt to transcend the disputes on the "transgender" and "transsexual" categories and definitions. Borrowing from Monro and Warren (2004), I acknowledge the limitations of the term and the debates that surround it; my aim is rather to focus on the emergence of a politics "subscribed to by people with a range of aspirations, identities, experiences and affiliations" (Monro and Warren, 2004, p. 345) who share the very concrete condition of being targets of hatred and discrimination on the basis of their enactments of gender.

Trans Media Watch claims that the media plays a critical role in either fueling or fighting such hatred and discrimination against trans persons. The group thus works to improve media coverage of trans under the claim that the way the media represents trans issues has very material consequences to the lives of trans persons and their loved ones². The notion of representation is therefore central in the theoretical and empirical issues discussed in this study. Sutherland (2003/2004) remarks on how two different connotations to the term in English are made clear in the German distinction between *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*. The latter refers to the "*political* process of standing in for, or acting on behalf of, another person or group and their interests" (Sutherland, 2003/2004, p. 81, emphasis original), while the former can be defined as "the act of making present what is absent in reality or in language and culture, that is, the symbolic order" (Buikema, 2009, p. 72). Theorist Stuart Hall (1997a) observes that the concept of representation brings together "the notion of something which images and depicts, and that which *stands in for* something else" (Hall, 1997a, p. 06, emphasis original). The centrality of representations, to Hall, is that they give meaning to what they depict or stand in for. Media practices "represent topics, represent types of people, represent events, represent situations" (Hall, 1997a, p. 06); media representations therefore give

² The impact of media representations on the lives of trans persons was assessed by Trans Media Watch through an online survey, which will be addressed in chapter 3.

meaning to that which they represent and attempt to pass on those meanings to their audiences³.

Briggs and Cobley (2002) acknowledge the difficulty of arriving at a straightforward understanding of what “the media” is:

Is “the media” a collection of industries? Is it a collection of practices? Is it a collection of representations? Is it a collection of the products of economic and statutory regulation? Is it a collection of audiences’ understandings? Is it a means of delivering audiences to advertisers or is it a public service? The answer to all these questions is “yes”. (Briggs and Cobley, 2002, p. 01)

The complexities evoked by “the media” are in the foreground of my study, which focuses on Trans Media Watch’s work on representations of trans in press (newspapers and magazines, in print and online) and broadcast (radio and television). My use of “the media” intends thus to emphasize the understanding of the representations of trans presented by newspapers, magazines, and TV and radio programs as inserted in a much broader environment of production and circulation of meanings and messages.

The media representations of trans addressed by Trans Media Watch, therefore, are the images and stories about trans persons and trans issues featured in newspapers, magazines, radio and television in Britain. The group emerged due to the widespread feeling amongst trans persons in the country that a great part of those representations was inaccurate, disrespectful and even harmful, with discrimination, harassment and violence as the most extreme aspects of their impact on the lives of trans persons. “Outings” of trans persons (exposing a person’s trans status without their consent), use of inappropriate language and pronouns and misgendering (a trans man referred to as “she” or as “woman”, for instance), or depictions of trans persons as objects of fascination are a few examples of prejudicial media coverage addressed by the group.

Additionally, TMW believes that such representations are taken to be the “truth” of trans experience, and if they misrepresent trans persons interests and demands, they give policy makers the wrong idea of what the needs of trans persons are regarding access to health care, employment, and education, for instance. Their struggle over media representation is thus directly connected to the struggle of trans persons for full citizenship, defined as “the collection of rights and responsibilities that establish

³ Hall’s encoding/decoding model ([1973] 2006), which problematizes the process of production and reception of media messages, will be discussed in chapters 1 and 4.

political membership and enable access to benefits and resources” (Turner and Hamilton cited in Hines, 2007, p. 43).

Trans Media Watch tackles what it calls “problem coverage” in the media, attempting to improve media coverage of trans issues under the belief that positive media representations of trans can foster social acceptance and civil recognition for trans persons. They employ different strategies and methods, such as media monitoring and the cultivation of relationships with media professionals and institutions. They pursue their endeavor on behalf of trans persons in the UK, or the “trans community”.

The notion of representation as “speaking for the needs and desires of somebody” (Baldonado, 1996) will also be explored, for that is one of the challenges in the work of Trans Media Watch. Being a small group of persons with a voice in the media realm to speak on behalf of a larger group of persons, how does Trans Media Watch do the work of representation themselves? How to speak on behalf of a community whose own terms of identification are highly complex and contested? The discussion on the relationship between Trans Media Watch and the community they purport to represent is crucial, for it not only further problematizes the notion of representation discussed in this thesis, but also offers a glimpse of the challenges that many social movements face in their struggle over representation and recognition for the larger groups they claim to speak for.

Structure of the thesis

My study of how Trans Media Watch has been challenging the press and broadcast and intervening in the media representations of trans in the UK is divided in four chapters. In the first chapter, dedicated to presenting my theoretical framework, I propose a triangle of theories comprising the fields of feminist media studies, feminist theories of transgender, and new social movement theories, in support of my premise that Trans Media Watch is an instance of a social movement – the trans movement – that emerged to tackle a gap both in theory and in practice. The struggle of trans persons over representation and self-definition takes place in the realms of theory and academia as

well as in political activism, connecting the symbolic and the material in the struggle for civil rights and social acceptance.

In chapter 2, I present the methodology I made use of in the study, explaining how I conducted my research: I carried out a series of nine interviews with three members of the group's core team, and each of them providing different insights on the themes we discussed. In my study, I am intent on letting them express their perspectives about the group itself, the connections with the trans community, the exchanges with the media, and so on. I will interweave their quotes and my observations throughout the thesis in order to present their ideas and reflections on their own work as well as my considerations about the issues addressed.

In chapter 3, I will explore the general conditions of trans lives and of the media in the UK that gave rise to Trans Media Watch. This will enable me to look at how the members of the group position themselves in the British context of media and trans activism. I will also probe the relationship between the group and the community they purport to represent to understand how they negotiate their position as liaisons between trans people and media professionals and institutions.

In chapter 4, I will focus on how Trans Media Watch has been challenging the media in the UK: what does the group understand as "problem coverage", and what alternatives do they propose? What are their methods and strategies to get their message across to media professionals of how they would like trans persons to be represented? I will offer a case study to illustrate the devastating consequences of negative media coverage of trans issues and to explore how the group managed to energetically respond to a particularly difficult situation, turning it into an occasion to foment the public debate on the ethics of the British press and the media coverage of trans issues. Furthermore, I will discuss how the group frames "problem coverage", relating their reading of the media to important notions in the study of media representations, namely ideology and oppositional readings of media messages.

In the last section of the thesis I intend to draw a number of conclusions from this study, particularly regarding Trans Media Watch as an instance of a larger struggle over representation on the part of discriminated groups in different areas, such as the one forwarded by trans persons in the realms of theory, academia, citizenship and the media.

By looking at TMW's actions towards the British media I intend to shed light on what could be learned from how the group forwards their goal of improving the media coverage of trans issues, with the aim of pointing to ways new social movements can challenge the media and promote their agenda of recognition through the work of representation.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I intend to contextualize the study of Trans Media Watch and their work to improve the representations of trans in the British media in a theoretical framework that encompasses feminist media studies, feminist theories of transgender and new social movement theories, highlighting the struggle over representation and meaning. I argue that Trans Media Watch is an instance of social and media activism intent on intervening on discourses about trans in the media as part of a struggle for representation and recognition for trans people. This representational gap is not circumscribed to the media: trans experiences have been theorized historically by non-trans persons, and the struggle of trans people for recognition for long remained attached to the lesbian and gay movement. Trans persons' claim for the right for self-representation, in theory and in activism, took force over the last three decades, and sprouted the emergence of a stronger and more assertive trans movement and of a new academic field, trans studies. Trans persons' demands to speak for themselves led to developments also in the realm of citizenship, with rights and legislation being enacted to cover the needs and interests of trans persons in various Western countries. Trans Media Watch is part of that struggle, and in taking the media as their field of action, they share some of the notions that prompted feminist research and activism on media. My approach to this study thus starts from a framework developed by feminist media studies, a field of academic investigation of media and communication from a feminist perspective, which has highlighted the ways in which media texts can construct and influence gendered subjectivities.

Feminist interest in the media has developed alongside the transformations in both the media landscape and the feminist movement and scholarship at least for the last four decades in the Western world. The field of feminist media studies has consistently followed a feminist tradition that takes "woman" as the subject of feminism, focusing mainly on how women have been represented in the media and the consequences of such representations – how they inform women's ideas about themselves and how they can enforce certain barriers to the development of women as autonomous individuals. Fortunately, feminist theory has been through significant shifts over the past three

decades, with the category “woman” as the foundation of feminism being challenged by many feminists who have rightly observed that “woman” too often means “white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied woman”. I would argue furthermore that “woman” does not equal “gender”, and the feminism that informs my research is concerned with how gender oppression plays out in the lives of all gendered subjects.

The work of Trans Media Watch shares with feminist analyses of the media the premise that representation matters and the concern with how images and cultural constructions propagated by the media are connected to patterns of discrimination and oppression (Gill, 2007, p. 07). Such concern relates to the understanding that the media has the power to “allocate, or more usually withhold, public recognition, honour and status to groups of people” (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p. 01), and that this power is mostly felt by groups of people who have been historically discriminated against because of their racial, ethnic, class, gender and sexual identities. In the midst of the social and cultural turbulence of the 1960s in the Western world, some of these discriminated groups grew stronger and more organized in what was later theorized as new social movements, understood as “new forms of *collective identity* engaged in *discursive struggles* that not only transform people’s self-understandings but also contest the legitimacy of received cultural codes and points of view” (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 86, emphasis original). Such movements, organized around different axes of identity and engaged in battles for civil rights and political and symbolic representation, soon realized the need to act and intervene in the way the media was representing them and their interests (Tuchman et al, 1978; Montgomery, 1989; Zoonen, 1994; Carroll and Hackett, 2006).

Trans Media Watch is engaged in changing the conversation on trans issues in Britain through media, working towards fairer and more respectful media representations of trans as a means to improve the way trans people are perceived and treated in British society, as well as attaining civil rights to trans people in different realms, such as public health and work legislation. In the following pages, I will start from feminist media studies to then question “woman” as the basis of feminist investigation of the media, and follow with a discussion on the subject of feminism as it has been unfolding amongst feminist theorists, with special attention to the debate about the place of transgender in feminist studies and feminism. This chapter advances a feminist

approach to media studies that embraces transgender, on the understanding that the feminist project should include all gendered subjects in the struggle against gender oppression and that the media is an important field of action to the establishment of a “just gender order” (Connell, 2012, p. 873).

1.1. Feminist Media Studies

Carter and Steiner (2004) trace women’s concern with the way they are depicted by the media in the United Kingdom and the United States of America back to as early as the 1860s (Carter and Steiner, 2004, p. 01). Whereas women’s rights activists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were aware of the role that newspapers and magazines played in their struggle, the loud and strong feminist movement that emerged in the late 1960s and in the 1970s in the Western world had to contend with a more robust challenge: the ubiquity of the mass media. As Gill (2007) puts it, “unlike their mothers and godmothers, second-wave feminists were bombarded daily by representations of womanhood and gender relations in news and magazines, on radio and TV, in film and on billboards” (Gill, 2007, p. 09). One of the main texts of that effervescent moment of feminist thinking and activism was in fact written by a journalist: US author Betty Friedan covered labor issues in a left-wing union newspaper and worked as a freelance journalist to women’s and family magazines (Henderson, 2007, p. 164). In her first book, published in 1963, Friedan observed how the media and particularly women’s magazines were involved in creating and reproducing *The Feminine Mystique*⁴, reinforcing and perpetuating social and economic inequalities between women and men (Zoonen, 1994, p. 11).

US sociologist Gaye Tuchman’s essay “The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by The Mass Media” (1978) established a proposition that became one of the early paradigms of feminist analysis of the media. By the end of the 1970s in the US, it was clear that the twentieth century had been – and kept on being throughout its last two decades – a

⁴ It is important to note that in *The Feminine Mystique* Friedan explores the situation of a very specific group of persons: white, middle class, heterosexual women. While her study of women’s magazines provided many insights and contributed to the engagement of feminists with mass media’s portrayals of women, many feminists have commented on how the work overlooks issues of race and class (hooks, 2000) and observed its heteronormative (and arguably homophobic) character (Bowlby, 1992).

period of important and rapid changes in the lives and status of women in US society: they had fought and won the right to vote and had become visible as workers outside the home, with ever growing numbers of women entering the paid labor force and accessing higher education, whilst the emergence of the women's movement highlighted all they had conquered and what they still had to achieve (Carter, 2012, p. 366). Tuchman questioned the way women were being represented in the media against such backdrop: "what are the media telling us about ourselves?" (Tuchman, 1978, p. 04). She believed that women were represented by "inadequate stereotypes" (Tuchman, 1978, p. 04) which were not "accurately reflecting" the transformations in the lives of women and in their status in society throughout the last century (Carter, 2012, p. 366). According to Tuchman, of the disproportionately few women portrayed in the media, the majority were depicted as housewives, and women who worked outside their homes, when they eventually appeared, were condemned and trivialized.

Tuchman focuses on communication theorist George Gerbner's notion of "symbolic representation", arguing that the media do not present "literal portrayals" but circulate representations of "what is valued and approved" by society (Tuchman, 1978, p. 08). While for Gerbner representation signifies social existence and "absence means symbolic annihilation" (Carter, 2012, p. 366), Tuchman claims that mere presence does not suffice and that condemnation and trivialization have the same effect as absence. The images of women in the media observed on her research were telling viewers that "women don't matter much" (Tuchman, 1978, p. 11) and therefore women were being symbolically annihilated by the media.

The premise forwarded by Tuchman and by much of the early feminist research on the media is rooted in what was later called a transmission model of the media, namely "a view that the media are agents of social control conveying stereotypical and ideological values about women and femininity" (Gill, 2007, p. 11). According to this view, media content always presents an unequivocal meaning which induces an unequivocal effect, with the audience "implicitly conceptualized as a rather passive mass, merely consuming media messages" (Zoonen, 1994, p.18). The transmission model has been criticized by many researchers in the field of feminist media studies over the last three decades (Zoonen, 1994; Gill, 2007; Carter, 2012; Gallagher, 2013), who have highlighted how a transmission view of communication is problematic in assuming a

knee-jerk view of the media effects on their audiences and a straightforward notion of “reality”.

Zoonen (1994) argues that the transmission model of the media (and the research based on such model) postulates that a “real world of objects, events, situations and processes” exists prior to and independently of our perception. This “real world” is therefore at the disposal of human cognition, ready to be “measured validly and reliably, as scientists try to do; to be represented accurately and truthfully, as media should do; and to be understood and experienced correctly or mistakenly as ordinary people do” (Zoonen, 1994, p. 36). The clear-cut view of the media as a reflection of “reality” led to much feminist research in the field to be based on the notion of “distortion”, assuming the media as a crooked mirror which consistently fails in reflecting the “reality” of women’s lives. The attempt to define what is the “reality” of women is a trap into which the mainstream feminist movement in the Western world has fallen time and again since its inception. Not coincidentally, while feminist scholars and activists argued for “realistic” images of women in the media, many women – women of color, non-Western women, non-heterosexual women, working class women, and so on – started to rightly challenge the presumption of a “reality of women”, pointing out how their experiences were marginalized by the assumption of “woman” as a universal identity (Carter, 2012, p. 373).

The most significant challenge to a straightforward conception of the relationship between media messages and audiences’ perceptions was presented by Stuart Hall in 1973 with the “Encoding/Decoding” model. According to Hall, meanings and messages are “encoded” into media content in each of the many moments in the process of production, to later be “decoded” by audiences in the moment of reception: “In a ‘determinate’ moment the structure employs a code and yields a ‘message’: at another determinate moment the ‘message’, via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices” (Hall, [1973] 2006, p. 165). Hall argues that media texts are therefore “polysemic”, open to a range of interpretations, which may vary according to the social context in which they are “decoded”. Nonetheless, there are limits to the possibilities of interpretation, since media texts are “encoded” with “*dominant or preferred meanings*”, which carry “the everyday knowledge of social structures, of ‘how things work for all practical purposes in this culture’, the rank order of power and interest and the structure

of legitimations, limits and sanctions” (Hall, [1973] 2006, p. 169). In Hall’s view, while there must be “*some* degree of reciprocity” between the meanings encoded by media institutions in media content and the meanings decoded by the audience, their correspondence is not given nor natural, and one does not necessarily entail or guarantee the other.

The encoding/decoding model and the critique of the notion of “reality” are both connected to the work of Michel Foucault and other theorists (Carter [2012] cites, amongst others, Louis Althusser, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous) on language, discourse and power, which continue to have a deep impact on feminist scholarship on the media. As Zoonen (1994, p. 39) puts it, “language is not a means of reflecting reality, but the source of reality itself”. “Discourse” is then the articulation of language in a system of representation that produces knowledge about a specific topic at a specific historical moment (Hall, 1997, p. 44), whose power lays in its capacity to prescribe how a certain issue should be talked about and to privilege certain meanings and narratives, inevitably excluding, annihilating and delegitimizing alternative views and positions on that same issue (Zoonen, 1994, p. 40).

If “reality is not merely something that exists ‘out there’, but it is also (re)constructed by the social and sense-making activities of human beings” (Zoonen, 1994, p. 38), one of those social and sense-making activities which (re)construct “reality” is, undoubtedly, the media. Such conceptual framework shattered the unproblematic distinction between “representations” and “reality” (Gill, 2007, p. 12) and thus led feminist media scholars to consider the role of the media in circulating meanings about and constructing gender. In this sense, the work of feminist theorist Teresa de Lauretis is another important paradigm in feminist media studies. Following Foucault and his conceptual premise of sexuality as a “technology of sex”, de Lauretis argues that gender is “the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life” (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 02). Gender, claims de Lauretis, is a representation, and “the representation of gender *is* its construction” (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 03, emphasis original). Hence the notion of the media as social technologies of gender; a social apparatus, amongst others, that engenders gender. Along with the media, de Lauretis

cites the schools, the courts and the family⁵ as instances where gender is constructed. Less obviously, affirms de Lauretis – and as importantly, I would argue – the construction of gender also takes place “in the academy, in the intellectual community, in avant-garde artistic practices and radical theories, even, and indeed especially, in feminism” (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 03). Thinking gender as a representation, as “the product and the process of a number of social technologies, of technosocial or bio-medical apparati” (de Lauretis, 1987, p. 03), allows for the understanding of gender as discourse, and as such a site of intense struggle and negotiation over meaning. In all these instances – in the media, in the academy, in feminist theory and activism – “at the heart of the matter is the struggle over the meaning of gender” (Zoonen, 1994, p. 41).

The questions addressed above – symbolic annihilation, distortion by inaccuracy, and media messages on the meanings of gender – run throughout the work of Trans Media Watch. While we can neither assume a reality nor count on the media to reflect it, the problems identified by the people who started the group are related to the observation that the portrayals of trans people in the media have an impact both on the perceptions of non-trans people and of trans people themselves. At the same time, the group seems aware that the audiences are not passively absorbing the messages forwarded by the media, and that such connection is not as straightforward as the transmission model suggests. As the very founding of Trans Media Watch illustrates, audiences often contest and question the coverage of trans issues in the British media, corroborating media theorists’ critique to a “tap on the knee cap” view of the media and their audiences. Furthermore, the struggle over the meanings of gender, or more properly, over the meanings and discourses regarding trans that are propagated by the British media, is the primary concern of the group’s work. In this sense I relate it to feminist discussions over media representation, and I believe that the framework of feminist media studies is a suitable starting point for the analysis of Trans Media Watch. Nonetheless, the field of feminist media studies has its faults, which I understand to be connected to feminist theory’s shortcomings, particularly its conflation of “gender” and “woman”, which will be explored in the following section.

⁵ Institutions singled out by philosopher Louis Althusser as “ideological state apparati” (Althusser, 1971).

1.2. From woman to gender, from gender to transgender

For the purposes of my study (and for the sake of the fields of both gender and feminist studies) I reckon important to underline that “gender” is not synonymous with “woman”. From a poststructuralist perspective, Zoonen claims that gender can be thought of as “a particular discourse, that is, a set of overlapping and often contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference, which arises from and regulates particular economic, social, political, technological and other non-discursive contexts” (Zoonen, 1994, p. 33). The struggle over the meaning of gender in the media, in the academy and in other instances of knowledge production is therefore related to the notion of gender as one among other discourses inscribed in the subject – such as ethnicity, class and sexuality – not determining nor exhausting identity (Zoonen, 1994, p. 33), and yet a crucial element in a person’s self-understanding and in the broader structure of society.

Nonetheless, most of the works I encountered on feminist media studies or “gender and the media” predominantly focused on the way *women* were represented in or interacted with the media, revealing their adherence to the notion of “gender” and “woman” as interchangeable terms (Zoonen, 1994; Carter et al, 1998; Stephen, 2000; Carter and Steiner, 2004; Dow and Conditt, 2005; Carter and Mendes, 2008; Ross, 2012). Such works are extremely valuable for their pioneering investigation of the representations of women in the media and for solidly establishing theoretical and methodological foundations for a broader inquiry into the ways media and gender discourses are reciprocally influenced and informed. Still, I take feminist research as an endeavor “oriented towards the achievement of ‘gender justice,’ a goal that takes into account the ways that gender always already intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class” (Dow and Conditt, 2005, p. 449), thus I reckon that feminist analyses of gender representations in the media going beyond “woman” are more than overdue.

The studies referenced in these pages so far do acknowledge more recent developments in feminist investigation of the media, comprising a wave of feminist work concerned with media representations of masculinities. However, they often betray a slight awkwardness towards the study of how diverse gender and sexual identities are

represented in the media and its connection to feminist scholarship⁶. Dow and Conditt (2005) affirm that the relationship between scholarship on what they call GLBT representation, the “analysis of the representations of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and the transgendered [*sic*]” and feminist politics is “somewhat unstable”: “This situation could possibly be linked to the fact that much of the queer theory upon which these analyses draw also has an ambiguous relationship to feminism” (Dow and Conditt, 2005, p. 461).

Jagose (2009) comments on the tension spurring from the seemingly contradiction between feminist theory’s attachment to “woman” as its founding subject and queer theory’s critique of normative identity categories, observing that the interrogation of the category of women was promoted by feminist scholarship long before queer theory arrived at the scene. The critique of “women”, claims Jagose,

was not only motivated by the important acknowledgment that the inauguration of that category as feminism’s primary analytic overvalued gender at the expense of other critically significant axes of identity, such as race, sexual orientation and class, but also informed by an understanding of the contingency and regulatory function of normative taxonomies of social recognition. (Jagose, 2009, p. 160)

The interrogation of the category from inside the feminist movement came from the realization that, in the battle to decide who counts as “women” and who could be the proper subject of feminism, many people were being relegated to the margins. Hekman (2000), in her assessment of how the feminist movement took to identity politics to further the demand for equality, discusses how exclusionary a feminist politics focusing on “woman” can be – especially because “woman” as a universal category states the attributes “white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied” in fine print.

These discussions continued brewing inside the feminist movement and scholarship over the 1970s and 1980s, and in 1990 Judith Butler incited *Gender Trouble*, opening up a new era of theories of sex, gender and embodiment. In her bid to deconstruct “woman”, Butler states that the distinction between sex and gender, with the latter understood as culturally constructed and as one of many possible interpretations of the

⁶ While enumerating the range of issues which are currently being scrutinized in the field of feminist media studies, Carter (2012) cites, in the same breath, the “representations of men (including gay men and transgender individuals) in the media” (p. 376). My hint is that the possible reason for these three categories to be amassed is the author’s notion they are *not* women, in a disquieting erasure of trans women.

former, undermines the stability of a binary of reciprocally correspondent sexes and genders. The author also challenges “the immutable character of sex”, proposing it as culturally and socially constructed as gender. Hence, according to Butler, there is no “abiding substance” to the identities of “woman” or “man”; borrowing from Nietzsche, Butler states that gender is not the doer, but the deeds: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, [1990] 2011, p. 34).

For its focus on the arbitrary and compulsory character of the heteronormative demand of coherence between one’s genitals and one’s gender expressions, Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender has been a useful framework to theorize transgender. The work signaled a welcome departure from a feminist tradition of heavy hostility towards transgender experiences and subjectivities, based on ambivalent notions of gender. Feminist theories of gender as a patriarchal structure to be overthrown and transcended, as a social construct, and as determined by the sex assigned at birth and/or a person’s upbringing have all informed feminist theorists’ considerations on transgender (MacDonald, 1998, p. 04), with many of them expressing negative stances on transgender. The most significant work in that tradition is Janice Raymond’s book *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* ([1979] 1994). Raymond focuses mostly on transsexual women, who, according to her, are and will always be men, and their invasion of women’s bodies and spaces likens them to rapists (Raymond, [1979] 1994, p. 104). Transsexual men are barely considered, but when she does turn her attention to them she describes the “female-to-constructed-male transsexual” as “the *token* that saves face for the male ‘transsexual empire’”, a woman assimilated into a male-defined world (Raymond, [1979] 1994, p. 27). The book is still a strong influence in some feminist circles: its ideas have been re-elaborated over the years by theorists who advocate a specific strand of radical feminism (Greer, 1999; Bindel, 2004; Jeffreys, 2014), informing to this day an often unfriendly and discriminatory position of many feminists towards trans people⁷.

⁷ The current resistance and hostility of some non-trans feminists towards trans people in the UK were commented on by the research contributors during the interviews, with one even singling out trans-exclusionary feminists as one of the biggest challenges in the work of Trans Media Watch. While I consider the harms caused by such trans-exclusionary feminism a pressing issue in

While some feminists accuse trans women of reinforcing stereotypical models of “über femininity” and trans men of being traitors and “renegades seeking to acquire male power and privilege” (Hines, 2007, p. 18), many theorists and activists have noted the commonalities between the struggles of non-trans women and trans people under an oppressive and unjust gender order (MacDonald, 1998; Heyes, 2003; Koyama, 2003; Butler, 2004; Namaste, 2005; Whittle, 2006; Hines, 2007; Serano, 2007; Connell, 2012). Whereas Hines highlights how transgender addresses issues which have long been central to feminist thought, raising key questions regarding notions of “sex” and “gender” and problematising the relationships between these categories (Hines, 2007, p. 17), Connell underlines that transsexual women’s lives are shaped by “the intransigence of gender”, which is evidence of a “necessarily common ground with feminism” (Connell, 2012, p. 872).

Butler’s writing (from *Gender Trouble* [1990] to *Bodies That Matter* [1993] and *Undoing Gender* [2004]) is the most prominent instance of a wave of feminist work positively engaged with transgender. Such strand of feminist theory takes transgender not as a menace to the feminist project, but as grounds to poststructuralist analyses of gender and sexuality as discursive formations as well as postmodernist readings that emphasize the differences that cut across and between distinctly gendered subjectivities (Hines, 2007, p. 22-24). These approaches have informed queer theory’s project of deconstruction of gender and sexual identity categories, embracing transgender practices as a “deconstructive tool” (Hines, 2007, p. 26).

In this sense, the field of transgender studies is “a true linking of feminist and queer theory” (Whittle, 2006, p. xii). An interdisciplinary field established throughout the 1990s, transgender studies, as Stryker (2006) conceptualizes it, is concerned with

anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood. (Stryker, 2006, p. 03)

feminist and trans activism, I had neither the time nor the space to discuss the matter in depth in this thesis. I intend to forward such investigation in my future academic projects.

The emergence of transgender studies as an academic field in its own right can be linked to a struggle for representation as well – in this case, the representation of transgender inside feminist theory and other theories of sex, gender and embodiment. If feminist theory is one of many social technologies of gender – with the academy and the intellectual community constructing gender as much as everyday social practices and the media – and if most feminist incursions on transgender were coming from non-trans positions being dismissive of or displaying hostility towards trans experiences, it would not take long for the question to be asked: can the trans person speak? Although transgender studies has built upon certain notions developed within feminist and queer theory from non-trans perspectives, the bulk of the field has been trans people’s accounts of their personal experiences combined with theoretical considerations, political commentary and trans activism (Hines, 2007, p. 28). Considered one of the founding works of transgender studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto*, by Sandy Stone ([1991] 2006), is a relevant critique of non-trans persons’ accounts of transsexual persons’ experiences. Addressing medical research and knowledge production, as well as chronicles of transition and Raymond’s *Transsexual Empire*, Stone draws attention to the fact that, at that point, theories of transsexuality seemed to come from everywhere, except from the transsexual individuals implicated in them: “The people who have no voice in this theorizing are the transsexuals themselves. As with males theorizing about women from the beginning of time, theorists of gender have seen transsexuals as possessing something less than agency” (Stone, [1991] 2006, p. 230). Stone calls for transsexual persons to come out as such and to create their own theories and accounts of their experiences: “whose story is it, anyway?” (Stone, [1991] 2006, p. 229)

Given such struggle for representation regarding theories of gender, sex and embodiment, and as a field so closely related to feminist and queer theories with poststructuralist and postmodernist approaches to said themes, transgender studies host a great volume of texts exploring issues of identity, in which “the central problems are self, subjectivity, voice, discourse, category, and representation” (Connell, 2012, p. 864). As Whittle points out, the concern with the instability of the categories of sex and gender and the need to make sense of one’s own core self – with gender being a crucial

aspect of a person's self-understanding – lead to questions of how to “theoretically recuperate” gender in a way that contemplates trans people's daily lived experiences:

Real life affords trans people constant stigma and oppression based on the apparently unreal concept of gender. This is one of the most significant issues that trans people have brought to feminist and queer theory. Homophobia and sexism are not based on your genitals or with whom you sleep, but on how you perform the self in ways that are contraindicative to the heteronormative framework. (Whittle, 2006, p. xii)

Many theorists have pointed to the problems with theories of transgender focusing on identity (Namaste, 2005, 2009; Connell, 2012), and with a certain tendency in some feminist and queer theories of transgender of posing trans people as emblems of a queer feminist revolution while sidestepping the material aspects of trans lives (MacDonald, 1998). Although never-ending theoretical considerations on identity may not be of much use to many trans people in helping them face the challenges of their everyday lives, it is the social movement and activism galvanized around trans identities and engaged in discursive and material battles that have brought concrete and symbolic gains to trans people. The establishment of the academic field of transgender studies is one of such achievements, directly connected to the surge of transgender activism throughout the 1990s (Stryker, 2006; Whittle, 2006). Trans Media Watch and their work towards more respectful representations of trans issues in the UK media as a means to achieve social and economic justice for trans people are inserted in such context as well⁸. The notion that discursive and material recognition of discriminated identities are two intrinsically connected dimensions in the struggle for social justice is one of the aspects that characterize what theorists in the 1980s denominated “new social movements”.

1.3. Transgender, a new social movement whose time did come

Alongside Stone's *Posttranssexual Manifesto*, Leslie Feinberg's *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* ([1992] 2006) is considered one of the founding works of transgender studies and of a brand new phase in transgender activism. The word “transgender” had already been in use at the time as a signifier for people who changed their gender through their self-presentation, without the

⁸ The specific UK context in which Trans Media Watch blossomed will be explored in chapter 3.

expediency of genital transformation (Stryker, 2006, p. 04). However, in her pamphlet, Feinberg infused the term with a whole new political charge: “transgender”, in Feinberg’s proposition, was to characterize a broad encompassing community of people “who defy the ‘man’-made boundaries of gender” (Feinberg, [1992] 2006, p. 205) and who are severely punished for not expressing their gender according to the “norm”. Feinberg called for an alliance amongst all such individuals for social, political and economic justice, and her pamphlet indeed sparked a movement which over a little more than two decades have achieved civil rights for trans people in many countries and have significantly influenced the public debate on trans issues (Stryker, 2006, p. 04).

An enormous accomplishment of Feinberg’s pamphlet is its success in naming a movement “whose time had come”. While listing an array of terms – “transvestites, transsexuals, drag queens and drag kings, cross-dressers, bull-daggers, stone butches, androgynes, diesel dykes or berdache” (Feinberg, [1992] 2006, p. 206) – used to define the wide range of “gender outlaws” called to form a political unity, Feinberg highlights the importance of self-definition in the fight against oppression:

We didn’t choose these words. They don’t fit all of us. It’s hard to fight an oppression without a name connoting pride, a language that honors us. In recent years a community has begun to emerge that is sometimes referred to as the gender or transgender community. Within our community is a diverse group of people who define ourselves in many different ways. Transgendered people are demanding the right to choose our own self-definitions. (Feinberg, [1992] 2006, p. 206)

The collective claim to self-definition is one of the aspects that characterize various social movements that emerged after the Second World War in most Western countries (Engel, 2001, p. 11), and which were dubbed “new social movements” (Melucci, 1980; Habermas, 1981) for their distinctive characteristics from the social movements from the pre-1960s era. While the latter were mainly focused on class-based and economic grievances, the “newness” of the former lies on their focus on cultural and symbolic issues connected to dimensions of identity and self-realization. New social movements, therefore, “are associated with a set of beliefs, symbols, values and meanings related to sentiments of belonging to a differentiated social group; with the members’ image of themselves; and with new, socially constructed attributions about the meaning of everyday life” (Laraña et al, 1994, p. 07). The feminist movement that re-emerged in the Western world in the middle of the twentieth century is one of the instances widely used by theorists to develop their notions about new social movements (Melucci, 1989;

Buechler, 1990), along with the peace, the environmental, the student and the lesbian and gay movements, all surged in the effervescent 1960s.

Such theoretical perspective proposes that these social movements arise in search of and in defense of identity, galvanized around interpersonal relationships amongst members, established so that they feel empowered to “name themselves” (Laraña et al, 1994, p. 10): “What individuals are claiming collectively is the right to realize their own identity: the possibility of disposing of their personal creativity, their affective life, and their biological and interpersonal existence” (Melucci, 1980, p. 218).

Fraser (1995) observes how these movements, galvanized around axes of identity such as “nationality, ethnicity, ‘race’, gender and sexuality”, are engaged in a “struggle for recognition”, with collective identity supplanting class interest as the main source of mobilization (Fraser, 1995, p. 68). Addressing new social movements’ theories, Fraser proposes an analytical distinction between movements fueled by a sense of economic injustice pursuing a politics of redistribution, and those fueled by a sense of cultural injustice seeking a politics of recognition. However, in a world of enormous material inequality, such clear-cut distinction is less than adequate: “culture and political economy are always imbricated with one another; and virtually every struggle against injustice, when properly understood, implies demands for both redistribution and recognition” (Fraser, 1995, p. 70).

In the Western world, the transgender movement, historically aligned with the lesbian and gay movement, existed long before Feinberg’s call to arms was published – Stryker (2006) gives an account of activity in the US and the UK that spans the last four decades of the twentieth century. However, the 1990s saw a confluence of many different factors that allowed the movement to name itself and stand on its own feet: the growth of home computer use and the expansion of the World Wide Web helped foster an online community of trans people who shared their grievances and united to claim civil rights and recognition (Stryker, 2006; Whittle, 2006). Such recognition, while broadly understood as a cultural and symbolic asset, is necessarily connected to material redistribution – access to jobs, income, housing, healthcare – and these two aspects reciprocally influence each other. As Whittle observes, while in the 1970s and 1980s many trans people had difficulties obtaining and retaining a job or a home, the 1990s

brought about changes for and by transgender people that enabled many of them to build new lives and careers (Whittle, 2006, p. xii). The fact that the transgender movement took on new life throughout that decade is not coincidental.

For social movements such as the transgender one, the struggle for recognition and redistribution is also a struggle for representation. Hall (1997) regards representation as a key moment in the “circuit of culture”: culture is about “shared meanings”, and “in part, we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them” (Hall, 1997, p. 03). Representation thus enters “into the very constitution of things” (Hall, 1997, p. 05) – an idea that resonates de Lauretis’s notion of gender as representation and the representation of gender as its very construction.

Meaning, continues Hall, is produced and circulated at and through several different sites, processes and practices in the “circuit of culture”: in everyday personal and social interactions, as well as “in a variety of different media; especially, these days, in the modern mass media, the means of global communication, by complex technologies, which circulate meanings between different cultures on a scale and with a speed hitherto unknown in history” (Hall, 1997, p. 03).

The struggle over meaning and representation in the media was taken by many social movements (Tuchman et al, 1978; Montgomery, 1989; Hall, 1997), which are one of the forces that drive democratic media activism, understood as “organized ‘grassroots’ efforts directed to creating or influencing media practices and strategies, whether as a primary objective, or as a by-product of other campaigns” (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 84). As “subordinate social groups”, their “lack of social, cultural, economic or political capital is paralleled in the massmediated machinery of representation” (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 85), and they turn their attention to the media both to intervene in the ways they are being represented and to forward their political project.

The initiative studied in this thesis can thus be placed in the intersection between transgender activism and media activism, making use of the media as a means towards a political end and approaching media as an end in itself (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 88). As I will further discuss in the next chapters, by working towards the improvement

of the representations of trans people in the British media, Trans Media Watch's goal is to achieve better treatment to trans people in British society, believing that a more positive societal attitude towards trans people could lead to more politicians engaging with trans issues, and consequently foster gains in aspects such as access to jobs and health care, as well as protection from discrimination and violence. Their focus on a politics of recognition is also a means to promote a politics of redistribution, with the media as another instance for trans persons' self-definition and as the arena of this struggle over representation and meaning.

2. METHODOLOGY

My study of how Trans Media Watch is intervening in media representations of trans in the UK draws on the series of nine interviews I carried out with three members of the group's core team through March and April 2014. As DeVault and Gross put it, the central idea of interviewing is that "knowledge can be produced in structured encounters organized around 'telling about experience'" (DeVault and Gross, 2007, p. 176). The shortcomings of researchers taking "experience" as "uncontestable evidence" were famously pointed out by Joan W. Scott (1991), who argued that experiences are always discursively structured and situated in specific historical and social contexts. Her critique leads to an insightful realization by DeVault and Gross, namely the awareness that

researchers are always working with accounts constructed linguistically, that experience recounted is always emergent in the moment, that telling requires a listener and that the listening shapes the account as well as the telling, that both telling and listening are shaped by discursive histories (...). (DeVault and Gross, 2007, p. 179)

Thus I acknowledge the limitations and situatedness of accounts of experience, adding that the notion that such accounts are discursively constructed and that they emerge in the moment they are told leads me to believe that interviewing was the most appropriate method to develop my research. My interest was to hear Trans Media Watch's members own reflections on their work – how they elaborate their involvement with the group, what are their opinions on the many themes of interest to my research, and how each of them positions themselves in relation to the group and frames their journey as members of Trans Media Watch. As Hesse-Biber observes, interviews are "a particularly valuable research method feminist researchers can use to gain insight into the world of their respondents" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 114). Hearing from the people who are forwarding this venture was a challenging and exciting way to get a hold of the information that would allow me to make sense of the conditions which fostered Trans Media Watch, to grasp where the people involved and the group were coming from, to understand their goals, strategies, methods and their perceived impact, and to situate them in the broader struggle over representation.

There is a variety of types of interviews used by researchers in order to access and produce knowledge in collaboration with research contributors, such as oral history and focus groups, for instance. For my research, I chose to do in-depth interviews for their issue-oriented character: they allow “getting at the ‘subjective’ understanding an individual brings to a given situation or a set of circumstances” (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 118). I decided to conduct what Hesse-Biber calls semistructured interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 116), in which I had a specific interview guide with questions and topics to cover and allowed space in the interview to ask new questions that would come up during the talks.

I relocated to London and remained based in the city during the months of March and April 2014 with the aim of meeting and interviewing the contributors in person. I later realized that even though face-to-face interviews allowed for a better establishment of rapport between the contributors and me, meeting in person meant a great expenditure of effort, time and money, especially in a city as big as London. Therefore I also carried out interviews via Skype, which I found a useful and efficient tool since it allowed for more freedom in terms of schedule and less costs for the contributors and myself.

As Hesse-Biber and Leavy underline, ethics must be at the forefront of researchers’ minds (2011, p. 100), and one of the ways to account for ethical research practices is obtaining informed consent from research contributors. An informed consent letter aims to ensure research contributors the right “to decide – free of pressure or constraint and in a fully informed manner – whether or not they will be involved in any research endeavor” (Faden and Beauchamp in Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2011, p. 66), by communicating the role the contributors are expected to play in the research and the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. I proposed an informed consent letter (Annex) in which I stated my research project and what it comprised, and stipulated that the contributors were free not to answer any question if they chose so and to ask for any clarifications they wished before, during or after the interviews. I gave them the possibility to be anonymized through the use of pseudonyms and to choose how they would like to be referred in the thesis. They all decided to be referred by their real names, which appear after each quote presented in the text. I also use their pronouns of choice, which are stated below in this chapter.

Since this thesis is concerned with the struggle of trans persons to represent themselves in their own words and on their own terms, I find it crucial to give prominence to the considerations the members of Trans Media Watch offered me during the interviews. Therefore they constitute the main core of the next chapters, along with my observations regarding the themes discussed.

2.1. Approaching Trans Media Watch

I first contacted Trans Media Watch in January 2014, through the email address for general contact available on their website. In this first exchange, I introduced myself as a “26 year-old Brazilian journalist and a Gender Studies Master student at the GEMMA consortium” and an advocate of transfeminism⁹. Stating my age and my commitment to transfeminism distanced me from the tradition of trans-exclusiveness that is commonly associated with an older generation of feminists¹⁰, also positioning myself as a person who does not identify as trans but who is committed to an ongoing work of alliance and solidarity with trans persons in the many struggles they face.

By situating myself as a media professional and a master graduate in a Gender Studies program, I hoped to be taken as a “scholar-in-solidarity” (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2012, p. 02) and to lay the ground to describe my research and ask for their collaboration. I explained that I was interested in writing my master thesis about Trans Media Watch and their work on the representations of trans in the British media, and for that I would like to meet and talk to a few of the group members.

Jennie Kermode, Chair of Trans Media Watch, kindly acquiesced to my research proposal and put me in contact with another member, Christabel Edwards, who is one of

⁹ The transfeminism I advocate is the one featured in Koyama, Emi ([2000] 2003): “The Transfeminist Manifesto”. In Cooke Dicker, Rory; Piepmeier, Alison (eds.), *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*. Boston: Northeastern University Press. Transfeminism is “a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond” (p. 245). It is based on the belief that each individual has the right to define their own identity and to express their gender without fear of discrimination or violence, and to make decisions regarding their own bodies free from intrusion of political, medical, or religious authority.

¹⁰ Nonetheless, hostility against trans persons can still be found in many so-called feminist spaces populated by persons of my same age or even younger, which shows that the ideas propagated by the strand of trans-exclusive feminism developed in the 1970s are still very much alive.

Trans Media Watch's trustees¹¹ and could meet me in London in early March. After our first meeting, Christabel put me in touch with Helen Belcher, director of Trans Media Watch. They are the three contributors featured in this thesis.

2.2. Research Contributors

My first interview was with Christabel Edwards, a 40-year-old trans woman, local government worker and trustee of Trans Media Watch (pronouns: she/her). We met personally once and talked for roughly one hour and a half. We had a second 40-minute interview a few weeks later via Skype.

I also spoke to Jennie Kermode, a 40-year-old intersex person, journalist and Chair of Trans Media Watch (pronouns: sie/hir¹²). Jennie is based in Glasgow, Scotland, hence all our talks were carried out via Skype. We had four interviews, one per week during four consecutive weeks, which roughly lasted one hour each.

The last research contributor featured in the thesis is Helen Belcher, director of Trans Media Watch (pronouns: she/her). We had two face-to-face interviews which lasted, respectively, 30 minutes and one hour each, and one Skype interview when we spoke for one hour and fifteen minutes.

Since I set to interview the members of the core team of Trans Media Watch, the sample of contributors featured in my research cannot be considered representative of the diversity in ethnicity, age, class and social background that characterizes the broader British trans population. While it certainly would have been enlightening to interview some of the people Trans Media Watch purports to represent, that was not possible within the scope of this research.

¹¹ "Charity trustees are the people who serve on the governing body of a charity. (...) Trustees have and must accept ultimate responsibility for directing the affairs of a charity, and ensuring that it is solvent, well-run, and delivering the charitable outcomes for the benefit of the public for which it has been set up" (Charity Commission, 2012, p. 08). As I will further clarify in chapter 3, Trans Media Watch registered as a charity in October 2011.

¹² Sie and hir are gender neutral pronouns usually preferred by people who do not identify as either female or male. They can identify as a gender outside of that binary (non-binary identified) or with no gender at all. More information on gender neutral pronouns is available via the following link: <http://nonbinary.org/wiki/Pronouns> - accessed on 07 July 2014.

2.3. A note on position, identity and authority

A common practice in scientific research is the use of particular identity markers to position research contributors regarding the topic of the research, notably granting them authority over the issues addressed in the study. As human beings, research contributors tend to be highly complex individuals with a myriad of attributes, and foregrounding some of their traits while overlooking others can have the effect of reducing their identities to a set of characteristics that might not be the ones they would primarily use to describe themselves.

The reader may have noticed while going through the introductions of each research contributor above that Helen's age and identity are not disclosed in her presentation. My question of whether I could refer to her as a trans woman in the thesis sparked an insightful talk about identity marks and authority. As she reflected on her experiences, she underlined how being trans does not define her:

Different people elaborate it in different ways, so it's only my perception. I know I've been trans ever since I was aware, really. For as far back as I can remember. It doesn't have to define me, it's just an attribute of me. (...) I was thinking: why do you want to refer to me as a trans woman? I can see why it might be relevant, but I ask you to think about this: is it really important that I'm referenced in that way? (Helen)

I understood that her concern, then, was that in referencing her as trans woman I would be circumscribing her identity to only one of her many attributes, and one that is taken to be a "toxic label", as she put it, by many people.

You are shaped by your history. You can't be anything but shaped by your history. Trans is part of people's history, part of people's make up, so why not try to embrace it and say "this is part of what made me"? (...) For your audience, would trans be perceived as a toxic label? In some ways, my history gives me a level of authenticity when I talk to the media, because then I get to call on different parts of my past, but in other ways it isn't important, it's just another variation. (Helen)

My notion is that each personal attribute can be thought of as a filter through which we process our experiences, and that, as Helen said, we are all largely shaped by our histories. Our histories and attributes interact and confer us with our different standpoints, which give us particular perspectives on different issues. As far as it is of concern to this study, I believe that positioning Helen and Jennie and Christabel as persons who have direct and personal experiences with the issues addressed by Trans Media Watch grants them their rightful place of authority on what they do as members

of the group's core team. Nonetheless, that is just one of their many attributes as persons who live full and complex lives and who certainly have many other interests besides the media coverage of trans and intersex issues.

2.4. Reflexivity

As a person who does not identify as trans writing about trans-identified persons, I am aware of the limits to my appreciation of trans experiences, which are most likely reflected in this study. In order to address the challenge of writing about a sense of being and a universe of experiences which are not my own, I have attempted to follow Jacob Hale's *Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans _____*¹³. Hale developed the rules "to assist non-trans individuals in writing about trans people in ways that avoided, rather than perpetuated, transphobic strategies and representations" (Bettcher, 2014 [2009]). The entire document provides relevant points for consideration, and I would like to quote two of the rules that are more closely related to my experiences during the research:

2. Interrogate your own subject position: the ways in which you have power that we don't (including powers of access, juridical power, institutional power, material power, power of intelligible subjectivity), the ways in which this affects what you see and what you say, what your interests and stakes are in forming your initial interest, and what your interests and stakes are in what you see and say as you continue your work.

11. Focus on: What does looking at transsexuals, transsexuality, transsexualism, or transsexual _____ tell you about *yourself*, *not* what does it tell you about trans.

These two points are related to the notion of reflexivity in feminist research, meaning the process of "taking a critical look inward and reflecting on one's own lived reality and experiences" (Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 129), and considering how these experiences are embedded in our choices as researchers, as in who, what and how we choose to study and research.

I began to engage more deeply with feminist studies and activism, online and in physical spaces outside academia, in 2011, and over the last three years I have been more than sad to observe occasional antagonisms between some trans persons and/or trans activists and some feminists. Although I would like to believe that such tension is

¹³ Available: <http://sandystone.com/hale.rules.html> - Accessed on 24 June 2014.

born out of a lack of understanding or goodwill from both sides, I have increasingly felt the pervasiveness of transphobia in so-called feminist circles. So far, my experience as a feminist activist and researcher has granted me the perspective that, for the most part, trans-exclusive stances in feminist groups can be traced back to academic work developed under the guise of “feminist theory” that sought to support and justify their authors’ (and many of their readers’) own hostility against trans persons.

As a feminist whose stripped version of feminism is that it is “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. 01) and who believes that “each individual has the right to define her or his own identity and to expect society to respect it”, which includes “the right to express our gender without fear of discrimination or violence” (Koyama, [2000] 2003, p. 245) I have never taken transphobia as a necessary or at all acceptable attribute of feminism. I have consistently engaged in exhausting but vital discussions with non-trans persons, feminists and not, about trans issues, in the hope of building bridges and promoting understanding amongst them. That said, I do not consider myself an ambassador of trans people. Nonetheless, as feminist theorist A. Finn Enke (2012), I believe that being a feminist and doing the work of questioning and dismantling gender hierarchies can as well be considered instances of gender transgressive phenomena, hence “trans issues *are* feminist issues and are *within*, not beyond, the scope of feminism” (Enke, 2012, p. 06, emphasis original).

2.5. Coverage of intersex issues

Trans Media Watch is also concerned and acting towards the improvement of the coverage of intersex issues in British media. They define intersex as individuals

in whom genetic, hormonal and physical features that may be thought typical of both male and female co-exist. They may be thought of as being male with female features, female with male features, or may have no clearly defined sexual features. (Trans Media Watch, n.d., p. 02)

Even though there are overlapping issues in the media coverage of both trans and intersex, there are also distinct concerns and problems to be worked upon in the way trans and intersex experiences are represented in the media, hence both themes cannot be conflated. In this study, I decided to focus on the work of Trans Media Watch

regarding the representations of trans, and I acknowledge that my choice both reflects and feeds into the large invisibility of intersex issues in the public sphere. There are signs, however, of an ongoing shift on the public status of intersexuality: in February 2013, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture released a statement condemning the nonconsensual medical treatment of intersexuality in children, comprising procedures such as “irreversible sex assignment, involuntary sterilization, involuntary genital normalizing surgery” (Mendéz, 2013, p. 18). In one of our talks, Jennie cited the UN report and a perceived rise in activism for intersex rights as indicators of an imminent increase in visibility of intersex issues. Preparing for this new scenario, Trans Media Watch is currently carrying out an intersex focused project, in partnership with organizations and groups of intersex people, to develop specific guidelines for the media coverage of intersex issues.

2.6. Acknowledging All About Trans

When I originally devised this research project I had the intention to produce a combined analysis of Trans Media Watch and All About Trans, another initiative working on the representation of trans issues in the media in the UK. The project was developed in 2011 by On Road Media, a not-for-profit organization working with misrepresented communities in the media, in partnership with Trans Media Watch. Despite the overlapping goals and the initial cooperation, TMW and AAT are currently two independent initiatives working in different ways towards the improvement of the media coverage of trans issues.

As I did with Trans Media Watch, I contacted All About Trans, explained my research project and asked for their collaboration. They agreed to take part in the study, and while I was in London I carried out four interviews with three people involved in the project. As I progressed with my research, I realized that I needed to narrow the frame of the data analysis for the actual master thesis, mostly due to limitations of time and space. Since I had had the chance to carry out more interviews with the members of Trans Media Watch and gather more information and insights about the group and their workings than I had had with All About Trans, I made the decision to focus my study on TMW. I am hugely grateful for the time and the attention the people from All About

Trans dedicated to me and my project, and I deeply appreciate the work they too have been doing concerning the representations of trans in the media in the UK. I firmly believe that their project deserves a study of its own, one that could for instance be centered on the varied narratives about trans youth that All About Trans has been championing in British media.

3. POSITIONING TRANS MEDIA WATCH: TRANS LIVES, ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY IN THE UK

The struggle over representations of trans in the media championed by Trans Media Watch (TMW) appertains to a very specific context, which encompasses various aspects of life as a trans person in the UK as well as the ongoing public debate over the role and the practices of the media in the country. Increasing awareness and interest in trans issues in contemporary British society due to the continuous work of trans activists are in a sense reflected and motivated by recent changes in the law, as well as encouraged and explored by the media. A shift can be observed in the country in relation to trans themes in the media and in public life as a whole; at the same time, there are still barriers to social acceptance and full citizenship for trans persons in the UK, such as the discrimination many of them still face and the negative representations still widely circulated by the media. Trans Media Watch tackles the latter in hopes of having an impact on the former, informed by the larger trans community in the country.

In this chapter, I will explore the British context concerning the aspects of life as a trans person regarding legal status and discrimination, as well as trans organizing, the media, and the circumstances that spurred the emergence of TMW. Following from the theoretical discussion in chapter 1 on the gap in theory and in activism that prompted the trans movement to come into its own and the establishment of the field of transgender studies in academia, I will show how Trans Media Watch comes to fill a gap in trans activism in the British context as well: until their appearance, there was no organized effort to tackle media representations of trans in the UK. Additionally, I will discuss how TMW handles the challenges and navigates the fraught position it occupies as representatives of trans persons in the country, to argue that the group creates community through the work of representation.

3.1. Living as trans in the UK

Over the last decade, significant transformations have been taking place in the UK for trans people. In the realm of citizenship, the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA)

secured legal recognition for people who wish to be legally registered in a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth. Since April 2005, when the GRA came into effect, a person can apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) from a Gender Recognition Panel (GRP) providing proof that they have been living in the gender in which they wish to be recognized for at least two years previous to the filing of the application. They must give evidence of a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria¹⁴, and convince the GRP of their intention to live permanently in the gender they wish to be recognized. Furthermore, “details of medical treatment and relevant dates are required. Genital surgery is not a requirement, although where it has taken place, applicants must supply details” (GIRES, n.d.). The GRC allows for change in all public records and documents, such as passport, driver’s license and even birth certificate, which are then issued with both the gender and the name the person wishes to be legally recognized as theirs. In a study on the significance of the GRA, many trans persons expressed its importance in terms of simplifying bureaucracy and some even linked the change of the birth certificate to their “sense of self”, seeing it “as an important reflection of their gender identity” (Hines and Davy, 2011, p. 10).

The GRA is certainly a significant milestone in the struggle for full citizenship for trans persons in the UK. Nonetheless, it is marred by considerable limitations, such as its binary and medicalized notion of transgender. The GRA allows legal recognition only to individuals who wish to be registered as either female or male, hence people who do not identify as any of those two are not contemplated by the law. Furthermore, the issue of a GRC is tied to a medical report confirming a diagnosis of gender dysphoria and detailing the medical treatment the person has been or plans on taking on. A person who identifies as a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth and does not wish to go through any medical treatment – be it counseling, hormones or surgery – does not qualify and could not obtain a GRC.

¹⁴ Gender dysphoria is the formal medical diagnosis of “discomfort or distress caused by a mismatch between a person’s gender identity and their biological sex assigned at birth” (National Health Service, 2014). Not all people who identify with a gender different than the one assigned at birth seek medical treatment, and such diagnosis is contested by many trans people, who oppose the pathologization of trans experiences. In the UK’s National Health System, the diagnosis is the first step to access medical intervention and procedures such as surgeries and hormones, which are considered “treatments” to the “condition” of gender dysphoria.

Hindrances notwithstanding, between April 2005 and December 2013 the GRPs received 3.877 applications and issued 3.346 full GRCs (UK Ministry of Justice, 2014). The Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIRES) calculates that by 2010 the number of people aged over 15 who sought medical intervention and were diagnosed with gender dysphoria in the UK could be estimated to be 12.500, and by March 2010, it was estimated that 7.431 individuals had completed transition (GIRES, 2009). The organization also reckons that the number of people in the country who may present some form of transgender identity could stay between 300.000 and 500.000, although only a small percentage decide to go through transition to a gender different than the one assigned at birth by medical means.

While the awareness of gender non-conformity usually appears at a very early age, according to GIRES, the median age in which the adult population seeks medical assistance regarding their trans condition in the UK is 42. The apprehension regarding social stigma and discrimination often prevents people from freely expressing their own sense of gender. The report *Engendered Penalties* (Whittle et al, 2007), which broadly mapped trans people's experiences in the country in 2006, related that the greater part of the people who participated on their online survey expressed "fear for their safety", with 73% stating experiences of harassment and 10% "being victims of threatening behavior when out in public spaces" (Whittle et al, 2007, p. 16). According to the report, the main trigger point for inequality or discrimination for trans people in the UK is the point of transition in the workplace. Other sectors of life in which they experienced most discrimination and inequality were healthcare access and leisure and education. Personal relationships – within family and marriage – were also related as potentially problematic (Whittle et al, 2007, p. 15).

Given such hardships, the existence of a vast support network for trans people is a logical and fortunate aspect of life as a trans person in the UK. In 2011, it was estimated that there were 125 organizations at national or local level offering support for trans people and their families (GIRES, <http://gires.org.uk/tranzwiki/>). Many of these organizations are also campaign and advocacy groups advancing better treatment and civil rights for trans people in the UK, such as Press for Change (<http://www.pfc.org.uk/>), GIRES (<http://gires.org.uk/>), Gendered Intelligence (<http://genderedintelligence.co.uk/>), The Gender Trust (<http://gendertrust.org.uk/>) and

Mermaids (<http://www.mermaidsuk.org.uk/>, the most prominent group offering support for trans children and youth and their families), among many others.

GIRES calculates that the number of persons in the UK presenting for treatment of gender dysphoria has steadily risen 11% per year since 1998 (GIRES, 2011, p. 01). The organization credits the constant growth in the number of persons seeking medical treatment to enhance their presentation in their preferred gender to a few broader social factors, such as the multiplication of local support groups and online spaces where trans persons can safely discuss their feelings and experiences, as well as new legislation securing rights and protection to trans persons in the UK (GIRES, 2009, p. 16). Greater awareness of trans issues as a result of “publicity in the media” and a “somewhat more respectful press coverage” are also underscored as influences in that scenario, an indication of how the media representations of trans persons and issues can have an impact on the lives of trans persons in the UK. Trans Media Watch sought to assess such impact very early on through a survey carried out a few months after the group was established. The findings helped the group take notice of the most pressing points to be worked upon in the media coverage of trans issues in order to make a positive impact on trans persons’ lives.

3.2. How Trans People Perceive the British Media

A survey carried out between November 2009 and February 2010 by Trans Media Watch provided an appraisal of the general perceptions of trans persons in the UK regarding the coverage of trans issues and representations of trans people in the British press (newspapers and magazines) and broadcast (radio and television) at the time. Released in April 2010, the report *How Transgender People Experience the Media* presented the views of 256 respondents in the UK, of which 250 self-identified as transgender and 6 identified not as transgender but as close relative of a transgender person (Trans Media Watch, 2010, p. 02).

According to the report, 78% of the respondents felt that the media representations of trans people were either inaccurate or highly inaccurate, and 70% felt that, on the whole, they were either negative or very negative – while less than 5% related finding them positive. The respondents regarded that the media consistently confused “cross

dressing”, “transsexualism” and “homosexuality” and represented trans women as “stubby blokes in dresses” (Trans Media Watch, 2010, p. 10). The gender imbalance in the representation of trans people was also related by the respondents, with the perception that the media has a bias towards the representation of trans women, with trans men remaining comparatively invisible. Christabel Edwards, trustee of Trans Media Watch, regards it as a “media obsession with trans women”:

You wouldn't think it, but there are nearly as much trans men as there are trans women. But if you read the media, you'll think that virtually every trans person is a trans woman. (...) Often a trans man has to become pregnant or something to get into a news, but a trans woman just has to turn up. (Christabel)

From their survey, Trans Media Watch concluded that “transgender people often find the media abusive and humiliating” (Trans Media Watch, 2010, p. 10), and many respondents felt that such abuse was routinely picked up by non-trans persons: 21,5% of them related verbal abuse and 8% reported physical abuse, 19,5% related negative reactions at work and 12% described negative encounters with service providers, all instances they believed to be associated with representations of trans people in the media. Christabel's impressions are similar: she believes that certain media representations can endanger trans persons.

People read “tranny” in the press, they shout “tranny” at us in the street. People see trans people mocked on the television, they mock us in the street. The media is making victims of us, and that makes life dangerous for us. (Christabel)

The impact of the media was also felt on the personal lives and relationships of the respondents of the survey, with 86 of them relating feeling that certain media representations of trans people had informed negative reactions of their friends and family, and 14 reporting family problems or “complete family breakdown” that they felt were due to specific media items (Trans Media Watch, 2010, p. 09). The respondents also assessed their feelings regarding negative items about trans people in the media: 67% said they felt “angry”, 50,5% “unhappy”, 34,5% “excluded” and 20% felt “frightened” – and 2% said they were “not bothered by it” (Trans Media Watch, 2010, p. 07).

Positive representations, on the other hand, were cited as vital in promoting better understanding of trans issues amongst society and helping trans people feel less

isolated, leading to more confidence in dealing with their own feelings and opening up with others about being trans:

Before and whilst I was trying to understand myself and discovering that I was trans I found watching the positive documentaries and films extremely helpful. They helped me to understand what I was thinking, and also made me realise that I wasn't the only person in the world who felt like that. (Survey respondent cited in Trans Media Watch, 2010, p. 06)

Over half of the respondents expressed their desire to see more representations of trans in the media, with some believing that even coverage considered negative can have a positive aspect, for it raises visibility and can be a starting point for public reflection and discussion about trans issues (Trans Media Watch, 2010, p. 07).

The report also reveals that most respondents considered newspapers to be “the biggest source of problematic material” (Trans Media Watch, 2010, p. 08), relating feelings of hopelessness and frustration linked to an inability to challenge negative coverage in British newspapers. An impressive 95% of respondents felt that the media do not care what trans persons think of items they publish on trans issues.

A few respondents also showed an awareness of the mechanisms available for challenging the media in the UK: the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) and the Office of Communications (Ofcom) are the two bodies responsible for regulating the press (printed newspapers and magazines) and broadcast (television and radio) respectively. Both are in charge of upholding the standards of their respective sectors, and offer the public the possibility of filing formal complaints against specific newspapers and magazine articles and TV and radio programs, as well as against the conduct of media professionals, in case of perceived breaches of their Editor’s Code of Practice (PCC) and Broadcasting Code (Ofcom). Both organizations work in similar ways: the complaints are analyzed by an advisory board which decides whether there are grounds for the grievances of the readers/viewers. In case they are considered justified, the board proposes an agreement between both sides of the dispute. Ofcom is a public body whose mandate was established by the UK Parliament through the Communications Act 2003, whereas the PCC is an independent self-regulating body, established by the press industry and run by its representatives, which gives rise to suspicions of bias of the PCC towards the press. Both organizations are often perceived as ineffective by many people who over the years have tried to make use of their tools to challenge the media. As one respondent expressed on TMW’s survey: "I think it is

important to note that it isn't just the media that doesn't care how what they do affects trans people. The Press Complaints Commission and Ofcom don't care either" (Trans Media Watch, 2010, p. 06).

In the next section, I will show how the dissatisfaction over media representations of trans and the frustration with the means available at the time to challenge them spurred the foundation of Trans Media Watch as an organized group to intervene in media discourses on trans issues.

3.3. Trans Media Watch

Under the aegis of “accuracy, dignity, respect”, Trans Media Watch describes itself as “a charity dedicated to improving media coverage of trans and intersex issues”¹⁵. It challenges what it sees as “problem coverage” of trans and intersex issues in the media, reaching out to media professionals and institutions providing criticism and alternative ways of approaching trans and intersex issues in the media. It also offers guidance and advice to trans and intersex people who are dealing with the media. Moreover, it engages with politicians and public institutions to forward its project of better treatment of trans and intersex people, being actively involved in the public discussion on media reform and press regulation in the UK.

Monro (2005) characterizes the development of a new social movement as involving “a number of people becoming unhappy about something, feeling that the mainstream ways of addressing it are insufficient, beginning to believe that they can act to change things, and having opportunities that allow them to do so as a collective” (Monro, 2005, p. 121). Such description is applicable to the events that led to the creation of Trans Media Watch, whose origins can be traced back to March 20th 2009, when the television channel ITV 1 aired the episode “The New Member” of TV comedy series *Moving Wallpaper*. The show revolved around the work of a troupe of scriptwriters, and the episode in question introduced the character Georgina, a new scriptwriter who happened to be a transsexual woman. Throughout the 26 minute episode, Georgina is referred to as “‘he’, ‘she/he’ or even ‘it’” and described as “a cock in a frock” and “a walking GM

¹⁵ Trans Media Watch website: <http://transmediawatch.org/> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

crop”, while being the butt of jokes about her “hairy hands” and “stubby face” (Chortle, 2009). The episode outraged a number of trans individuals and many of them turned to Ofcom, the broadcast regulating body, filing 100 letters of complaint. Ofcom ultimately cleared ITV and the TV show in June 2009, declaring that the treatment reserved to the character was justified given the “specific context of a satirical drama” (Ofcom, 2009).

The reaction to the *Moving Wallpaper* episode, orchestrated via blogs and social media, culminated in the creation of the Facebook group Trans Media Watch, set up to be a focal point for trans persons and allies dedicated to monitoring the coverage of trans issues in the media. Trans Media Watch was thus originated in a context of community mobilization against what many perceived as an utterly offensive treatment of a trans character on a TV show, which they viewed as yet another example of a string of media coverage in the UK showing general lack of regard and respect towards trans persons.

The Facebook group quickly gathered a number of trans individuals coming from other online spaces and forums of discussion and support by and for trans persons, who felt that they had a personal stake in the way the media was representing trans issues. The Facebook group became then a space where they could keep track of media representations of trans issues and discuss what they saw as good coverage and bad coverage, and what to do about the latter. Christabel so recounts her early experience with the group:

It was set up in 2009, and that was about the time that I was going through transition, so I was joining all sorts of support groups and things, and I found Trans Media Watch on Facebook. (...) I just had an interest in reading media. And I had an interest in trans issues, obviously, because I was just in transition at that time, and I was very much focused on it, so I was looking out for everything I'd find. So I was just picking up these articles at work and emailing them to myself, so that I could post them later. I'm not sure why, it just seemed like something to do, I wanted to help. (Christabel)

Similarly to Christabel, Jennie Kermode, currently chair of Trans Media Watch, came to encounter the Facebook group a few months into its foundation. As a journalist, she occasionally offered guidance and media expertise to a number of charities and organizations, and did the same for Trans Media Watch, which at that point had already gone from an informal collective effort to monitor the way trans issues were being reported by the media to setting up a website with the aim of taking direct action to improve the media coverage of trans issues. Jennie employed her media expertise and

shared her contacts to help TMW build relationships with media professionals and institutions and establish itself as a formal organization:

It was clear that it had the potential to go somewhere, and that it didn't really have the expertise at that time to take it somewhere in terms of the media, in terms of getting it noticed. It wanted to comment on the media, but to be visible like that you need to be seeing the right people, to be meeting with people, you need to be able to send out press releases that get attention; you can't do that kind of thing just without any experience. They could probably have built that eventually, but by then they might have burned themselves out, so I originally came in as media officer, to help with that. (Jennie)

The contact with media professionals is one of the fronts in which TMW operates in order to forward its project. Another front is the engagement with politicians, and these two features were conjoined very early on in the group's work. Helen Belcher, director of TMW, understands that the work with the media is the means to an end: both social acceptance and access to rights and public services for trans persons:

In its most raw state, the media shapes how people think. Amongst those people are the policy makers and the politicians. So if the media is giving the wrong impression of what trans people and trans issues are, then they're never going to get fixed, because the policy makers won't understand them. And also, there's a large battle for social acceptance. So it's one thing getting politicians and policy makers on board, but if you haven't got the wider population on board as well, then it's just going to be another set of meaningless laws which no one has any intention of complying with. So the media work is very important to get the view on trans people right to the general public. It's a precursor to everything else. (Helen)

Everything else, according to Helen, is a very encompassing set of issues, such as access to health care, education, housing, social welfare and immigration, employment and legal rights. As Helen, Jennie holds that the media is "where it all starts", and that it is through the media that most non-trans persons will first come in contact with trans and intersex issues. Her stance is that the media is a crucial field in which to advance a broader and deeper understanding of trans issues to a non-trans audience and enact cultural and social change.

People learn these things when they know someone personally, but we're a minority. Trans and intersex people are small groups within the population, and an awful lot of people are not open about being trans or intersex because of the stigma associated with that, although that's something that's starting to change, and we hope we can contribute to that. But when people don't have those personal encounters, then all they have is the media as their source of knowledge. And people are not going to change their attitudes until they're educated, until they get it, and that's what we're there for. We work with the media because if the media gets it right, if the media makes trans and intersex people more visible in positive ways, then prejudice will go away. (Jennie)

Their idea is that the representations of trans issues in the media inform the perceptions of non-trans persons – politicians and law makers included. Such representations, as they believe, can shape non-trans persons’ attitudes towards trans individuals, as well as politicians and law makers’ notions of the needs of trans persons regarding legislation and access to public services. Trans Media Watch can be thus understood as a liaison group, whose mandate stems from its grounding in the trans community, working as a mediator and advocate for said community along media professionals and institutions, as well as politicians and public bodies.

The move from Facebook to boardrooms prompted the registration of the group as a charity, a legal status for organizations working to benefit the public under a not-for-profit principle (Charity Commission, n.d.). The charity framework entails a specific organizational structure and a registered membership. Members can register via the group’s website and are asked to pay an annual fee of 10 pounds to support TMW’s activities¹⁶. According to Helen, registered membership “varies around 15 [people], sometimes a couple more, sometimes a couple less”. Members have the right to vote and to present themselves as candidates in the annual elections for the group’s board, carried out during the Annual General Meeting (AGM). The AGM is open for members and non-members alike, and besides the elections the meeting is dedicated to discuss the group’s work over the previous year and the goals and projects for the following year. TMW’s board, the core team of people who run the group, account for nine to twelve people, according to Jennie. They are registered paying members who do not receive any financial compensation for their dedication to Trans Media Watch.

Groups organized by and for trans persons such as TMW have existed in the UK ever since the 1960s, with an upsurge in the 1990s and 2000s, credited to the popularization of personal computers and access to internet (Whittle et al, 2007) and also to the larger visibility of trans issues and the gradual recognition of rights for trans persons. The majority of these groups have been dedicated to providing support for trans persons and working on the realms of legislation and access to health care. Hence, in focusing on media representation, Trans Media Watch comes to fill a gap in trans activism in the UK:

¹⁶ <http://transmediawatch.org/members.html> - Accessed on 12 July 2014.

All the time there wasn't really any voice speaking out about media representation, it was all trying to work through civil servants and the bureaucracy, and all the media were being left untouched, which then meant they were getting more and more out of control, working irresponsibly. And it wasn't necessarily intentional irresponsibility, it was simply that they had no one there who was able to come knock on the door and say "this is what's going on". So when we started up about four years ago we got a lot of interest, because it was something new, something different. (Helen)

The "something different", the work with the media, was an aspect which until the emergence of Trans Media Watch was not a priority of any of the organized groups working on trans issues in the UK. As the survey carried out by TMW showed, the grievances regarding the representations of trans issues in the British media had been in the making for quite some time among trans individuals; nevertheless, it took a perfect storm involving a specific piece of media content, community engagement and the willingness of a few individuals to move the cause forward.

Another factor which contributed to the establishment of Trans Media Watch as a critical voice of the media in the UK was the society-wide feeling of mounting distrust and dissatisfaction towards the press in the country. News media, comprising newspapers and magazines, have been under close scrutiny in the UK since the mid-2000, when the News International phone-hacking scandal revealed that phone-hacking and police bribery were customary practices on the part of employees of the *News of the World* newspaper (BBC, n.d.). The scandal fueled a lively discussion in British society about ethics in journalism and prompted a public inquiry to examine the culture, practice and ethics of the press, known as the Levenson Inquiry. The inquiry ran public hearings from November 2011 and June 2012 and produced recommendations for stricter press regulation in In the UK, published in the Levenson Inquiry report in November 2012 (Levenson, 2012).

Trans Media Watch participated in the inquiry, elaborating a report pointing out the problems and offering recommendations for better practices and coverage by the British press regarding trans people and issues¹⁷. The document entitled *The British Press and the Transgender Community* (2011) was submitted in December 2011. In February

¹⁷ Some of the problems Trans Media Watch finds in the media coverage of trans issues and the alternatives suggested by the group will be discussed in Chapter 4.

2012 Helen gave evidence at the Inquiry, talking through the points made in the report; something that, as Jennie put it, helped humanize its content¹⁸.

Given that the Levenson Inquiry was the main stage of the disputes of the previous five years in the UK between media institutions, politicians and policy makers and members of the public, Helen, Jennie and Christabel all believe that participating in the Inquiry raised TMW's profile as an organization: "that was really what put us on the establishment scene" (Helen). It also singled the group out from the wider field of trans activism and placed them more clearly in the realm of media activism. Carroll and Hackett characterize "democratic and progressive" media activism as one of the driving forces of media democratization, whose main goal is to "change media messages, practices, institutions and contexts (including state communication policies) in a direction that enhances democratic values and subjectivity, as well as equal participation in public discourse and societal decision-making" (Carroll and Hackett, 2006, p. 84). Jennie shows a similar conceptualization of the work of Trans Media Watch:

I think that, as an organization, we would perceive ourselves as being part of a movement towards improvement in media standards generally. And I would see us there as being aligned with organizations like the National Union of Journalists, potentially with groups like Hacked Off¹⁹ (...), certainly with organizations, for instance, that represent disabled people's rights, which want to tackle racism in the media, that kind of thing. I would say that we see ourselves as part of a larger group as far as that's concerned. So you might say we would see ourselves as a progressive organization, it would probably be the easiest way to put that. (Jennie)

Thus, while it is based upon a tradition of trans organizing in the UK concerned with the attainment of full citizenship for trans people, Trans Media Watch marks its difference as a media-focused organization, with a very specific field of action inside the broader trans movement in the country.

Trans Media Watch has a very focused strand, which is media issues, media representation, so Trans Media Watch quite often gets approached for views on healthcare, and was approached for views on same-sex marriage; well, Trans Media Watch has no views on same-sex marriage, and has no views on healthcare. All it's simply concerned about is that when these things are reported, they are done so accurately and fairly. (Helen)

¹⁸ The transcript of the hearing carried out on 08 February 2012 can be found at <http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Transcript-of-Afternoon-Hearing-8-February-2012.pdf> . Accessed on 31 May 2014.

¹⁹ Hacked Off is a campaigning group for "a free and accountable press": <http://hackinginquiry.org/> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

Although the distinction is important to position the group's mandate inside the trans community and activism in the UK, TMW offers an interesting case for it blurs what Carrol and Hackett claim to be one of the main analytical differences between "conventional activism" and media activism: "the former makes strategic use of the media (whether mainstream or its own) as a means towards some other political end; the latter approaches media as an (at least interim) end in itself" (Carrol and Hackett, 2006, p. 88). Trans Media Watch approaches the media both as an end in itself – for it pushes for changes in the practices of media professionals and institutions, as well as nationwide media reform – and as a means to an end – improving the coverage and representations of trans in order to raise public awareness and educate policy makers and members of the public about trans issues – all in the British context of fierce public and political contestation of the role and the practices of the media.

As I showed throughout the previous pages, the emergence of Trans Media Watch was precipitated by an event that mustered trans people's feelings of vexation over media representations that they considered negative and problematic, frustration over their perceived inability to challenge them, and a steadily increasing confidence which was both cause and consequence of a strong sense of shared grievances and goals amongst the community and of recently acquired rights and protections under the British law. All these factors catalyzed into a collective and orchestrated effort to challenge and intervene in the media discourse on trans issues. In the next section I will explore how Trans Media Watch, as a progressive organization working on behalf of trans persons, navigates its position as representatives of the trans community in the UK, and argue that such community is created by the work of representation carried out by TMW and other groups dedicated to trans issues.

3.4. Making community through the work of representation

On their website, Trans Media Watch states its dependence on "ordinary trans and intersex people to be its eyes and ears", and its aim to "reflect the concerns of those people and of the community as a whole"²⁰. While TMW acts upon representations of trans in the media (*Darstellung*), they also position themselves as doing the work of

²⁰ <http://transmediawatch.org/about.html> - Accessed on 10 July 2014.

Vertretung, “‘political’ representation – that is, the role of a delegate or a spokesperson for a particular community” (Escoffier, 1998, p. 190). The issues with the notion of “trans community” have been cleverly discussed by anthropologist David Valentine (2007) and psychologist Y. Gavriel Ansara (2010; 2012). Both have emphasized the faults of the presumption of a cohesive unity comprehensive of all persons who identify with a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth, who are “assumed to share a single ‘community’ focused around this category, regardless of their cultural or personal context or self-identification” (Ansara, 2012, p. 93). Moreover, Valentine sees the transgender community as existing in the context “of those very entities which are concerned to *find* a transgender community: social service organizations, social science accounts, and activist discourses”, being therefore the “*product of an imaginary*” (Valentine, 2007, p. 68, emphasis original). Drawing from political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983), Valentine highlights the transgender community as an “achievement”, a process which happens with the exercise of agency and power, which at the same time “fails to account for all its imagined members” (Valentine, 2007, p. 73). Community, a notion “predicated on an assumption of shared identity” (Valentine, 2007, p. 103), describes thus “not a static, place-based social collective but a power-laden field of social relations whose meanings, structures, and frontiers are continually produced, contested, and reworked in relation to a complex range of sociopolitical attachments and antagonisms” (Gregory in Valentine, 2007, p. 102).

As I discussed in chapter 1, the essence of new social movements is their basis on shared identity and grievances, which prompts collective action to tackle the struggle for symbolic and material recognition. The notion of community discussed above could thus be related to new social movement theories on collective identity and collective action, both understood as interdependent and fraught processes. Sociologist Steven Buechler draws from social theorist Alberto Melucci (1988) to explain that “the social construction of collective identity is both a major prerequisite and a major accomplishment of the new social movements”:

Melucci is insistent that new social movements be seen as ongoing social constructions rather than as unitary empirical objects, givens or essences, or historical personages acting on a stage. In contrast to these conceptions, whatever unity movements may achieve is a result of ongoing efforts rather than an initial starting point for collective action. (Buechler, 1995, p. 446)

As a new social movement, the trans movement is based on shared identity and shared grievances concerning the various manifestations of discrimination against such identity in broader society. Collective action on behalf of a collective identity on the part of varied groups to differently tackle such grievances is a work of representation that manages to strengthen and build community around such identity and around the perception of shared struggles. I would argue that the idea of trans community is thus connected to the acknowledgement of the existence of a group of individuals who may not share many attributes beyond the fact that they identify with a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth, but who are targets, due to their expressions of gender, of similar prejudice and discrimination (which are inextricably linked with discrimination regarding other categories of social difference such as age, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, amongst others), and engage, one way or another, in the struggle for recognition.

I believe such is the case in the UK context where Trans Media Watch operates. Based on my talks with Helen, Jennie and Christabel, I would argue that the trans community they purport to represent are not necessarily the totality of persons in the UK who identify with a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth; rather, they strive to represent the persons who engage in conversation with the group in the online and activist spaces they inhabit and share. Alongside other groups dedicated to provide support and to advocate for rights and citizenship for trans persons, TMW creates community through the work of representation, which implies the involvement of people who feel contemplated by and engage in their struggle.

One of the tools TMW employs on their work which contributes to “make” community is media monitoring, the feature that originated the group and that continues to be an important aspect of the relationship between the group and the broader community. Through media monitoring, the community indicates the problematic pieces to be addressed in TMW’s contacts with media professionals and institutions. The work of media monitoring is done online, via email and social media: as of July 2014, Trans Media Watch counted 13,100 followers on Twitter²¹ and 514 likes on their Facebook page²², founded in January 2014 after the original Facebook group, which then totaled

²¹ <https://twitter.com/TransMediaWatch> - Accessed on 12 July 2014.

²² <https://www.facebook.com/transmediawatch> - Accessed on 12 July 2014.

2,555 members, was closed. They also have an online forum²³, created in December 2013, which in July 2014 comprised 92 members.

People will email about stories, they'll tweet about stories to us, they will put things on our forum and they'll put things on our Facebook page. (...) People can use whatever means they're more comfortable with, and that really helps with getting a wide diversity of things. (Jennie)

The exchanges with the community about problematic coverage is one of the aspects of what TMW regards as collection of data which are then used to ground the group's proposed alternatives to the media. They also carry out researches and surveys, on a variety of themes, through social media and personal contacts with other groups working on trans issues.

We'll talk with people all the time on our internet forum, on our Facebook page, and on our Twitter feed, and we'll get feedback from people on all kinds of stories and we keep notes of what the balance of opinion is on particular stories, on particular themes. (...) So that kind of thing is day to day data collection, and assessing that on an ongoing basis we keep in touch with the community. Other work can involve online surveys, or it can involve sort of focus groups (...). When we go in we do training on how to handle the media, or we meet a group to do a talk for them on something like that, then we'll talk with them about what's important to them, what their concerns are and look at ways that we can represent them better. And it's all about, again, collecting data, and finding out what the average opinions are out of that, because we don't want to misrepresent people. (Jennie)

The concern with misrepresentation comes from the recognition of their position as representatives of a community which is deeply diverse in terms of age, class, race, sexuality and other categories of social difference. Such diversity is reflected on the variety of opinions on the different matters addressed by Trans Media Watch regarding media representations of trans, and they attempt to incorporate the myriad of different voices in their work with the media, highlighting the views of the majority but also acknowledging the minority viewpoints:

Because we're in a sense expected to speak for the whole of the trans community and for the intersex community, we need to make sure that we have a solid evidence base for that. We don't want it to be about 'this is what we think', it has to be about what the whole community such as it is thinks, and we have to put across minority viewpoints as well as the ones that we feel need to have the most attention as majority viewpoints from that community. (...) If you look for instance at the first big study we did, *How Transgender People Experience the Media*, you'll see that there are some people recorded there as really liking the media the way it is, and feeling happy with it, and we didn't want to make their voices go away, so our final published report shows that. We usually find some people who disagree quite strongly with the majority view and we all try and raise that when we're on meetings, when we are working with people and certainly in our publications. (Jennie)

²³ <http://forum.transmediawatch.org/index.php> - Accessed on 11 July 2014.

Among the people Trans Media Watch seeks to engage in conversation about how to tackle the struggle over more positive representations of trans in the media, many are actively involved in different efforts to improve the lives of trans persons, as members of other organizations dedicated to provide support and campaign for rights for trans persons. Moreover, some of the members on TMW's board are also members of such groups: Jennie and one of the trustees are members of the Scottish Transgender Alliance, and another TMW trustee occupies the same position at GIRES. The composition of TMW's board is another aspect the group is attentive to in their work of representation: while they do not circumscribe participation in the group only to persons who identify as trans or intersex, they attempt to maintain their board as composed by people who have a direct experience with trans or intersex issues. That does not mean the core team is strictly comprising of people who identify as trans or intersex; one of the group's trustees does not identify as such but is the father of a trans person, therefore he has a "particular expertise to bring" to TMW, believes Jennie.

There are many different experiences that come into what we do. When it comes to our board, our trustees, we are quite careful to make sure that everybody has a direct and visibly substantial experience of trans issues that directly and personally impacts them. So we're entirely run by people who either are trans or intersex, or in that one case, have a trans child. (Jennie)

In spite of attempts to reflect the community's concerns in their work by taking input from the community at large and from members of other organizations, and to ensure that the group is run by persons who have direct experiences with trans issues, TMW expectably faces criticism from part of the community. Some people strongly disagree with the group's stances and strategies and loudly express their dissatisfaction, which is often related to the positive approach the group takes on dealing with the media. While the group states its openness to criticism that can help them "do better" (Jennie), they also maintain their position to assess situations and decide among themselves what they believe to be the most appropriate strategies to handle the issues and challenges in the work with the media²⁴.

We don't expect everybody to think that every decision we make is perfect. Criticism can be legitimate and sometimes it leads to us changing our strategy, sometimes it gives us new ideas, sometimes we just disagree, or we feel that it's not a view that has strong enough support from the community to be worth pushing, or we don't think that this strategy that someone suggested is particularly useful. We get a lot of people saying, for instance, that we should be more aggressive, that we should be refusing to work with people. Well, our experience is that if we

²⁴ TMW's approach to the media will be discussed in the next chapter.

refuse to work with people, they refuse to work with us. (...) So we'll listen to people's criticism in terms of we'll listen to what they have to say about where they think we're actually getting it wrong, where they think we can do better, and their suggestions for that. (Jennie)

The wide range of opinions amongst trans persons engaged in the discussion on how to forward TMW's goals evidences the fallacy of a monolithic understanding of a "trans community" as a cohesive unity galvanized around similar perceptions on how to approach the challenges of the struggle for representation and recognition. I would argue thus that it is precisely through the fraught and challenging work of representation that Trans Media Watch – along with other organizations dedicated to trans issues – creates community. By bringing to the fore the discussion on representations of trans in the media and on the alternatives for improving the media coverage of trans issues, the group engages people who are directly impacted by such coverage in their struggle. This can be considered a means towards the making of a trans community – not a homogeneous entity, but a community traversed by contentious positions as well as common views on how to achieve the goal of better lives for trans persons.

How, then, does the group put into practice such collective force intent on establishing new and more positive narratives of trans by trans persons for trans people in the media? In the next chapter, I will look at how Trans Media Watch has been challenging the media in the UK, exploring the group's practices and strategies in approaching media professionals and institutions.

4. CHALLENGING THE MEDIA

Having situated Trans Media Watch as a media-focused group doing the work of representation of the trans community and inserted in a context of media and trans activism in the UK, in this chapter I will focus on their bid to improve media coverage of trans issues and promote more positive representations of trans people through direct contact with media professionals and institutions. “Behind the scenes” engagement with the media is one of their main methods of work: the group proposes alternatives to what they consider “problem coverage” by trying to “educate” and “work positively”, fostering amicable relationships with media professionals and institutions, a crucial element in their work as liaisons between the trans community and the media.

Over the next pages, I will identify some of the group’s main concerns about the media coverage of trans issues and their routine practices in communicating their proposed alternatives to media professionals. After determining the group’s usual procedure, I will offer a case study that allows for examination of their work under a strained situation, which demanded different strategies and practices to reap the momentum built around a particularly critical press coverage. I will then look at how TMW frames “problem coverage” and connect a discussion on transphobia and cisgenderism with theoretical elaborations on ideology and oppositional readings of the media, to argue how such framing is relevant to the group’s engagement with the media.

4.1. “Problem coverage”, suggested alternatives and positive engagement

As I discussed in Chapter 3, the *News International* phone-hacking scandal prompted the UK government to carry out the Levenson Inquiry into the culture, practices and ethics of the press, and Trans Media Watch took part in the inquiry by giving evidence at a public hearing and submitting a report laying down some of the problems they observed in the media coverage of trans issues (Trans Media Watch, 2011). In that occasion, TMW highlighted the media’s harmful practices such as the use of language intended to demean and ridicule trans persons; the customary use of birth names rather

than chosen names and “before” photos; and the perennial online existence of the material published in newspapers and magazines (Trans Media Watch, 2011, p. 11).

These practices are addressed in the first resource TMW provides to media professionals, their *Media Style Guide* (Trans Media Watch, n.d.), a four-page leaflet with the group’s orientations on how to report on trans issues. The document offers a list of “nine simple guidelines”, mostly focused on what to avoid, and also brief sections on terminology, definitions and language. Jennie explains that the resource is deliberately simplified so that any person without much previous familiarity with trans issues can easily read and understand it:

A lot of what we’ve done over time is educate and make sure that there are quick look up resources as well. Our style guide, for instance: we keep it short so that people can just skim through it quickly and say “am I making these mistakes? Have I understood this issue?” Then there are other places they can go to if they want to know about things in more depth, so they can always contact us, which obviously a lot of people still do. (Jennie)

In devising a simple and straightforward guide, the group shows awareness of the often hectic routine of media professionals, particularly journalists and news media staff, in what Jennie illustrates with the predicament of “people who are writing BBC News online stories, for instance, who have five minutes from being told that they found a story to putting that story up on the website”. The guide also states that the group’s channels are open for further clarification and help via email contact. The simplification may not account for the complexity of trans experiences and of reporting on them over different media forms; however, keeping the guidelines simple and brief is most likely an attempt to introduce the subject to an audience who is not well-versed in trans issues and to communicate the group’s notions of trans and of how to approach the subject in the media in the most plain way as possible – even if, as Jennie herself constantly tried to convey in our talks, hardly anything in their work can be taken as “a straightforward thing”.

The first issue addressed in TMW’s guide is language, a contested terrain within the trans community itself. The recommendation on the avoidance of language considered offensive to trans people is followed by a list of terms such as “sex swap” and “tranny”. The latter is a highly controversial term: while it has been historically used as a slur against trans people, the word is going through a process of rehabilitation inside the

trans movement²⁵, with some trans persons trying to reclaim it, according to Jennie. However, she observes that the majority of people in the trans community is not comfortable with it, and the dispute over the term is acknowledged by TMW and negotiated in the group's directives to media professionals. Their advice to journalists and media professionals is to use the word "advisedly":

We have to take a more nuanced position because we have to take into account that there are people who feel very strongly that that's their identity, and we're not here to tell people how to identify. And so we say, when people ask us about that particular word: if somebody uses it to describe themselves, then that should always be respected, but we would encourage people to avoid it, and voice that, for instance, where it's not clear that they're talking about someone identifying that way. (Jennie)

The group also advises against the use of "transsexual" and "transgender" as nouns. The guide proposes TMW's definitions to both terms: "trans" is paired with and taken to gradually supersede "transgender" as "usually perfectly adequate" adjectives to describe "people who experience the need to present themselves as, and/or who identify as other than the gender they were assigned at birth" (Trans Media Watch, n.d., p. 03). The adjective "transsexual" is applicable to "a person who wishes to undergo, has undergone or is undergoing transition". The guide highlights that not all people who identify as transsexual go through medical therapy but positions the word as "the most appropriate when used in relation to clinical practice" (Trans Media Watch, n.d., p. 03). The use of these terms often presupposes the use of the word "transition" as well, which is another term that can be problematic due to the different connotations the word might have for people who are not familiar with trans issues, says Jennie. She holds that, within the trans community, the word would be used to describe "the process of moving from living in a male identity to living in a female identity or vice-versa", whereas to the general public it may imply "a magical moment" in the experience of a trans person, usually equated to "the surgery". Their usual recommendation to journalists writing about a person's transition is to structure the language of the article in a way that conveys the complexity and the commonly long time frame comprised in the process.

²⁵ For an assessment of the debates over the word "tranny" inside the LGBTQ movement in the US, Lowder, J. Bryan (2014): "The 'Tranny' Debate and Conservatism in the LGBTQ Movement". In *Slate*, published on 30 May 2014. Available: http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/05/30/is_tranny_a_slur_or_an_identity_who_decides.html Accessed on 06 July 2014.

We don't want people to just talk about things in terms of "this person had surgery, or had *the* operation", or whatever, and the notion that there's a magical moment when somebody moves from being *one* sex to being *the other* sex. There's nothing more complex or subtle than that, and we always stress that there's a social and a psychological process, that those things are often a much bigger deal to people than surgery. (...) We tend to try and keep an awareness that it's not a sort of magical instant process, that it's something that takes time, so that means looking at the way that an article has phrased things. We try and talk about, for instance, moving from one role to another role, to give the impression of something that takes longer. (Jennie)

Another research contributor, Helen, believes that the trope of transition in the press and in TV programs can also reduce a person's experience to a matter of "transformation", as exemplified by the so-called "butterfly story":

The butterfly story is a story of transformation. "Look at this bloke, isn't it amazing that that bloke is now this woman? Let's follow them through the process of transformation!" So it's purely focusing on somebody's transformation, not really focusing on their day to day life and pressures they face, the history which led them to that point, or the challenges that they've come to face from that point onwards. The most extreme one is when you have someone followed through the two weeks before the surgery and the month after, and that's it, that's as much as they'll do. Fortunately you don't tend to see so much of that now, but for a long time [the butterfly story] was a very standard trans narrative. (Helen)

The proneness showed by strands of the press and broadcast to frame a person's experience in terms of "before" and "after", as Helen observed, is connected to the use of previous names and "before" photos when reporting on trans people, one of the issues addressed by Trans Media Watch in their *Media Style Guide* and in the report submitted to the Levenson Inquiry. According to the UK Gender Recognition Act, if a person has a Gender Recognition Certificate it is illegal to disclose their previous name or identity, a legal requirement many journalists and media professionals disregard all together. Likewise, in TMW's guidelines, they are advised to avoid revealing such information, unless the person gives their explicit permission (Trans Media Watch, n.d., p. 02). The idea behind TMW's advice is that a person will most likely want to move on from their previous identity after transition, and that they may not have disclosed their past to co-workers or neighbors, for instance. In this sense, having this information revealed in the media without their consent can be extremely distressful (Trans Media Watch, 2011, p. 11). Christabel, moreover, sees it as a further attempt to dismiss or even erase a person's identity:

[The "before" photograph] gives me the creeps, and the before name, because that's devaluing you, that's subconsciously saying "this is who you are really". And I find that very offensive and very difficult. (Christabel)

TMW's orientation on this matter is based on opinions from inside the community such as Christabel's, but Jennie explains that this issue is not completely straightforward. The use of past names was not a priority when the group started out; however, over time, many people from the trans community started to express their distress with this aspect in media coverage. In contrast, she says, some people have voiced a different opinion:

There are some people who will say "well, we want to use our old names, we're not ashamed of them". We're quite happy to support those people. Again, we would say [to media professionals] "respect people's identity", but we would also say "don't just put the name in there for a bit of color in an article, because people can find it very upsetting". (Jennie)

The problem with material that can be upsetting or offensive, according to Jennie, is not only for the fact that it gets published in the first place, but also because it could virtually remain forever available in the vast endless sea of the World Wide Web. A trivial Google search could bring up stories that a person never had the intention of sharing with the world, and that could revive situations of great anguish.

Somebody who's "outed" in a newspaper, for instance, is going to always have that on their record. An employer, for instance, or someone who is considering employing them, can do an internet search on them or pay someone to do that, and it'll often come up, and they'll be "outed" by it; maybe other awkward things about them will be put out there, and it would be very difficult for them. This could stop people from getting employment; it could make people's personal lives very difficult. (Jennie)

Once a specific piece is identified as "problematic", that is, featuring one or some of the points discussed above – use of past names and photos or use of inappropriate language, for instance – the standard procedure of the group is to approach the person responsible for said piece so as to point out where it went wrong and to offer suggestions, alternatives and further guidance on how to handle the argument in the future. The *Media Style Guide* comes in handy at this point, for its basic guidelines can be a simple first step to get someone acquainted with basic terms and concepts such as "transgender" and "transsexual" (Trans Media Watch, n.d., p. 02), for instance. The response, as Helen explains, varies, but this first contact often leads to a more extensive dialogue on how to report on trans issues:

Some of them don't understand. From some of them we just get no response at all. From some we get a response saying "thanks, but I don't really agree", or "I don't think there's a problem here, I don't understand why there's a problem". But an increasing number are going "ah, ok, yes, I see what you're saying", and then some of them actually end up with meetings and discussions. (Helen)

Reaching out to media professionals is thus crucial to the work of the group, for it is through active engagement with the media that they manage to establish a dialogue and propose alternatives. A central aspect of such connections is the tactfulness the group seeks to employ when dealing with the media. Approaching journalists and other media professionals “behind the scenes” proposing to work “positively” helps establishing rapport and positions their intervention as constructive criticism with the aim of informing and educating:

We remain positive and educational in our heart. We recognize that very often people want to do the right thing but don't know that they're doing the wrong thing, or don't know how to do the right thing. (...) We don't really want to have to sit there and condemn things time and time again. We actually do complain, but we tend to do it behind the scenes, quietly. Which again, people tend to appreciate, because it then means that they can resolve things quietly. (Helen)

Such stance also reflects an awareness of the need for diplomacy and discretion in order to foster relationships with media professionals and achieve the goals intended by the group:

People don't like to be pulled up publicly about something; it's actually very embarrassing, and you would try and dig in and defend your position as much as you possibly can, and that then makes getting to any resolution so much harder. So personally I prefer to contact people directly behind the scenes and say “actually, this was problematic, and you could have done that a bit better”. (Helen)

Once they have “a foot in the door” (Jennie), they seek and often manage to turn that first contact into an amicable relationship, which allows them to get their message across and have their preferred representations of trans featured in the media. Besides the fact that those first contacts mean that a channel is open between the group and the media professional or institution, often turning into proper collaborations, another sign of the effectiveness of such method is that currently media professionals reach out to TMW more than the other way around. They are often approached and asked to assist in the development of media pieces and press stories. Nowadays, as Jennie explains, journalists are mostly concerned with the use of appropriate language and with showing respect towards the people featured in the stories.

These days mostly we get people saying “I want to show respect for this person but I'm not sure how I should approach describing the gender of the person”; perhaps is somebody who is well known as being male and is now known as female or vice-versa. Sometimes is people who say “this person described themselves in a way that we've heard is offensive to other trans people, how do we work around that?”; sometimes is people who just want us to read through something because they think it's ok but maybe they've made a couple of mistakes. (Jennie)

Besides the concern with language, another aspect that the group seeks to highlight when approached by media professionals is the very frame into which the stories are developed. They try to suggest different angles and issues to be addressed when reporting on trans issues, with the aim of broadening media actors and audiences' perceptions of the varied aspects of different trans experiences. Jennie offers the example of stories involving trans children, which the British press have often presented with disregard for the safety of the child and intrusion on the privacy of the child, their family and their school (Trans Media Watch, 2012).

Sometimes journalists will contact us and they say "I think I might do stories like this in the future, how should I think about it?", or somebody might give us a story that is really problematic, and we might say "well, try and look at it from this different perspective, try considering the impact of this experience on the trans person, or maybe you want to ask this person some questions about other aspects of their experience", and shifting the balance of a story like that. For instance when it comes to school stories, (...) somebody's writing about a specific case, of a child in a school who's trans, we would say "don't think just about how this child affects other children, think about how this child is affected personally". (...) It isn't always obvious to journalists coming from outside this kind of subject area, dealing with a trans story maybe for the first time; they don't always think of that. (Jennie)

In addition to educating media professionals on appropriate language, offering them new perspectives on trans issues that take into account trans persons' standpoint can be considered even more essential in getting the media to present more positive representations of trans. The very members of the group engage in the attempt to "put a human face to trans people", as Christabel puts it:

One of the recent meetings we were in, with a TV executive, he was there and he was saying "I hadn't thought about any of this". And it's only because we were there and we were telling him, you could see a little light go on: "wow, I hadn't realized this was happening, I hadn't realized my work was having this effect". (...) We've always believed, within the organization, that it's important to let [media professionals and institutions] put a human face to trans people, so that we don't become a stereotype. We become Chrissy and Helen and Jennie and whoever. We're real people. So that they can, I guess, empathize with us. (Christabel)

Getting media professionals to learn about trans issues and empathize with trans persons and to reflect such knowledge and empathy in the stories they produce is thus achieved through collaborations based on constructive engagement and criticism – a process preferably carried out behind the scenes. However, as Helen explains, "occasionally there does need to be noise made", and the group has made noise in a few occasions over these last five years to protest when they believed that the media had gone too far or had not responded to their attempts to amend coverage the group considered highly problematic.

I propose now to look at a specific example of media coverage in which TMW “had to shout” (Jennie). The case of Lucy Meadows illustrates the devastating consequences of prejudicial media coverage of trans experiences, and as such has had a big impact on how British media handles trans issues. Over this episode, TMW engaged the media, politicians and regulators with the aim of stirring up the debate on the practices of the press and its often discriminatory stance towards trans persons, consequently forwarding their case of better treatment to trans persons in the media.

4.2. The Lucy Meadows coverage

In 19 December 2012, a story titled “School's letter to parents tells them male teacher will return to class as a woman after Christmas” (Pike, 2012) appeared in the local newspaper *Accrington Observer*. The story commented on how a primary school in Accrington, a town in the North West of England, had sent a letter to the pupils’ parents explaining that Nathan Upton, one of the school’s teachers, was transitioning to live as a woman and would return to work after Christmas break as Lucy Meadows. The article was born out of the complaint of one parent, which was given prominence throughout the text, expressing his concern that his children were “too young to be dealing with that”. The teacher issued a statement explaining that it had been “a long and difficult journey” and that the transition was “certainly not an easy decision to make”. She thanked the school’s support and asked for her privacy to be respected.

In the space of two days, the story was picked up and reproduced in a variety of local and national newspapers²⁶, always focusing on the fact that “Sir” would become “Miss”²⁷ and on the alleged “shock” to pupils and parents²⁸. On 20 December 2012, journalist Richard Littlejohn commented the story in his column in the *Daily Mail*, in an article titled “He’s not only in the wrong body... He’s in the wrong job” (Littlejohn, 2012). The polemicist refers to Meadows throughout the text as Mr. Upton and “he”,

²⁶ <http://tabloidtrolls.blogspot.nl/2013/03/the-hysteria-around-lucy-meadows.html> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

²⁷ http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/10116784.Sir_will_become_Miss_at_Accrington_school/ - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

²⁸ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2250555/Shock-CofE-school-Mr-Upton-return-Christmas-Miss-Meadows.html> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

claiming that “he is putting his own selfish needs ahead of the well-being of the children”, and that “if he cares so little for the sensibilities of the children he is paid to teach, he’s not only trapped in the wrong body, he’s in the wrong job”.

When the story broke, Trans Media Watch followed their usual procedure and contacted the newspapers that had featured the pieces behind the scenes in order to communicate the problems of such coverage. Littlejohn’s column prompted TMW to complain directly to the Press Complaints Commission, the independent body responsible for regulating the press, presenting the PCC with a series of stories they considered problematic. They sent a call out to the community, stating that they were available in case Meadows wanted help to deal with the media: “we asked around and said ‘if anybody knows Lucy and she would like advice on this, please put her in touch and let her know about the advice in our website’” (Jennie).

Meadows contacted the group through an intermediary, asking about her legal options, in which she was guided by TMW on how to make a complaint to the PCC. According to Helen, “the tone of her emails to Jennie indicated that her state of mind had been very upset at the time by the press coverage and the press harassment”. Meadows filed the complaint on 03 January 2013, and a day later the PCC opened an investigation into Littlejohn’s article and sent an email to all UK media passing on her concerns²⁹. After that, there were no further stories. On 11 March 2013, following negotiations between the PCC and the Daily Mail, the newspaper offered to resolve the complaint by removing the article from its website³⁰. On 19 March 2013, Meadows was found dead at her home, and an inquest concluded two months later ruled that she had committed suicide partly due to “ridicule and humiliation” and “character assassination” on the part of the *Daily Mail*, and wider “sensational and salacious press coverage”³¹.

The outing of Lucy Meadows exemplifies some of the gravest practices in the British press, particularly local and tabloid newspapers, in their coverage of trans issues. In this case, the press magnified the little controversy there was amongst a few parents to

²⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/mar/22/trans-teacher-lucy-meadows-press> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

³⁰ <http://hackinginquiry.org/mediareleases/the-tragedy-of-lucy-meadows-and-the-cynicism-of-the-press/> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

³¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/may/28/lucy-meadows-coroner-press-shame> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

imply public interest given the involvement of children. The teacher never consented to being the subject of a press story, and specifically asked for her privacy to be respected. Nonetheless, Littlejohn's column and many of the articles featured pictures of Meadows before her transition, which were taken without permission from the Facebook profiles of the teacher and her relatives. Paparazzi stationed in front of her house and the school, and some parents were offered money for a picture of the teacher³².

Trans Media Watch had been countering this kind of coverage and the media practices that surround it since their foundation, and their submission to the Levenson Inquiry one year earlier had denounced how often trans persons would "suddenly find themselves the unwanted subject of intrusive and mocking press attention simply because they do not fit the gender norms as dictated by the press, or because they are undergoing an entirely private process of gender reassignment" (Trans Media Watch, 2011, p. 03). The fact that it was a sadly customary story in local and tabloid newspapers is also one of the reasons why at first the group contacted the newspapers involved behind the scenes, trying to amend the situation and get to a resolution in conjunction with the media institutions and professionals involved, following the strategies explored in the previous section of this chapter. Meadows's death, however, took the issue to a whole new and sorrowful level.

When we got told about her death, probably about four hours before the news broke more widely, Jennie and I just chatted and said "this is going to be huge". We just knew it was. There wasn't anything that we could do about it. (Helen)

The public and the trans community response was mostly directed at the *Daily Mail* and Richard Littlejohn. An online petition for the newspaper to fire the columnist and issue an apology gathered over 212,000 signatures³³, and a vigil held in front of the newspaper's offices rallied over 300 people³⁴. Both initiatives were orchestrated through social media, organized from the grassroots level and summoned the collective outrage over the media treatment of trans persons, quite similarly as the context that originated Trans Media Watch back in 2009. The group, however, had another view on how to handle the situation:

³² <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/mar/22/trans-teacher-lucy-meadows-press> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

³³ <http://action.sumofus.org/a/daily-mail-littlejohn-lucy-meadows/> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

³⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/mar/25/lucy-meadows-daily-mail-vigil> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

Some people called for Richard Littlejohn to be sacked as a result; we didn't go in that direction because we felt that that would provide a really useful scapegoat. It wasn't just about Richard Littlejohn; it was about the editor who let that through, it was about the newspaper climate in which that seemed like a reasonable thing to say, and we didn't want to make that easier for people. (Jennie)

Such stance shows that the group was aware that, horrific as it was, the situation offered an opportunity to forward their case of better treatment to trans persons in the media. Trans Media Watch quickly realized the need to directly engage politicians in the discussion, to demonstrate how the treatment the press reserved to Meadows was not a "one-off".

We decided we would run an event in Parliament which was basically highlighting "this is how Lucy was treated, it's the latest in a long line, and actually this is routine when it comes to trans people." And so we got, with a week's notice, thirteen MPs and one member of the House of Lords to attend (...). We even got a government minister along [Norman Lamb, Minister of State at the Department of Health]. (Helen)

The event, held in April 2013, drew from the group's submission to the Levenson Inquiry, which had presented ten stories of press harassment against trans persons. Three of those persons attended the event and each gave their own story of the impact of press coverage on their lives.

The MPs sitting there were simply appalled. (...) [The event] was basically giving these three people the opportunity to give their own stories, and giving a bit of background in between each, to say "well, this is the kind of coverage..." And in the back, Chrissy had put together a rolling presentation, something like 150 headlines from the previous year and a half. So while we were talking you had these "sex change shocker", "sex change freak", "sex swap", just constantly rolling around the back, and because there were a hundred and fifty of them, it made a strong impact that Lucy's story really definitely wasn't a one-off. (Helen)

Besides politicians, Trans Media Watch also engaged directly with the PCC throughout and in the aftermath of the Meadows case, deepening a conversation that had been in motion over the previous two years. TMW was one of the groups which assisted the PCC team on developing the guidance titled *Reporting and researching stories on transgender individuals* (Press Complaints Commission, 2013), issued in November 2013.

What we did was we consulted with the Press Complaints Commission, and said "this is what we would like to see for guidelines, here are our guidelines, here is how we think that you can improve this situation". (...) They made it clear from the start obviously that they had to produce their own guidelines on their own basis. They couldn't simply adopt something from us, because they didn't want to be seen to be caving into a pressure group; they wanted to base things on their own concerns, and that is entirely fair enough. (...) We talked about the situation more widely, so it wasn't just that "we'll hand over these simple guidelines to you and then

work it out there". We talked them through the reasoning behind the guidelines and that kind of thing. So they could then decide what they thought was most appropriate to do. (Jennie)

The new guidance highlights the clauses of the PCC's code which the press often breaches when reporting on trans issues, namely the items on Privacy, Harassment and Discrimination. It also presents a number of complaints to illustrate how such issues have arisen in the press coverage of trans issues and to express the regulators' position on each case. Furthermore, it offers a list of the main trans organizations in the UK which journalists and editors can contact for further guidance, such as TMW, GIRES, Mermaids and Press for Change, amongst others.

Trans Media Watch also issued a press release³⁵ commenting the coroner's verdict on Meadows's death, which was also addressed in an article³⁶ penned by Jennie and published on *Press Gazette*, an online newspaper directed at media professionals. In both texts TMW takes a public position on the episode, highlighting how it was an instance of a broader issue in the British media, while also emphasizing the need and the possibilities of reflection and change offered by the event, keeping the positive and educational approach TMW favors in their work.

Helen elaborates her view of the general outcome of the Lucy Meadows's case in terms of broader awareness in the media and support from politicians and the public:

Since the inquest into Lucy Meadows's death I think the press has taken a very big step back from trans issues. I don't know if it's engaged properly, but it certainly decided it's probably now not worth "outing" anymore trans people. I think they realized that it's very likely they have somebody's blood in their hands, and that's a price that they don't want to pay. Secondly, they are aware that we managed to get a significant level of support within Parliament. And also you've got a general changing shift in people's perceptions of these articles, as "why is this news? Why are you intruding into somebody's personal life?" (...) I think people genuinely now are not interested in that kind of stories when it comes to trans people, because they see the damage that it does. (Helen)

The episode illustrates how Trans Media Watch managed to tackle the struggle over media representation in the face of a critical instance of problem coverage using the means and resources available in the UK context to challenge the media. First, the group stuck to their usual conduct, attempting to resolve it behind the scenes alongside the newspapers that had pursued and reproduced the story. Such procedure is central to their

³⁵ <http://transmediawatch.org/Documents/Press%20Release%2020130528.pdf> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

³⁶ <http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/content/press-needs-take-hard-look-itself-after-attack-lucy-meadows> - Accessed on 07 July 2014.

positive and educational approach, as it allows them to foster dialogue with the media on an amicable basis. When the press coverage got out of hand – which was precipitated by Richard Littlejohn’s opinion piece – they engaged with the PCC, so that the regulator body could take action into curbing the problematic practices and coverage.

The death of Lucy Meadows brought the practices and ethics of the press back into public debate, and TMW’s subsequent actions show sharpness in their assessment of how to best direct the discussion towards their goal of improving the media representations of trans people. Strategically engaging politicians and law makers in this scenario helped them make their struggle more visible and open new inroads with parliamentarians, who are powerful actors both in advancing media reform and civil rights and legislation to address wider trans issues such as access to health care, employment and protection from discrimination. The episode also gave more visibility and weight to the group among the media, and the new PCC guidance on reporting on trans individuals shows that media institutions themselves realized the need to tackle the issue on their own terms to avoid further controversy and devastating consequences to the lives of trans persons.

4.3. Transphobia or cisgenderism? Strategic oppositional readings of ideology in the media

The indifference shown by some media to the impact of the coverage on the lives of the people involved in media stories, as well as the frame into which such stories would often appear, could be read as expressions of transphobia in the media, with the term not necessarily implying fear of trans people “but simply any negative attitudes (hatred, loathing, rage, or moral indignation) harbored towards transpeople [*sic*] on the basis of our enactments of gender” (Bettcher, 2007, p. 46). When I questioned Helen, director of Trans Media Watch, whether she saw instances of transphobia in the media, she explained that she finds appropriate to distinguish between transphobia and cisgenderism: in her view, the first would appear in media coverage as conscious misrepresentation as an attempt to eliminate trans people, and the second would be disregard for trans experiences due to a lack of understanding or familiarity with trans issues:

I prefer the term “cisgenderism” rather than “transphobic”, because very often people misrepresent or eliminate trans issues simply because they haven’t thought about them. (...) It’s a bit like retro-normatism, it’s cisgenderism, it’s not thinking about trans issues because you don’t have to. So it’s usually not intentional. Occasionally, I mean, the Daily Mail, for example, used to regularly publish pieces which were stereotyping and disparaging of trans people, and that probably is transphobic, them wanting to eliminate trans people in the same ways they really would like to have eliminated gay people. (...) So that potentially is transphobic rather than cisgenderism because it’s a conscious decision to misrepresent or eliminate. But most of the stuff we see I wouldn’t say it’s transphobic, I’d say it’s cisgenderist. (Helen)

Helen’s idea of cisgenderism resonates Ansara’s concept of the term as “discriminatory approaches towards people’s self-designated genders and body diversity” (Ansara, 2012, p. 93). Ansara states that the term “is increasingly used in activist circles by people seeking language that goes beyond notions of ‘phobia’ to address systemic problems”, such as “the assumption that all people with self-designated genders constitute a universally and essentially distinct type of being” (Ansara, 2012, p. 93) – similar to Helen’s distinction between media coverage that reflects hatred and the desire to eliminate trans persons (transphobia) or disregard due to lack of knowledge about trans experiences (cisgenderism).

The discussion on whether the problematic coverage identified by Trans Media Watch would be instances of transphobia or cisgenderism echoes a few important themes in the field of media studies which can provide a valid framework to reflect on such question. The notion of ideology, which can be defined as “the ruling ideas which present the ‘social cement’ which unifies and holds together the dominant social order” (Durham and Kellner, 2006, p. 03), is one of such themes. The concept has become central in media studies for it states that events or objects have no inherent “natural” meaning, rather “the meanings into which events and objects are constructed are always socially oriented – aligned with class, gender, race or other interests” (O’ Sullivan et al, 1994, p. 143). Theorist Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony complements such notion for it describes “the *process* by which general consent is actively sought for the interpretations of the ruling class”: “Dominant ideology becomes invisible because it is translated into ‘common sense’, appearing as the natural, unpolitical state of things accepted by each and everyone” (Zoonen, 1994, p. 24, emphasis original).

According to Stuart Hall’s model of encoding/decoding, meanings are “encoded” into media content throughout the production process and are later “decoded” by audiences, who make sense of the messages received according to the social context in which they

are inserted. Such view of the communication process is grounded in the concepts of ideology and hegemony, stipulating that the meanings encoded into media texts attempt to convey the *dominant cultural order* (Hall, [1973] 2006, p. 169, emphasis original), taking the media as “the contemporary mediators of hegemony” (Zoonen, 1994, p. 24). The messages propagated by the media would thus be permeated by dominant ideology, with the “whole social order embedded in them” (Hall, [1973] 2006, p. 169). The existence of transgender fundamentally defies a social order that has trouble accepting the arbitrariness of gender assignment at birth and the fact that a person’s gender does not reside in their genitals. If the media is one of the upholders of such social order, the resistance to trans could thus appear in the media as either transphobia – hatred and hostility towards trans persons – or cisgenderism – unconscious dismissal due to ignorance of trans issues.

Audiences, however, do not simply absorb the dominant or preferred meanings embedded in media texts. Hall identifies three types of readings or decodings of media texts: the *dominant-hegemonic* reading “accepts the text ‘full and straight’ according to the assumptions of the encoder” (O’ Sullivan et al, 1994, p. 239), hence taking in the preferred meaning intended by the text. The *negotiated* code or position “acknowledges the legitimacy of the dominant codes, but adapts the reading to the specific social condition of the reader” (O’ Sullivan et al, 1994, p. 239), operating through “particular or situated logics” (Hall, [1973] 2006, p. 172). Finally, the *oppositional* reading “is radically opposed to the preferred reading, because it derives from an alternative, oppositional meaning system” (O’ Sullivan et al, 1994, p. 239). In Hall’s view, a significant political moment is when events usually read from a negotiated position begin to be given an oppositional reading: “Here the ‘politics of signification’ – the struggle in discourse – is joined” (Hall, [1973] 2006, p. 173).

The Lucy Meadows case can be used to illustrate such different readings. A reader operating on a dominant-hegemonic position would agree that a primary teacher going through gender transition and returning to work under a new identity is indeed “shocking” and would share the feeling of the father, who claimed that the school’s pupils were “too young to be dealing with that”, and of the *Daily Mail*’s columnist, who believed the teacher was “in the wrong job”. A reader operating with a negotiated code would accept that such event could be considered “shocking”, while understanding that,

in that specific case, the school staff and the teacher seemed to be handling the transition in a sensible way and looking out for the children involved. A reader operating with an oppositional code would realize that the media concern over the gender transition of a primary teacher from a small town is related to a broader societal discriminatory stance towards trans persons, both reflected in and informed by that same media that considers such story relevant and that frames it in terms of “shock” and awe.

Trans Media Watch’s struggle over representations of trans in the media – or the struggle in discourse, as elaborated by Hall – is animated by such oppositional readings of media texts and the subsequent realization of the need to intervene in the media to replace meanings taken to be negative or discriminatory against trans persons with messages that promote understanding of trans experiences and positive representations of trans persons. Categorizing discriminatory media messages as cisgenderism or transphobia serves then a strategic purpose to TMW’s work. Understanding “problem coverage” as motivated by transphobia, by hatred towards trans persons, could take a toll on the group’s positive approach to the media, given the fundamental irreconcilability between the demand for representation and recognition on the part of trans persons and the desire for their elimination on the part of media actors motivated by transphobia. Framing “problem coverage” as cisgenderism, hence coming from an unconscious disregard for trans persons and trans issues due to lack of knowledge, allows them to engage with such coverage from a more benevolent place and to pursue a positive and constructive rapport with media professionals and institutions:

People want to get it right, and we just work with them to help them get it right. One of the ways we do that which we think it’s important that other campaign groups sometimes ignore is we will say “ok, you made a mistake, maybe you actually want to get it right, we’re not here to shout at you, we’re here to help you do better next time”. We’ll only shout at people if they carry on going wrong. We want to help people to learn or to educate. (Jennie)

The ties between cisgenderism and transphobia, nonetheless, are more complex than the simple differentiation between the two concepts implies, and that complexity is evidenced by the impact that media representations can have on the lives of trans persons. Such tension can be observed in the debate over the use of trans themes in comedy, which TMW considers to be one of the main problems with the representations of trans people in broadcast at the moment in Britain. Helen illustrates her notion of the

difference between cisgenderism and transphobia in the media with a talk she had with the head of the comedy department of Channel 4:

I had a meeting with [Channel 4's] head of comedy in January, and he said "Helen, where do you draw the line about what is a problematic joke about a trans person?" So I just said: "Why are we laughing at trans people? Why aren't we laughing with them? Why aren't we including them in the joke rather than making them the subject of the joke?" Now, he wasn't transphobic. (...) It didn't come from a transphobic motivation, he simply hadn't thought about trans people in those terms. (Helen)

Helen, in this specific instance, did not see a deliberate manifestation of transphobia. Jennie, on her part, believes that the type of humor that takes the concept of trans alone as enough to incite laughs in a non-trans public reinforces pervasive notions of trans as a motive for ridicule and provides non-trans persons with tropes and language to be used to taunt trans persons in public places – occurrences reported in the survey *How Transgender People Experience the Media* (Trans Media Watch, 2010), discussed in chapter 3. As Jennie elaborates:

[Comedy at the expense of trans persons] is problematic because it creates situations that are very popular with people who abuse trans people in real life. When there are characters like this on television, when there's comedy like this, we know that that gets picked up, and that gets shouted at trans people in the street, and that gets used to bully trans people. We're fairly confident that if it weren't there, then there wouldn't be as much bullying, because it's not a case of people will always find some reason to pick on them. It's people who will pick you up on popular tropes and they'll see as an opportunity to repeat the lines they heard on the television, pick up some status points from their friends. It feeds into general transphobia like that. (Jennie)

Thus, the cisgenderist frame is valid and can even be considered strategic, for it informs the group's positive and constructive approach to coverage considered problematic, which comprises attempts to educate by proposing alternatives and establishing dialogues with media professionals. However, "problem coverage" framed as cisgenderist can have an impact on the lives of trans persons as plain manifestations of transphobia. The bullying example offered by Jennie can even be understood as a dominant-hegemonic decoding on the part of audience readers who embraced the intended meaning of a media text that makes comedy at the expense of trans persons – namely, that trans persons are up for ridicule simply for being trans. And it is precisely the material and often devastating consequences of "problem coverage" that prompts the group to tackle the struggle in discourse and media representation, in hopes of improving the lives of trans persons in the UK.

CONCLUSIONS

My study of Trans Media Watch is grounded on a theoretical framework comprising feminist media studies, feminist theories of transgender, and new social movement theories. This tripartite of theories constituted the frame of reference for the nine interviews I carried out with three members of Trans Media Watch's core team during the months of March and April 2014. Bringing the theories and the data I gathered from the interviews together allowed for the understanding of Trans Media Watch as an instance of a larger movement for self-definition and self-representation. Such movement has been tackling the gap in representation in arenas of production of knowledge and discourses, intent on establishing new and positive narratives on trans lives and experiences in order to have an impact on the material conditions of trans persons.

As I explored in chapter 3, Trans Media Watch is an initiative grounded in a tradition of trans organizing in Britain, composed mostly of organizations dedicated to campaigning for civil rights and providing support for trans people. Such activism has achieved great victories for trans persons in the country, such as the enactment of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA), which secured legal recognition for people who wish to be legally registered in a gender different than the one they were assigned at birth. Nonetheless, discrimination and transphobia are still sadly everyday occurrences in the lives of trans persons in Britain, and as the report *Engendered Penalties* shows, a large part of trans persons in the country fear for their safety, with 73% of the respondents reporting experiences of harassment due to their trans status (Whittle et al, 2007, p. 16).

Trans Media Watch emerges in this scenario to fill a gap in the struggle of trans persons for recognition in Britain, namely the struggle over media representations of trans. As the research contributors emphasized, the vexation over media coverage of trans issues had been in the making for many years among trans persons in Britain. A perfect storm gathering collective anger over media coverage considered inappropriate and disrespectful, frustration over the inability to challenge such coverage through the means then available, and a stronger sense of confidence and community amongst trans persons in the country, motivated also by the achievement of legal milestones such as

the GRA, spurred the formation of a group dedicated to take the struggle for representation to the media. As the research contributors expressed in the interviews, the focus on the representations of trans circulated by the press (newspapers and magazines, in print and online) and broadcast (television and radio) is predicated on the notion that the media is a crucial field in the battle for cultural and material recognition. The group believes that the messages propagated by the media can either educate and encourage understanding amongst a non-trans audience and promote positive models and images of self amongst trans persons, or advance negative or inaccurate perceptions of trans experiences, which can inform societal discrimination and violence against trans people, with devastating consequences for the lives of trans persons.

An interesting aspect of such understanding of the effects of the media on their audiences is the seeming contradiction that it presents regarding the group's basis for action. As I discussed in chapters 1 and 4, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model ([1973] 2006) proposes that audiences do not plainly assimilate the messages presented by the media. Instead, audiences differently decode the meanings embedded in media texts according to their social context and position. Following Hall's proposition, TMW's understands the majority of audiences' readings of the media as *dominant-hegemonic*, with audiences accepting "full and straight" the messages they receive from the media. I argued that the group's own reading of the media operates with an *oppositional code*, which contests the perceived negative messages the media circulates about trans issues. The oppositional reading, still according to Hall, is a significant political moment, and as such it is precisely what sprung Trans Media Watch into action. The difference between the dominant-hegemonic reading and the oppositional reading of media coverage of trans is thus related to the different social position of the audiences. The group therefore acts under the understanding that media messages perceived as negative, inaccurate and disrespectful by readers who are familiar or have a direct experience with trans issues are often unquestioningly accepted by readers in a non-trans position, or a position of unfamiliarity with trans issues. Such messages contribute to uphold a societal climate of discrimination against trans persons, which are reflected in harassment and the many hardships trans persons still face, such as lack of access to health care, education and employment, for instance.

The reflection on the messages the media conveys through their representations of trans is connected to the elaborations on the role of ideology in media messages, a central concern in the fields of media and cultural studies (Durham and Kellner, 2006). According to Durham and Kellner, such notion leads to the realization that media texts “are laden with meaning, values, biases, and messages that advance relations of power and subordination” (Durham and Kellner, 2006, p. xiii). Which meanings and values, then, underlie and motivate negative representations of trans in the media? In chapter 4 I discussed my talk with Helen Belcher, director of Trans Media Watch and one of the research contributors, about transphobia and cisgenderism in the media: transphobia, understood as hatred and desire to eliminate trans persons, and cisgenderism, understood as disregard due to lack of knowledge or familiarity with trans issues, could both be conceived as underlying ideological motivations to media coverage the group considers harmful and disrespectful of trans persons. In Helen’s view, while there are instances of transphobia in the media – deliberate misrepresentation – most of the coverage the group currently considers problematic would be simply cisgenderist – unintentional disregard.

Trans Media Watch thus attempts to counter such ideologies through the very means of their construction and circulation. Their endeavor to intervene in the negative meanings and messages on trans is directed at influencing audiences’ perceptions of trans issues. They share critical theorist Douglas Kellner’s (2003) notion of the media as sources of “cultural pedagogy”, contributing to educate us, their audiences, on “how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire – and what not to” (Kellner, 2003, p. 07). The group aims at curbing both cisgenderism – lack of knowledge on trans issues – and transphobia – hatred and hostility towards trans persons – amongst the public through the media. In order to achieve that, they work on promoting education on trans issues and building empathy amongst media professionals, so that the media representations of trans are informed by respect towards trans persons and accurate notions of trans experiences.

I realized that the distinction between the notions of cisgenderism and transphobia is instrumental to TMW’s approach to the media, which is based on positive engagement and fostering of amicable relationships and collaborations with media professionals and institutions. If negative media messages were largely understood by the group as

intentionally harmful, the basis for establishing constructive and educational dialogues with media professionals would most certainly falter. That does not mean that the group does not engage with media coverage they read as coming from a place of hatred and hostility; they do, reaching out to media professionals and institutions responsible for such coverage using the same educational approach³⁷. Nonetheless, I believe that framing the majority of the negative representations as cisgenderist allows the group to pursue a consistent strategy of constructive criticism and positive relationships with the media.

The positivity the group favors in their approach to media professionals and institutions is one of the main criticisms on the part of the trans community towards TMW. I discussed the connections between the group and the community in chapter 3, noting how the notion of a “trans community” as a cohesive entity has been rightly questioned by observers and alleged members (Ansara, 2010; 2012; Valentine, 2007). Rather than a harmonious association of individuals unproblematically sharing feelings of belonging and viewpoints on a variety of issues, the “trans community” is a space of symbolic and concrete disputes, whose frontiers, structure and terms of allegiance are constantly being contested and reworked by the actors involved in its formation. I argued that the work of representation taken on by Trans Media Watch and other organizations for and by trans persons is a means of making community. The group encourages the participation of trans persons in their efforts to curb negative representations of trans in the media and engage them in the conversation on problem coverage and positive representations – and largely depends on them, as the group claims, to establish what should be considered problematic and what should be promoted as positive. In this way, TMW stimulates the building of a symbolic space of belonging and common struggle for people who feel impacted by the media coverage of trans issues and who take part in the group’s initiatives to assess the community’s views – through media monitoring, surveys and researches and general communication through the group’s online channels (Twitter, Facebook and discussion forum).

³⁷ The dialogue, however, does not always hold: according to Helen, subeditors of the *Daily Mail* are not so keen on TMW “because we’re seen as being ‘you’re doing that wrong, can you correct that, can we come in and talk to you?’ All they ever hear is the first two bits, ‘you’re doing that wrong, can you correct that?’ They don’t really pick up the third one.” (Helen)

The divergence between the group, who believes in building amicable relationships with the media in order to promote positive representations of trans, and part of the community, who feels that TMW should take a harsher stand and be “more aggressive” in the face of media coverage which is often harmful and disrespectful of trans persons, offers a good point for reflection: to what extent should anger over injustice and discrimination be incorporated into activist practices? I reckon performance artist and author Kate Bornstein’s commentary on the role of rage in activism as a valid input to such question. Bornstein ([1994] 2006) acknowledges anger as an important fuel for activism, but remains cautious of infusing rage into activist practices:

I think that anger and activism mix about as well as drinking and driving. When I’m angry, I don’t have the judgment to select a correct target to hit out against. I do believe that anger is healthy, that it can lead to a recognition of the *need* for action, but activism itself is best accomplished by level heads who can help steer others’ anger towards correct targets. (Bornstein, [1994] 2006, p. 242, emphasis original)

Trans Media Watch could thus be considered such “level heads” steering the community’s anger towards the correct targets, through the employment of what they believe to be the most appropriate and effective strategies to address each case they encounter. While they privilege working “behind the scenes” and collaboratively with the media, there have been moments over the last five years when they felt they “had to shout”, or take a public stance of reproach against what they deemed to be unacceptable media behavior. The Lucy Meadows case, explored in chapter 4, was one such moment, when the group publicly reprimanded the press for coverage that amounted to “ill-informed bigotry”, according to the verdict of the coroner who led the investigation over Meadows’s death³⁸. Even in a moment of extreme consternation and indignation due to “unacceptable press behavior” (Jennie), TMW managed to direct their anger, seeking to handle the situation in a way that served the overall aim of the group. By taking a public stance and engaging parliamentarians and the Press Complaints Commission, TMW succeeded in fomenting the public debate on the media treatment of trans persons and drawing the support of the public, politicians and even the regulatory body, who a few months later issued the guidance *Reporting and researching stories on transgender individuals* (Press Complaints Commission, 2013).

³⁸ <http://hackinginquiry.org/mediareleases/the-tragedy-of-lucy-meadows-and-the-cynicism-of-the-press/> - accessed on 16 July 2014.

The struggle over media representations is not trans persons' alone, and research contributors all agreed that there are other discriminated groups routinely being subjects of negative media coverage in the UK, such as Roma people and other Traveller communities, immigrants, and the unemployed. The lesson TMW could offer to such groups can be that of putting collective anger to good use, grounding the work in the community's demands and perceptions. That can be accomplished by keeping the channels for collective input open and encouraging the participation of the community in the effort, all the while maintaining the focus on getting the message across to the media through strategies centered on positivity and constructive criticism. Engaging prominent actors such as politicians and media regulatory bodies (PCC and Ofcom) has also proven effective, as the aftermath of the Lucy Meadows case shows.

Besides taking action to intervene in the representations, discourses and meanings circulated by the media, social movements, scholars and researchers and the public at large must keep asking questions about the politics of representations. As author Gregory Jay (1994) summarizes it:

The questions we face might be put this way: "Who represents what to whom, for what reasons, through what institutions, to what effect, to whose benefit, at what costs? What are the ethics of representation? What kinds of knowledge and power do authorized forms of representation produce? What kinds of people do such representations produce? Who owns or controls the means of representation? And what new ways of representation might better achieve the goals of justice and democracy (...)" (Jay, 1994, p. 10)

By exploring the connections between media representations and social attitudes as perceived by Trans Media Watch and much of the trans community mobilized by the group, I hope I have been able to communicate the need for public scrutiny of the messages all media try to convey. By probing into TMW's endeavor to challenge the media and have a say in the way trans issues are featured in press and broadcast in the country, my goal was to emphasize the importance of initiatives by civil society in general and social movements and discriminated groups in particular to question, challenge and intervene in media discourses and representations. I pursued this study under the belief that "empirical research, as well as social critique and theory building, will better enable both intellectuals and others to engage in some form of praxis – meaningful engagement with the world" (Byerly, 2011, p. 16). My hope is that more feminist researchers realize the myriad of ways gender and transgender are being represented in the media, and how such representations are of concern to all gendered

subjects. Feminist scholarship must incorporate such complexity in the study of media representations of gender, and be more mindful of initiatives that challenge sexism, misogyny, transphobia and other discourses of hatred and discrimination in the media.

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ANNEX - INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Purpose of the Study. As part of the requirements for a Master Degree in the GEMMA – Gender and Women’s Studies Programme – University of Bologna/Utrecht University, I carry out a research study as part of my final master thesis. A central question in my thesis is how gender in general and transgender in particular is represented in the media.

What will the study comprise? The study will comprise interviews with people involved in the two projects, to take place by arrangement at a place and a time convenient to the participant and the researcher, as well as observation of the work carried out by the staff of the two initiatives, in their offices or wherever they find it more convenient.

Why have you been asked to take part? You have been asked because you are involved with the work of Trans Media Watch or All About Trans.

Do you have to take part? No, participation is voluntary. By signing the consent form, you agree to participate and with the conditions expressed in the information sheet. You may decide not to answer any of the interview questions if you wish. You may decide to withdraw from this study at any time, even if you agreed to participate. If you do so within two weeks of participation all identifiable data will be destroyed. I may ask for clarification of issues raised in the interviews some time after they have taken place, but you will not be obliged in any way to clarify or participate further.

Will your participation in the study be kept confidential? Yes. I will make the interview data anonymous and no identity markers will appear in the thesis. Any extracts from what you say that are quoted in the thesis will be made as anonymous as possible. During the interview I will ask you how you would like to be referred in the thesis.

What will happen to the information which you give? The data will be kept confidential for the duration of the study. On completion of the thesis, they will be retained for a further six months and then destroyed.

What will happen to the results? The results will be presented in the thesis. They will be seen by my main supervisor and my second supervisor. The thesis may be read by people interested in the topics addressed. The study may be published in a research journal and the thesis will be made available via the university online database (Igitur). However, I am the only person who will have access to the data itself.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part? I don’t envisage any negative consequences for you in taking part. It is possible that talking about your experience and your work may cause some distress.

What if there is a problem? At the end of each interview, we will discuss how you found the experience and how you are feeling. If you subsequently feel distressed, we can discuss how the participation in this study is affecting you and if you would like to move forward.

Who has reviewed this study? Approval to this study was given by the Gender Studies Department of Utrecht University, in the person of Marieke van Eijk (M.S.vanEijk@uu.nl), my thesis supervisor.

Any further queries? If you need any further information, you can contact me: Carolina de Assis, mobile number 07918324858, c.silvadeassis@uu.nl. You can also ask me any questions regarding this study or any additional information before, during, or after the interviews or observation.

If you agree to take part in the study, please sign the consent form overleaf.

I _____ agree to participate in Carolina's research study.

The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I give permission for my interviews with Carolina to be audio-recorded.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study, without repercussions, at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use the data within two weeks of the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I agree to being contacted again by the researcher if my responses give rise to interesting findings or cross references, and/or to discuss hypotheses and the conclusions of the study.

I understand that extracts from my interviews may be quoted in the thesis and any subsequent publications.

Date:

Participant Name:

Participant Contact Information:

Participant Signature:

Researcher Signature: