In 2017, the first year of Donald Trump’s presidency, journalists and commentators in the United States heralded the dawning of “The Year of Women.” A contributor for the Huffington Post, for example, confidently explained “Why 2017 Will Be the Year of Women,” assuring her readers in March that “while recent events are a constant reminder of the challenges facing women in today’s world, I am more convinced than ever that 2017 will be our year” (Jain, 2017). Year-in-review headlines published in December 2017 implied that these earlier prognostications had been correct: “2017: The Unexpected (and Inspiring) Year of Women” (Dvorak, 2017); “The Year of Women, in Policy and Politics” (Epstein, 2017); “A Timeline of the Year of Women” (Boston Globe, 2018); “Did You Hear Her Roar? 2017 was Unquestionably the Year of the Woman” (Shamus, 2017).

A similar rash of trend stories surfaced twenty-five years earlier when, after a handful of women were elected to the heavily male-dominated Senate in 1992, headline writers widely touted the arrival of the “Year of the Woman” (Zhou, 1998). But the more recent “Year of Women” extended beyond the walls of political institutions. While record numbers of women were once again running for office, analysts also pointed to the Women’s March on Washington following Trump’s inauguration and the
viral #MeToo movement against sexual violence as indicators that conditions were ripe for a feminist reckoning. Some highlighted a relationship between women’s improbable ascendance and a recent surge in women-centric television, film, and digital content, describing 2017 as “the year of women’s anger, onscreen and off” (Grady, 2017). The pattern would continue into the future. A year-end piece published on CNN’s website guaranteed that “2018 Will be the Year of Women” (Schnall, 2017), while a cover story for Politico looked further into the unknown, eyeing the next presidential election: “Why 2020 Will be the Year of the Woman” (Scher, 2017). Everywhere you looked, headlines indicated that women were having a “moment” across politics and popular culture despite the odds they faced.

And the odds were undeniably against women. The same news outlets that heralded “The Year of Women” made it clear that, under President Trump, women and marginalized groups, including people of color, immigrants, queer and trans people, Muslims, people with disabilities, and laborers, were under attack. Within hours of being signed in as president of the United States, Trump began dismantling the Affordable Care Act, President Barrack Obama’s signature legislation, which aimed to make health care accessible and affordable to all, even those with preexisting conditions (Luhby, 2018). Later, Trump halted Obama’s Equal Pay Rule, ending the requirement that large companies report how much they pay workers by race and gender (Khimm, 2017). He also proposed budget cuts to the National Domestic Violence Hotline and programs under the Violence against Women Act (Planned Parenthood Action Fund, 2017). That summer, the U.S. government, under Trump’s orders, began separating families seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border, even going so far as to remove nursing infants from their mothers (Kirby, 2018). Meanwhile, the Supreme Court, weighted toward conservative opinions thanks to the Trump-appointed Justice Neil Gorsuch, voted to allow pro-life “crisis pregnancy centers” to masquerade as abortion clinics (Liptak, 2018), to uphold the president’s travel ban on Muslims (Liptak and Shear, 2018), and to end the practice of mandatory union dues, delivering a sharp blow to organized labor in the process. With Justice Anthony Kennedy’s retirement and the appointment of Justice Brett Kavanaugh, a conservative judge facing multiple sexual violence accusations, the Supreme Court was
positioned to destroy the 1973 landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion in the United States (Litman, 2018).

How could 2017, 2018, or even 2020 be “The Year of Women” against this backdrop of institutionalized white male supremacy? Why could commentators envision a feminist future, precisely at a moment when *women’s* futures, especially the futures of women of color, queer and trans women, and working-class women, seemed so bleak? The answer lies, at least in part, in the creativity, resilience, and audacity of contemporary *feminist media activism*, or collective communication practices directed toward ending misogyny and oppression.¹

At the same time that feminists’ values and hard-won legislative victories were under siege, hope for a feminist future grew out of the steady revitalization of U.S. feminist movements, spearheaded by media-savvy activists. After a period of anti-feminist backlash throughout the 1980s (Faludi, 1991), media activists produced *zines*, or mini-magazines, to breathe new life into feminist politics throughout the 1990s, before moving their work online as early feminist “e-zines” and, later, the feminist blogosphere. Digital activism brought feminists an unprecedented degree of visibility, pushing feminist politics into the mainstream spotlight. The Women’s March, which began with a single Facebook post, exploded into one of the largest protest events in U.S. history; activists used the #MeToo hashtag more than nineteen million times in the campaign’s first year, making sexual violence a trending topic nationally and globally (Brown, 2018); commercial outlets have featured feminist issues, ideas, and figures, once erased and maligned in mainstream media, prominently and positively (Banet-Weiser, 2018a, 2018b). With feminism in the streets and on our screens, hope for a feminist future in the United States has felt plausible, even in moments of intense reactionary politics.

In print and digital media and across popular culture, media activists have driven the steady growth of what some have referred to as feminism’s “fourth wave” (e.g., Munro, 2013; Schulte, 2011; Solomon, 2009), riffing on the oceanic metaphor long used to periodize U.S. feminisms’ ebbs and flows.² But while the current “wave” has descended from the tides of previous generations, a key feature distinguishes this cohort from its antecedents. Formal organizations and grassroots collectives with clear leaders
and distinct voices and luminaries structured the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and the third-wave feminism of the 1990s (Reger, 2012). Historical accounts of these feminist eras are punctuated by well-known groups and figures. Narratives of 1960s “second-wave” feminism tell the stories of the National Organization for Women, Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, the Combahee River Collective, Angela Davis, and others. The “third wave” highlighted the insights of visionary thinkers like bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Gloria Anzaldúa, who pushed against the second wave’s failure to account for how race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender. Nineties feminism also brought us the insurgent politics of young writers and artists like Rebecca Walker, Jennifer Baumgardner, and Kathleen Hanna, who opened up creative spaces to redefine what “feminism” meant to their generation. As new waves rise, however, it has become increasingly difficult to name leaders or organizations at the center of feminist movements. Instead, descriptions of the “fourth wave” underscore communication technologies and highly mediated flashpoints that, like the Women’s March and #MeToo, ignited global action and discussion. Pioneering feminist blogger Jessica Valenti, when asked if she considers herself a fourth-wave feminist, captured the increasing centrality of media for feminism in a 2009 New York Times interview: “Maybe the fourth wave is online.” Contemporary U.S. feminist movements revolve, not around singular leaders or big-name organizations, but around media and everyday media makers, users, and consumers.

This book tells the story of how activists have used media to reconfigure the face and reach of feminist politics. Against a vibrant backdrop of existing scholarship on the structures of political opportunities and constraints surrounding feminist media activism, it centers the perspectives of feminist activists, draws connections across feminist media campaigns, and sheds light on consistencies across feminists’ media activism. It asks, how have contemporary feminists used media to craft an activist praxis that reflects their values and responds to the challenges of their political context? And what are the implications of their media activism for feminist movements in particular, and social movements more generally? If any year is to be the “Year of Women,” we need a better understanding of how feminist activists are navigating this contradictory political context and complex media landscape.
Through years spent participating in grassroots communities and observing viral campaigns, I found that contemporary feminists engage in a *do-it-ourselves* feminism (DIOF), a feminism that is characterized by the use of everyday media technologies and platforms. Faced with an electoral system and a history of collective organizing that have failed to address complex systems of oppression, do-it-ourselves feminists do not rely on existing political organizations, institutions, authorities, or experts. Instead, they use digitally networked media to build movements from the ground up that reflect their values and meet the challenges of the current political climate, all the while juggling the affordances and limitations of their media tools. It is this tactical creativity and resilience that fuels the power, potential, and hope of the “fourth wave.” This chapter sets the scene of our story by describing feminists’ shift to networked activism. I delineate the social and technological conditions that led to this shift and outline the opportunities and challenges facing networked feminists. It concludes by turning to what feminist activists are doing with media and how their media practices are reshaping social justice work for the digital age.

**Feminisms across the U.S. media landscape**

The current media landscape is marked by a plurality of feminisms. A convergence of often contradictory discourses has swirled around the concept of feminism across U.S. media over the past several decades, creating a complicated social and political backdrop for feminist media activists. This section maps a series of feminist media histories, each of which overlap with and feed into one another, through a synthesis of existing feminist media studies scholarship. Together, they recount how feminists’ status within the United States has shifted since the rise and fall of second-wave feminism and the role that media—including mainstream commercial media, activist-produced media, and digital media platforms—have played in this process. In turn, they also tell the story of networked feminism’s evolution and historicize contemporary feminists’ media practices. While a growing body of scholarship offers case studies of individual feminist media campaigns, less clear is *why networked media have become*
so central to the U.S. feminist repertoire at this particular juncture. U.S. feminists’ turn toward networked activism and away from highly structured organizations cannot be explained through the availability of digital media tools alone. Rather, their practices stem from a precarious socio-political context for feminist discourse, a desire to reimagine a more inclusive feminist politics, and a long tradition of feminist media making.

Media and the Undoing of Feminism

Starting in the mid- to late 1980s, feminism took on a precarious position in the United States, and media were partly to blame. The activism of feminists throughout the 1960s and 1970s had fundamentally altered the social, political, and economic fabric of society, troubling patriarchal norms and creating new possibilities for women in the workplace, in the home, and in the public sphere. Following this period of revolutionary change, however, a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill, 2007, p. 5) flooded U.S. media, framing feminist movements as unnecessary, undesirable, and out of touch with young women’s lives (McRobbie, 2004). Some scholars have pointed to the 1980s rise of the religious right’s conservative “family values” platform under President Ronald Reagan and have described this era as a concerted backlash aimed at undermining leftist movements’ achievements (Faludi, 1991; Whelehan, 2000). But while the backlash thesis tells a compelling narrative of America’s political pendulum swinging from left to right, theorists of postfeminist media culture argue that the reality was not so straightforward. The postfeminist sensibility did not offer a flat-out rejection of feminism. Rather, postfeminism selectively took some feminist ideas and values into account (McRobbie, 2004) as commonsense thinking, while simultaneously dismissing feminist politics. As Rosalind Gill (2007) puts it, within postfeminist culture, “Feminist ideas are at the same time articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed” (p. 163). Much like feminist media, postfeminist media produced throughout the 1990s and early 2000s emphasized “educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment” (Tasker and Negra, 2007, p. 2). At the same time, however, postfeminist media suggested that feminism had already achieved these goals, that
those who continued to perform feminist activism were extremists, and that participation in feminist politics deprived women of some essential feminine fulfillment in the domestic sphere. As Angela McRobbie argues (2004), postfeminism engages in a “double entanglement” with both neo-conservative values and the liberalization of choice in domestic relationships and professional aspirations.

Postfeminist culture’s subtle disavowal of feminist politics cut across 1990s and 2000s film, television, print media, and music. While ’90s pop culture staples like the Spice Girls, Xena: Warrior Princess, and sex-positive Cosmopolitan headlines heralded the age of “girl power,” their marketing and production sold women’s agency in traditionally feminine packages. Powerful women and girls exhibited strength at work, in school, and in their personal lives, but they also adhered to traditional standards for beauty and feminine sexuality. The postfeminist subject was also at the center of the “makeover paradigm” (Gill, 2007, p. 156) that dominated television throughout this period. Viewers of reality television staples like What Not to Wear, Extreme Makeover, and The Swan followed women contestants as they found personal empowerment and fulfillment through new wardrobes, beauty routines, cosmetic surgery, and weight loss. The ideal postfeminist subject achieved empowerment through self-surveillance, self-discipline, and self-improvement via participation in consumer culture, not collective action. The postfeminist sensibility refused to acknowledge the role systems of power like sexism or racism play in shaping individuals’ personal lives, instead positioning “women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or imbalances whatsoever” (Gill, 2007, p. 153). With structural inequities erased from view and empowerment framed as a matter of choice, the collective politics of a social movement were no longer necessary. The result was a generation of women who, by some accounts, refused to identify as feminists, even as they acknowledged their debts to past feminist movements and the persistence of sexism at home and in the workplace (Scharff, 2016). Postfeminism’s double entanglements left feminism to exist, in sociologist Jo Reger’s (2012) words, “everywhere but nowhere,” a distilled version of feminist ideas and identities “diffused into the culture and structure of society” (p. 3) but without the organized support of a social movement.3
From the 1980s through the early 2000s, the rise of postfeminism mainstreamed a flattened, one-dimensional, individualistic understanding of agency, erasing from view the systems of power that structure everyday life and making collective action seem unnecessary. Theorists of postfeminism describe this era as an impasse for feminist activists, as the possibility for widespread social, political, and cultural transformations informed by feminist politics appeared increasingly improbable. Combined with growing internal discord over the marginalization of women of color, queer women, and working-class women within feminist movements, these conditions made feminist work especially precarious (Reger, 2012). This, McRobbie (2004) argues, was the “undoing of feminism” (p. 255).

Media and the Popularization of Feminism

But, by the mid-2010s, the tide of popular culture shifted. In the words of Andi Zeisler (2016), founder of feminist outlet Bitch Media, “feminism got cool” (p. x). Across the U.S. media landscape, the repudiation of the postfeminist sensibility gave way to celebration, and a new era of “popular feminism” began (Banet-Weiser, 2015b, 2018a, 2018b).

The shift from postfeminism to popular feminism reached a fever pitch in August 2014. More than eight million viewers watched Beyoncé close out the MTV Video Music Awards while standing defiantly in front of a giant screen emblazoned with the word “FEMINIST.” Her girl-power anthem “Flawless,” which samples a recording of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie paraphrasing a dictionary definition of “feminism,” blared in the background. But while she created a breathtaking moment in feminist media history, Beyoncé was not the only celebrity aligning herself with the feminist label. A number of other stars “came out” as feminists, including Miley Cyrus, Lady Gaga, Lorde, Lena Dunham, Elliot Page, Emma Watson, and Taylor Swift, and media outlets even began curating lists of “top” celebrity feminists.

This “celebrity feminism” emerged against the backdrop of an undeniably feminist “moment” in U.S. media. In 2013 and 2014 “hashtag feminism” emerged through some of the first feminist hashtag campaigns, including #YesAllWomen, #NotYourAsianSidekick, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, #WhyIStayed, #BringBackOurGirls, #YouOkSis, and
RapeCultureIsWhen, among others. During those same years, feminist nonprofit The Representation Project launched the #NotBuyingIt campaign and mobile app, inviting Super Bowl viewers to take to Twitter, call out the big game’s traditionally sexist commercials, and harness the power of women consumers through threats of brand boycotts (Clark, 2014). Their efforts went viral, ushering in a new era of what commentators have alternatively referred to as “femvertising,” “empowertising,” or “go-girl marketing” (Ciambriello, 2014; Zeisler, 2016; Zmuda and Diaz, 2014). In 2015, women’s lifestyle company SheKnows Media launched their annual Femvertising Awards. From Always feminine hygiene products to Bud Light beer, socially conscious advertisements featuring positive representations of women and girls breaking down gender roles and barriers became the new norm (SheKnows Media, 2018). Meanwhile, successful women entrepreneurs, like Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg and Nasty Gal founder Sophia Amoruso, penned best-selling feminist books, drawing on their own life experiences to advise women on how to Lean In and become a #Girlboss. And while gender gaps still plagued the television and film industries, these years also brought an increase in the presence of trans women in popular culture through television series like Transparent, Orange Is the New Black, and I Am Cait and through the activism of celebrity actors and advocates like Laverne Cox and Janet Mock. Feminist ideas and rhetoric popped up in even the most unexpected places. Women’s magazines such as Cosmopolitan, Elle, InStyle, and Teen Vogue shifted away from the genre’s emphasis on beauty and fashion and traditional representations of gender and sexuality and started running explicitly feminist content (Groetzinger, 2016). Even Playboy, the men’s “lifestyle” magazine known for its pornographic centerfolds and long derided by feminists (temporarily) stopped printing nude photos and began publishing stories with headlines like, “You Can’t Have Feminist Liberation without Choice.” These are just a fraction of the media sites, figures, products, and trends that have embraced feminism in recent years. By 2017, Merriam-Webster declared feminism its “Word of the Year,” citing the Women’s March and the #MeToo movement alongside film and television offerings like the Wonder Woman reboot and The Handmaid’s Tale as evidence for the term’s comeback. Suddenly, in a clear reversal of Reger’s (2012) prognosis,
feminism, with a big, capital $F$, was absolutely everywhere, loud, proud, and clear as day.

It is difficult to isolate any one variable that triggered feminism’s ascent in U.S. media. But while the exact cause of feminism’s popularization remains unknown, as Valenti (2014a) argues, one thing is for certain: “The zeitgeist is irrefutably feminist.” We are living in a moment that Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2017) describe as “decidedly not postfeminist” (p. 886). Rather than casting feminism as unnecessary or outmoded, advertisers, celebrities, and corporate leaders have adopted the feminist label and its associated rhetoric of empowerment. In a dramatic shift from the “backlash media” (Faludi, 1991, p. 94) of the postfeminist era, the current media landscape has given feminism a “new luminosity in popular culture” (Gill, 2016, p. 614). As Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) put it, “For us as feminist media scholars, feminism has always been a useful lens through which to understand popular culture. However, we are now living in a moment when feminism has undeniably become popular culture” (p. 884).

*Media and the Traffic in Feminism*

The popularization of feminism through its commercial and digital media diffusion has made feminism accessible and even admired, a remarkable feat when compared with the postfeminist sensibility that infused media markets in the 1990s and early 2000s. Feminism’s unprecedented degree of visibility has offered gender justice advocates a variety of new political opportunities and affordances, as feminist ideas and rhetoric reach wider audiences than ever before. Feminism’s hypervisibility, however, has also created three major challenges for feminist activists. To borrow McRobbie’s language for describing postfeminism, popular feminism has become *doubly entangled* in both the resurgence and the undermining of feminist collective politics.

First, popular feminism’s emphases on identity, representation, and empowerment are easily co-opted and commodified. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) argue that “the terrain of popular feminism is currently occupied in large part by the individualist-feminism of neoliberal consumer culture” (p. 884). The most popular forms of feminist media
are inflected with a discourse of self-improvement and individual choice. From the inspirational self-care messages that circulate on social media to feminist-branded clothing to the girl power marketing of femvertisements, popular feminism often celebrates feminism in name only while simultaneously upholding marketplace values. Zeisler (2016) argues that these manifestations of popular feminism, however alluring they may be for activists who could once hardly imagine a culture that celebrates feminism, are merely “facsimiles” of feminist “ideas, objects, and narratives that are, on closer inspection, almost exclusively about personal identity and consumption” (p. 74). This “marketplace feminism” (Zeisler, 2016, p. xiii) is necessarily decoupled from analyses of structural inequities, which would undermine the capitalist systems of exchange that enable it to exist. The most popular forms of feminism only go so far as to recognize that feminism is necessary and that inequities exists, but stop short of actually disrupting the systems of oppression that justify feminist politics in the first place. Instead, they point to consumption and the marketplace as solutions to social injustices (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017). Drawing on anthropologist Gayle Rubin’s (1997) analysis of the “traffic in women” within capitalism, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) refer to this phenomenon as the “traffic in feminism” (p. 886); just as capitalism depends upon and reproduces gendered oppression, today, capitalism depends upon and reproduces a particular version of feminism that supports individualist marketplace values. Popular feminism enables the gendered, racial, sexual, and economic oppressions of capitalism by linking empowerment with consumption and work on the self, masking persistent inequities, and creating the illusion that we live in a feminist society (Banet-Weiser, 2015b; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Gill, 2016; Zeisler, 2016). The traffic in feminism produces and reproduces a more palatable, depoliticized version of feminist ideas and rhetoric, shoring up capitalist ideologies and benefitting only those most privileged “feminists”—the celebrities, CEOs, and marketers—best positioned to profit from marketplace visibility (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017).

Second and relatedly, popular feminism’s linking of empowerment to consumption and choice implies that feminism is an individual enterprise, one open to interpretation and uncommitted to a particular political agenda. Perhaps nowhere does this dynamic play out more clearly than in
the media frenzy over celebrity feminism. Entertainment media’s obsession with exposing which actors and pop artists identify as feminists and which do not has produced a full roster of celebrity activists. What being a “feminist” actually means, however, has gotten lost in the f-word’s surge in popularity, leaving feminism to be treated as a label rather than an action, a movement, or a set of values (Valenti, 2014b). This has opened the door for celebrities and politicians whose beliefs and platforms contradict basic feminist ideals, including conservative figures like Sarah Palin and Ivanka Trump, to brand themselves as feminists (Filipovic, 2017; Valenti, 2014b). Celebrity feminism and other forms of popular feminism make the movement more accessible to a broader base, offering a gateway to feminist politics for the otherwise uninitiated. Even so, when feminism is boiled down to a label, a soundbite, or a headline, it is left, in Gill’s (2016) words, “contentless” (p. 618), an identity that can be taken on or off like a trendy T-shirt, unencumbered by the weight of a specific set of politics or positions. Whether it takes the form of Beyoncé putting the word FEMINIST in lights on the VMAs’s stage or Super Bowl advertisers promoting girl power, popular feminism is not equipped to confront ongoing systemic inequities. The large amount of media attention given to identifying as a feminist rather than engaging in feminism makes activism appear as easy as proclaiming yourself an activist.

Third, popular feminism has been met in equal measure with “popular misogyny,” a “misogynistic political and economic culture, where rape culture is normative, violent threats against women are validated, and rights of the body for women are either under threat or being formally retracted” (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016, p. 172). The hypervisibility of feminist cultures, Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) argue, has triggered an anti-feminist backlash, ushering in “a new era of the gender wars” (p. 171). The same digital platforms feminists have used to launch viral campaigns against sexual violence have been complicit in the perpetuation of violent harassment against feminist activists, as misogynist and racist users face few consequences for their actions. Offline, the backlash of popular misogyny has taken the form of attacks on the policy gains of previous feminist generations. The Trump administration, for example, undermined access to safe abortions and reproductive health care, anti–domestic violence programs, and workplace discrimination laws (Planned