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Sexist portrayals of women in daytime television

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Sexist portrayals of women in daytime television

Abstract

Television is one of the main socializing forces in our culture today. It can mold opinions and attitudes and it can also help to change them. The portrayal of women on television in programs and commercials is still very negative in 1992. Although many people believe women have a more positive image on television today, many of these appearances are deceiving. Television's resistance of the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement is very evident in its continued stereotypes of women in subservient positions to men. Stereotypes of women are shown by the overwhelming majority of female roles in programs, commercials, and children's productions that still show women as sex objects or housewives.

Sexist Portrayals of Women
in Daytime Television

A Graduate Paper
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
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Angela Sommars
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Entitled: Sexist Portrayals of Women in Daytime
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Chapter I

Introduction

Television is one of the main socializing forces in our culture today. It can mold opinions and attitudes and it can also help to change them. The portrayal of women on television in programs and commercials is still very negative in 1992. Although many people believe women have a more positive image on television today, many of these appearances are deceiving. Television's resistance of the influence of the Women's Liberation Movement is very evident in its continued stereotypes of women in subservient positions to men. Stereotypes of women are shown by the overwhelming majority of female roles in programs, commercials, and children's productions that still show women as sex objects or housewives.

In both daytime and evening soap operas ("All My Children," "Falcon Crest," "Dynasty") the rich, strong, powerful, and successful women are invariably cast as villains. The "good" women are helpless, sacrificing, loyal, naive, sweet, and easily manipulated. The message is that only "bad" women challenge or succeed in nontraditional female roles.

Many Americans believe that television reflects real social changes and that television is a mirror of reality. Many people whom are avid watchers of television point out the occasional anchor-woman, powerful woman executive, or glamorous female physician as portrayed on television as evidence of gender equality. These are all examples of television's perception of women as tokens. Female television news anchors also do not receive equal treatment with men. Benokraitis and Feagin (1986) observe that even when women seem to be accepted as equals in their lifetime, they become "just women" (p. 94) after their death. They are quoted as saying: "When Jessica Savitch died during an automobile accident in 1983, a number of newspapers eulogized and highlighted her personal characteristics rather than her professional accomplishments. An editorial in Baltimore's 'Evening Sun' focused on her marriages, miscarriage, looks, and competition from younger (female, of course) anchors: 'She was so exquisitely beautiful that she could have been Miss America...' despite demonstrable talent in her work, there were still whispers that she was a bit of fluff NBC's Playboy bunny." (p. 95)

Benokraitis and Feagin (1986) go on to say that when male television news anchors die, their affairs, impotence, toupees, biceps, illegitimate children, or other nonprofessional characteristics are rarely discussed.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1980) reports that many of the sexist portrayals and attitudes displayed on television are a result of the minority of women with positions in the television industry. Training opportunities in the area of television are considered to be masculine and most women are in secretarial positions. Women need to be involved in all areas of the television industry to help encourage positive attitudes about women. Baehr (1980) includes an article about television camerawomen. Diane Fammes is one of the few camerawomen in the television industry. She explains some of the difficulties she has encountered: "When I arrive on location with a male assistant he is approached as the cameraperson. There is a belief commonly held by male technicians that if a woman can do the job it is not worth doing. A cameraman is seen as a macho technical expert and this notion supports the egos of some

directors. It is difficult for them to accept a woman behind the camera because it demeans their position."

(p. 60)

There are many efforts being made to change sexist views for a more positive image of women by different groups. The National Organization for Women is one example.

This paper will attempt to examine sexist portrayals of women on daytime television and in commercials, why these portrayals still exist and how and why they need to be changed. Evidence will be provided demonstrating the sexist slant of many media presentations and supporting evidence will show why these negative representations of women are so damaging to societal values.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Messages and images relayed by television reinforce culture and cultural stereotypes. Television is a very influential medium. Benet, Daniels, and Tuchman (1978) compare television to religion:

Television is the new religion. It has to be studied as a new religion, an organic structure of rituals and myths, including the news and documentaries, but primarily serial drama. It is religion in the sense of preindustrial pre-Reformation religion, in the sense of one's having no choice--a cosmic force or a symbolic environment that one was born into, and whose assumptions one accepted without much questioning (p. 47).

Linguist Noam Chomsky (Szykowny, 1990) is considered by many to be one of the most important scholars in the United States. He has written several books and has studied media extensively. He believes that television is one medium out of many that serve a propaganda function by shaping perceptions, selecting

events and offering interpretations in conformity with the needs of the power centers in society, which are the state and corporate worlds. Chomsky believes the media take issues and shape and modify them so that they serve the interests of established power.

The established power has always worked through the traditional institutions of the government, school systems, churches and the family but now one of the most powerful forces is the media. Day in and day out, in living color, television pounds home the message that men are active, hard-working, curious and intelligent and that women are seductive, frivolous, motherly and domesticated. Old myths have merely been put into modern dress (Strainchamps, 1974).

People become so conditioned to seeing and hearing negative comments about women that they often do not question televisions portrayal of women and that is why these portrayals are so powerful and dangerous. They are dangerous because stereotypes of women as care-givers or as mere decorations, in the words of Ceulemans and Guido, (1979) "diminishes self-esteem, and ignores other aspects of women's personality and their human potential." (p. 9)

Children and adults look to society for role models, and television makes up a large part of our society. Many people do not question television and accept what they see as realistic social relations. People who view these relationships on television receive a very negative view of women.

In an article entitled "The Make-Believe Media," Parenti (1990) said that studies show that women are put in a box, women are portrayed mostly in subsidiary roles and depicted as less capable, effective, or interesting than the more numerous white male principals. Parenti writes that some portrayals of women have improved but many of the realistic positions women endure are not even shown:

Women can now be seen playing lawyers, judges, cops, executives, professionals, and sometimes even workers, but the questions of gender equality and the fight for feminist values are seldom joined. Likewise, the struggles of sleep-starved, under-paid single mothers trying to raise their children and survive in an inhospitable environment are not usually considered an appropriate theme for prime-time television or Hollywood. (p. 18)

The images that media implant in our minds may influence how we appraise a host of social realities. People may believe that television is only reflecting the way life is in reality. However, the reality may be that real life is affected by these strong messages that the culture of television would have us believe. Parenti (1990) believes that when people respond to a real life situation with the exclamation "Just like in the movies." (p. 19) They are expressing recognition and even satisfaction that media-created mental frames find corroboration in the real world. Parenti states that audiences usually do some perceptual editing by projecting something of their own viewpoint upon what they see but this editing is partly conditioned by the previously internalized images installed in their minds by the media. "Rather than being rationally critical of the images and ideologies of the entertainment media, our minds--after prolonged exposure to earlier programs and films--sometimes become active accomplices in our own indoctrination." (p. 19)

Research from this same article indicates that ninety percent of the nation's adult viewers consider themselves to be immune from the influences of

television, yet, the same ninety percent account for about ninety percent of all sales of advertised products on television. Media critic Jerry Mander believes that electronic images are "irresistable" because people's brains absorb them regardless of how they might consciously perceive such images. People can consciously know that a particular media situation is fictional but still believe it to some extent. When people draw upon images in their heads they do not keep their store of media imagery separatist and distinct from their real-world imagery because the mind does not work that way (cited in Parenti, 1990).

Television and Stereotypes

The influential and powerful media of television, then, creates our images of women and stereotypes of women. Stereotypes are harmful and they create insecurities for people who do not want to conform to them. Benet, Daniels and Tuchman (1978) note that:

Sex-role stereotypes are set portrayals of sex-appropriate appearance, interests, skills, behaviors, and self-perceptions. They are more stringent than guidelines in suggesting persons not conforming to the specified way of appearing, feeling, and behaving are inadequate as males or females. (p. 5)

One of the continued stereotypes of women is that their main responsibility is still the care of home and family. According to Modleski (1986), "home" means something different to most men and women. To men it is still primarily a place of leisure but to women it is still primarily a place of work. The home is a place where most women are still oppressed and exploited.

It is not so terrible that women do housework or that they care for their family. What is terrible is that it helps to trap women into an image that they have to be the primary care takers. Baehr (1980) calls this the "double day" or the "second shift." She writes, "The double day has been seen as a problem for women with family responsibilities, as a source of emotional and physical stress and as supporting women's continued subordination in the workplace and in politics." (p. 79)

The stereotype of the woman as caregiver is transferred by television advertisements with women using certain cleaning supplies in the home, women using a new food item or a new detergent. Rarely are men shown in these situations. When men are shown in

commercials they are often helping an "out of control" or upset woman get back into control. In an Actifed commercial an upset woman says "I can't stand this cold." The man sitting next to her, who is very calm and collected, gives her the medicine and relieves her. In the end she is happy and back in control. The message that is sent out is that women are delicate, hysterical and need to be helped out by men who protect them. Another message is that women are not in control so they have to be kept under control by men. A similar advertisement is a Draino commercial. A woman comes into a store all upset because her drain is clogged. A man comes over to her with a can of Draino and tells her to use it. The woman says, "I knew I needed to call for help." At the end of the commercial the woman is relieved because the man has helped her out.

There is a commercial for safety belts with a woman portrayed as a housewife driving the car. She has her seat belt on and two sacks of groceries next to her. Another woman carelessly backs out of the drive way into her path. The woman puts on the brakes and the groceries fly forward hitting the windshield. Here is

a depiction of two women in stereotypical roles. The first woman driver is the traditional wife and mother and the second is the "woman driver" who is dizzy and out of control.

Commercial Stereotypes

Another example of a sexist portrayal of women is the woman as sex object. There are many commercials that continue this stereotype. One of the best examples is the Old Milwaukee Beer's commercial featuring the Swedish Bikini Team. All of the women look exactly the same. They all have big chests, they are all blonde, they are all in skimpy bathing suits and they are all acting brainless. This portrayal shows women as objects with no individuality or thought processes of their own. They are simply things for men to take pleasure in. San Francisco Examiner Marinucci (1991) writes:

Old Milwaukee Beer's Swedish Bikini Team: The blondes in this T & A fiesta had more brains than the ad writers. Think about it: commercials so juvenile, the brewer was actually sued for sexual harassment. (p. 1)

Five female workers of the Stroh Brewing Company sued

the company claiming that the commercials featuring the voluptuous Swedish Bikini Team contributed to sexual harassment of them on the job.

Wilson (cited in Duckett, 1992), a director of the National Organization for Women states,

The most infuriating thing is that the beer industry really believe they have to link sex with their product. Who do they think is watching television? Because the commercial are aimed only at a certain kind of male--that disruptive animal kind of male that is no asset to this society. (p. 1)

Beer companies argue that their advertising has generally depicted real people in realistic situations.

Beer commercials are not the only commercials that depict women as sex objects, however, there are many more. One more example is a Cool Whip commercial that features scantily clad women. The women are shown giving provocative looks and sucking on strawberries. The main parts of their anatomy that are shown are their eyes, lips, breasts and thighs. The women are separated into separate body parts not as a whole person. Interestingly enough, there is often a male

announcer in the soundtrack of many of these sexist commercials who is the "voice of authority." Butler and Paisley (1980) state, "Almost all commercials with voice-overs are spoken and sung by men." (p. 10)

Men in commercials are shown more often in important roles, while women are shown more often in family roles. Commercials also show women doing most of the activities in the home and show men as the beneficiaries of these activities. The message these commercials send is that women are inside the home and men are outside the home. Other points about the way men and women are portrayed in television are: women in commercials are shown as younger than men; in commercials during children's programming, women and girls are seen less than men and boys; in television programs, men are more often employed than women and have higher - status jobs; in television programs, marital status is known more often for women than for men; television programs for children show men in more roles than women and show women more often in family roles (Butler & Paisley, 1980).

Arlen (1974) corroborates the finding that women are shown as the ones responsible for the care and

running of the home. Arlen writes, In most housewife commercials, the housewife is portrayed as little more than a simpering, brainless, jelly, almost pathologically obsessed with the world of kitchen floors or laundry, or the celebrated "bathroom bowl" (p. 266). Commercials show that women are not only obsessed with a clean house but they are obsessed with their appearance. In a commercial for J.C. Pennys, to promote their "Great Perm Sale," a woman is shown to be hysterical about the condition of her hair. The man is shown trying to calm her down and console her. The woman is shown to be illogical and the man to be rational and logical.

Another common way commercials relate women with obsession and appearance is the need for women to have moisturizers. Men grow older and develop wrinkles too but the emphasis for moisturizing the skin is most often directed at women. Berger (1991) believes that dehydration is a metaphor for the loss of sexual attractiveness and capacity or, stated simply,

desexualization:

A great deal of cosmetic advertising stresses wetness, moisture, and related concepts, as if the body were in danger of becoming an arid desert, devoid of life, dry, uninteresting, and infertile. These ads suggest that women fear or should fear, losing their body fluids, which becomes the equivalent of losing their capacity to reproduce. This, in turn, is connected with sexuality and desirability. Anxiety over the body as a kind of wasteland is implicit in appeals in advertisements about retaining and restoring moisture. (p. 121)

Stereotypes in Daytime Television

Commercials such as these are shown most often during daytime television. Other daytime television productions that portray women in a negative manner are game shows like "The Price Is Right." The women who help show the objects for prizes are objects themselves. They are dressed in tight-fitting clothing, low-cut dresses and blouses, and skimpy bathing suits. None of the models are male. They are all slim females with large breasts. The models

constantly give seductive glances toward the camera and use their bodies in suggestive poses. Goffman (1976) published a book named "Gender Advertisements." He describes how certain body movements and poses women are asked to do are very submissive and degrading. Goffman states that women are often shown using their hands and fingers to gently touch or caress objects which suggests sex, weakness or that they are primarily care-givers. However, men are shown to use their hands in a utilitarian manner by the way they grasp, manipulate or hold objects. Women are also often shown tilting their heads down, bending their knee in a submissive pose or lying on or next to an object in a submissive pose. Goffman says these subordinate positions are classic stereotypes of physical deference. He says a recumbent position is one from which physical defense can least well be initiated and so it renders a woman very dependent on the benignness of the surround. The models on "The Price Is Right" display all of these positions every day on the show.

The daytime soap operas provide many sexist portrayals of women as well. Two of the most popular soap operas are "All My Children" and "The Young and

the Restless." On "All My Children" it seems that most women can not be happy without men. Their happiness, identity and careers are dependent upon men. If a character is successful on her own like Erica Kane, then she is portrayed as mean and manipulative. Another successful character on the show is Natalie Chandler. The way she got her first fortune was by being fortunate enough to be beautiful so that she could marry a rich, older man. After she is divorced by this man, she becomes a nurse. Women on television are often portrayed as nurses or teachers which are among the lowest paid professions. One of Natalie's patients happens to be a very rich old man. He is attracted to her and likes her enough to change his will so that all of his money eventually goes to her. Natalie gains money, and with it power, once more through a man and not through her own skills or intelligence. The only woman in the whole show who had a successful career and child on her own was a token black woman.

The token black woman is used on "The Young and the Restless" also. The only woman in the whole cast who achieved her degree and became successful on her

own is a black doctor. The rest of the women either married into it because they were beautiful or were rich already because of their father. There is one woman on the show who is successful and single, Jill Abbott. Jill is rich mostly due to her divorce from businessman John Abbott. In order to keep her successful she is portrayed as evil and manipulative.

Nikkie Abbott is another character on the "Young and the Restless." She has an addiction problem that is out of control. Her husband and ex-husband try to help her because they are rational and in control. She is a housewife and her whole world revolves around her home and family. They are both powerful businessmen who eventually help her and solve all her problems for her. On "General Hospital" a man's mother makes a great quantity of food and organizes a party for her son. The son is shown saying, "Well that's what happens when my mother puts her mind to it . . . and I put my foot down." The woman is shown to be concerned with making food for people and doing less important things like arranging a party. The man is shown in control of the woman.

The way the women look and are dressed in daytime dramas is another area of concern. On "Another World"

an episode shows a blond female maid dressed in an extremely short skirt that reveals most of her legs. Her character acts stupid and asks many unintelligent questions. The "woman of the house" comes in wearing a very low-cut red dress. She files her nails and gossips about everyone. When she finds out a man is on the way over she puts on red lipstick and positions herself in a sexy pose on the couch. The man walks in, fully dressed in a business suit and acts very controlled and businesslike. He sits very straight and dignified in a chair beside her.

A similar scene is played out on "General Hospital." A woman is shown in a tight-fitting leather outfit that is trimmed in feathers. Her boyfriend is dressed in a tuxedo. They have a romantic scene where he takes off most of her clothes and most of her legs and some of her breasts are revealed. The man remains fully clothed. The introduction to "Santa Barbara" shows a woman in a low-cut yellow bathing suit. The suit is partially see-through and her breasts and nipples are revealed. Again the man is shown fully clothed.

Women's hair on soap-operas is usually long and curled. Men are shown with short, straight hair.

Women are generally considered to be more sensuous and beautiful if they have long, curled hair. If they have short hair they are often portrayed as not being as feminine. This stereotype carries over from television to real life but in reality it takes a very long time to have long, curled hair. Women are already overburdened with work, home-care and often children too and there is also societal pressure to always look beautiful.

Television News and Sports

The concern for the way women look carries over into daytime news shows also. Jonathan Alter (1989) examines "Looksism" (p. 72) in these shows. Alter states that attractive women move up quickly in the news shows due in large measure to the way that they look. Alter's research shows that Diane Sawyer moved directly from Richard Nixon's staff into a job as a correspondent for CBS news. Jane Pauley became a "Today" coanchor at the age of 26. Catherine Crier changed positions from a state court judge in Texas to coanchoring CNN's evening news with no journalism experience at all. Deborah Norville began working for public TV on camera while still in college and became a

weekend anchor at the age of twenty-two at a prestigious station. Norville replaced Pauley on the Today show and the media called it a "cat - fight" because Norville was younger and prettier than Pauley. In an interview with "Newsweek," Norville (cited in Alter 1989) said:

This is, in its entirety, a sexist issue. It's astonishing that in 1989, it would be suggested that two capable women can't work on a program side by side. Are they [TV critics] saying that two women can't be on the masthead of a law firm, that two women can't start a business together? . . . Would they spread these rumors about men? On the age [issue], Jane's 37, I'm 31, we danced to the same music, watched the same movies. It's not like we're light-years apart. (p. 72)

Alter (1989) also cites two network executives who made sexist comments. Gartner, president of NBC News stated, "It's unfairly difficult for a handsome woman to be viewed by the TV press as a serious journalist." (p.72) Former CBS News president Sauter expressed an entirely different view when he stated, "I don't know

of any bitches at the top though there are some in the middle" (p. 73). Fromson, a former network correspondent expressed the opinion that the networks use beautiful women to sell sex and bring in more viewers. Alter concludes his article by stating that although women over forty are achieving more visibility, the highest levels of management where important decisions are made such as hiring, firing and program survival are still male bastions.

In an article named "One Hand Clapping," Leonard (1988) related that only two of twenty-three network entertainment programs introduced in the fall of 1987 had a female lead, one was Dolly Parton and the other Bill Cosby's surrogate daughter. Leonard notes other sexist issues such as: Diane Sawyer being "hooted" at for looking good on the cover of "Vanity Fair"; almost every "serious" nationally syndicated columnist is a heavy-breather; Jennifer Levin is accused by tabloids of her own murder because of "rough sex"; Pat Schroeder was front-page news when she cried over losing the presidency and George Bush insists he is not a wimp. Women reporters covering sports events on television also have to work under the burden of

stereotypes. Gayle Sierens spent ten years as a TV sportscaster and a nightly news anchor. She got a chance to call an NFL football game on December 27, 1988. CBS taped a Sierens practice session and then used it to bad-mouth the job she did to a "USA Today" reporter. Leonard writes, "You'd think a woman's describing a football game was as radically threatening as, say, Lionel Trilling's becoming the first Jewish tenured professor in the English Department at Columbia" (p. 25).

Women's sports shows have their own problems. Reith (1989) reports that many women's sports shows do not even get covered by the media. The media will not cover them until they have a proven audience that will tune into broadcasts. However, interest in women's sports can not be developed to a great extent if people are not exposed to it.

Roles of Women in Decision Making

Roles that show women as subservient, dependent, evil or as objects are still evident every day on television. The reason for this problem is that very few women are part of the policy making and decision making structures in the media business. It is only in

exceptional cases that a woman is a director, producer, a board member or a manager in the television industry. The few women that make it to these top positions still have to deal with a majority of men who may have very different views about the way women should be portrayed on T.V.

Sexism is not only transmitted through television messages but is behind the scenes as well. Data generated by the Task Force on Women in Public Broadcasting show that most of the top managerial positions in television are held by men. The percentages of men in positions such as general manager, station manager, operation or production manager are in the nineties with women making up the remaining ten percent. (UNESCO, 1980).

Women are still not guided toward technical or production positions in television. Ceulemans & Guido (1979) found that few women, compared to men, possess the education or background required to be involved in the top positions in the television industry:

The proportion of women with some sort of higher education, mostly secretarial, was much higher than that of male employees. However,

fewer women than men held a university degree in film / T.V. qualifications. The educational qualifications required by ITV are not very strict, since it relies primarily on experience and training provided by other industries where women are almost absent, and on a general technical background which few women are encouraged to develop. (p. 56)

Even if a woman does climb the ladder and become a producer, she may be treated as less powerful and less substantial than a man. She may theoretically have power because of the money, authority and responsibility given to her to make her own show but if a male has to okay her ideas, she still is not in control (Strainchamps, 1974). Gloria Banta was a writer for the "Mary Tyler Moore" show. Banta said when she was about twenty years old she worked as a secretary for comedy script writers. When writers' conferences were called she would meet with the staff and write down the material that they decided was funny

enough for the show. She was quoted as saying:

Once it occurred to me while transcribing those notes that if I tried, maybe I could write skits half as funny as theirs. God, I wanted to be one of those guys! But whoever heard of a girl comedy - writer? Besides I'd never have the nerve to show anything to them. (A secretary, just out of her teens, pushing material!) I was just grateful for my job. My boss, the associate producer, didn't help. He kept telling me to get out of the business. `This is no life for a nice girl--or a rotten one, either. They only end up having affairs with all these crazies, going from job to job . . . it's awful. (p. 269-70)

Women in Television

There are women who go against the grain and pursue careers in television even when they are pressured not to--Kate Crowley is another example. Crowley is a media planner at Grace & Rothschild. Crowley believes she can compete in her field on an equal economic footing with men. She is in line with a recent New York Times poll on Women in U.S. society who

reject the view held by many older women that they cannot compete with men. "Men still have the upper hand, observes Crowley, "but in just the four years that I've worked, I've seen changes for the better" (Sexias 1989, p.86). She said her mother, a former nurse, still goes by the old credo that men will always make more money than women. Crowley does not agree with her mother's view because she believes that because there is such a large number of women in all spheres of media that it is likely that both genders will earn the same pay for compatible work in the years ahead (Sexias, 1989).

Charlayne Hunter-Gault (1988) is also a determined woman in the media field who would not listen when people tried to change her mind about her chosen career. Hunter-Gault was raised in the South and was one of the first black women to attend a prestigious southern college. Many people protested against her when she first started attending college but she didn't give in or give up (Young, 1990). She believes some of these hard experiences have helped her in the media

business:

I think being Southern helped me survive in this profession. Being black and a woman and being in the Civil Rights Movement helped me survive, too. All of those things helped me to forge my armor, because I think you do need a suit of armor, particularly if you're black, if you're a woman, if you're in this kind of business. (p. 78)

Claudia Cohen rose to the top of the media field on her own. In college at the University of Pennsylvania she became the managing editor of an ivy league paper, "The Daily Pennsylvanian." After Cohen graduated from college she became the managing editor of a journalism review named "More." Cohen's work for "More" brought her national recognition. Cohen could have easily quit the media world after she married a very wealthy man but she chose to stick with the world of television reporting where she could make a difference (Conant, 1989). These are some of the many women who are sticking with television and the media world to try and make a difference for themselves and others by hopefully changing some of the negative views of women that the industry has spread.

Influence on Children

Television is an extremely powerful medium. One of the groups T.V. strongly influences is young children. Children's shows are a good place to start to bring about some change in the attitudes that are developed about females through T.V. Pollitt (1991) is a poet and essayist who identified "The Smurfette Principle." Pollitt found that there was not a single network cartoon or puppet show that starred a female character. She discovered that contemporary shows are either essentially male, such as "Garfield," or are a group of male friends that are accented by a single female who is stereotypically defined--The Smurfette Principle. Some of the worst cartoons portray the female character as a little-sister type who has a pink dress and hair ribbons and tags along with the more adventurous males. Other examples of female stereotypes are: Kanga, the only female in "Winnie-the-Pooh" who is a mother; Piggy, from "Muppet Babies," is a smaller version of Miss Piggy--the camp glamour queen of the Muppets and April who is a girl Friday to a bunch of male superheroes in "Teen-Age

Mutant Ninja Turtles." Pollitt writes:

The message is clear. Boys are the norm, girls the variation; boys are central, girls peripheral; boys are individuals, girls types. Boys define the group, its story and its code of values. Girls exist only in relation to boys. (p. 22)

Pollitt comments that public television is not much better than the networks when it comes to sexist female portrayals. She notes that Mr. Roger's neighborhood is made up mostly of middle-aged men like himself. A cartoon called "Shining Time Station," features a train engine that is a male character and the female characters are passenger cars. "Sesame Street," too, contains a mostly male cast because the stars of the shows are all male Muppets. Even in videos males are the featured star in nine out of ten offerings.

Pollitt does have some hope because of videos such as "The Little Mermaid." The main character is Ariel who is active, brave, determined and independent. She does not let her father control her. She rescues the main male character, a prince. However, even this video has a ways to go because of certain backward views that

creep into the movie such as when the sea witch relates that "on land it's much preferred for ladies not to say a word" and "she who holds her tongue will get her man."

Children pick up on sexism in the culture of television. Girls learn to filter their ambitions and dreams through male characters. Boys learn that they are the main characters and females are minor characters. Television shows for small children are often more authoritative than evidence presented to them before their own eyes. Dulcy Singer, executive producer of "Sesame Street," says they are working on changing the all male cast of muppet stars. However, the change is coming about to slowly for the next generation of children who have already been influenced by this and many other television shows (Pollitt, 1991).

Movement for Change

Some people, especially women, have been working to change things for a very long time. The 1960's is now being called the "second wave" of feminism. Women involved in this movement paid special attention to the way women were portrayed by the media. The political agenda of the feminist movement at this time was to

guarantee equality in economic and social roles and to change the way women were stereotyped and trivialized in television programs. Feminist critics also found that there was widespread discrimination against women in the broadcast industry and charged media managers and owners with sexist employment practices. Some of the practices critics discovered were: if a woman and man applied for the same job, the man usually was usually employed in the position, if the woman did get the job she was usually paid less than a man with the same job and women were on slower promotional tracks than men.

In the 1970's critics organized into groups and tried to change matters through legal channels. One of the foremost organizations for women was the National Organization for Women, NOW. NOW used the same method that other minority groups had already used to try to achieve equal treatment in the media field. They used relicensing procedures of the FCC, Federal Communications Commission, as prime opportunities to confront broadcasters on the fair treatment of women in media. During the 1970's and into the 1980's fifteen stations in the United States had their licenses

challenged by feminist groups but none of them lost their license. Women in these movements never fully expected these stations to lose their licenses but they believed that challenging the stations would make them review and maybe even change some of their policies that discriminated against women. It is difficult to measure how much change these specific efforts brought about for women but the position of women in and by the media field has undoubtedly improved since these movements first began.

Mass media research flourished in the 1930's and 1940's, however, women were not considered important enough for serious research. Women were not seen as having an active role in communication but rather as passive consumers of media messages. Much of the research tried to subdue fears about the power of the media in shaping beliefs, attitudes and subsequent behaviors of those affected by their messages. These studies tried to show that the media did not direct values and attitudes but just reinforced already existing beliefs.

In 1963 Betty Friedan (cited in Cantor, 1988) wrote "The Feminine Mystique" which showed women were

trivialized in the media. This work inspired a series of reports and studies that focused on how women were portrayed by the media. After the book was published the President's Commission on the Status of Women released a report criticizing the media for projecting an image of women that contained misconceptions and distortions. Another event that kept the focus on this women's issue was the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. This helped to keep scrutiny on mass media portrayals of minorities which included women. In 1966, the Court of Appeals required the FCC to permit citizens to become involved in commission proceedings. For the first time in commercial broadcasting history less powerful groups like minorities and women could conduct their own research on how mass media affected them and use this research to try to bring about changes in policy.

Barriers

Although the reforms helped the women's association with media there were and still are barriers to promote further change. One of the biggest barriers is that it is too expensive for disadvantaged groups to start a station or take over an existing

station. Without direct ownership reform groups have to adopt the strategy of trying to bring about change in the status quo. The case of the National Organization for Women v. FCC in 1977 (cited in Cantor, 1988) was one result of this strategy. NOW along with other feminist groups used the legal system to challenge two stations, WRC-TV in Washington, D.C. and WABC-TV in New York. The stations won the right to keep their licenses but important advances were achieved for women. The Court of Appeals decided that the FCC could not permit stations to use the First Amendment as a defense to create biased portrayals of women. The case serves as a model that women's groups still use to challenge stations. The case also directly led to the most comprehensive study on women in television, "Window Dressing on the Sets."

The legal basis the women's groups used to challenge the stations for this model case were based on three elements of communication regulation and law: violations of the Fairness Doctrine; discrimination in employment of women and minorities; and ascertainment of community needs.

These license challenging campaigns were effective tactics in creating greater awareness of feminist

concerns to public and private sectors. They also helped to modify a few of the policies and practices of local television stations. As a result television viewers of today see women in more of a variety of roles than was thought possible by the media industry twenty years ago. Several other positive outcomes resulted from these campaigns. Ordinary citizens became involved in the policymaking process regarding women's issues. Personal gains were achieved for women in and outside these movements and also for women not in the labor force by creating a sense of confidence and accomplishment. A new focus in the area of research was also promoted and research was used for political, educational and informational purposes. This activist research continues to be used in publications about women and media which keeps the topic alive in the classroom and among scholars.

The media industry changed in response to changes in the political culture brought about by the women's reform movement. An underlying assumption in the movement is that eventually more and more women will break into the more powerful roles in the media industry, they will help change how women are portrayed

and this, in turn, will help change their role in society (Cantor, 1988).

Chomsky (cited in Szykowny, 1990) says that people have to take a stance in intellectual self-defense. This means that people have to understand the nature of the material that is imposed upon them and its institutional sources. When this is accomplished in communication with others then corrections can be made. In an interview with Jesse Jackson (cited in Hunter-Gault, 1988) he talks about how the media are less interested in sexism and racism because if they were to focus on these issues they might get the lens turned on them. Jackson further states:

. . . in a democracy, it's a mistake to apply the puritanical ethical standards of one's faith to the constitutional government. Some of the behaviors now being judged by the press are not illegal; they are sins. Well, the church deals with sin. The law deals with crime. Of course, right now, the media are just obsessed with sex and immorality. They're less interested in sexism and racism, both of which are illegal. (p. 37)

Television has the ability to reduce millions of people to passive viewers for significant portions of their lives. It is addictive, commanding and readily available. There is nothing wrong with relaxing in front of a television screen every once in a while. What is dangerous is when the messages from television preempt our experience and take over our brains. When this happens we are provided with a prefabricated understanding of what the world is supposed to be (Parenti, 1990). Academic media critics Larry Gross and George Gerbner (cited in Parenti, 1990) believe that television can confirm or encourage certain views of the world. The more time people spend absorbing television's messages, the more their impressions of the world resemble those of the media.

Chapter III

Summary

The research contained in this paper provides evidence that there are many sexist portrayals of women on daytime television. The references cited indicate that these portrayals are damaging to the self-esteem of women and the way they are perceived by others. The powerful medium of television stereotypes pushes women into sexist and subservient roles. Feminist research into television has shown that women tend to be shown as passive, submissive, and portrayed largely in terms of their sexuality, while men tend to be shown as active, dominant, and authoritative (Benet et al 1978).

Women are often portrayed in terms of their relationships with men. Benokraitis and Feagin (1986) note: In 'Partners in Crime,' for example, the two female private investigators have inherited the agency from the same late ex-husband. They move around in very high heels, very tight, short skirts, and very revealing dresses. True to Hollywood's perception of women, they spend more time changing hairstyles and wardrobes than investigating crimes. In such supposedly equalitarian TV shows as 'Scarecrow and Mrs. King,' Mrs. King is cute

but empty-headed, talks in questions, whimpers a lot, and helps her male partner solve crimes only accidentally. In such female-dominated shows as 'One Day at a Time,' 'Facts of Life,' and 'Gimme A Break,' most of the themes revolve around sex and love, and the women and girls spend a lot of time worrying about their sexuality or looks, trying to figure out how to get or keep a man or how to make him happy (p. 4).

Many of the television shows cited in the previous passage are shown in daytime and afternoon slots on television as reruns. These shows may go on to influence new and perhaps younger viewers. The few shows that do portray more interesting and strong women such as Diane on 'Cheers' or 'Cagney and Lacey' are not standard fare (Bendokraitis and Feagin, 1986).

The daytime soap operas noted in this paper are a prime example of the way women are treated as sex objects or housewives. From "All My Children's" Erica Kane to Nikki Abbott on "The Young and Restless," the women on soaps are still treated as decorated bits of fluff who are dependent on men. Even news anchors like Debra Norville or Jan Pauley are not held in equal professional status with men. Norville (Alter, 1989)

states:

"The blue eyes, the blond hair, the gender have been a handicap. They may have gotten me noticed, but they would have gotten me thrown out three times as fast if I hadn't busted my butt. Because people expect you to be unqualified, I have had to work longer hours, do more stories, over more years (12 in television). I've spent an awful long time becoming this overnight sensation (p. 72).

One of the major reasons for sexist views imposed on viewers is that too few women are in decision-making positions within the television industry. Stephen Heath (Modleski, 1986) examines this issue: "Precisely one of the aspects of the development of mass culture, in the sense of the production by a minority who control the means of production, the effective possibilities of social representations, with financial interests so determining, is that part of the development has included a continual containing of positions, of readings, mass images that allow for all sorts of different readings and appeal within the overall limits of this mass culture. Thus, for example, television producers, writers, and so on are well aware that

there's a lot of activity around women in our societies, new relations of women amongst themselves, new definitions by them of their identity as women; they're aware of women as a 'problem' or a 'concern' which is then built into programs" (p. 9). The influence starts early on in life. The daytime cartoons are filled with images of female characters who are ineffectual. Minnie mouse is always dressed up and cute but never slays the dragons that Mickey does.

Organizations such as NOW, fight the battle for equal rights through the legal system but this is a very slow process. There is a new generation that will be influenced by existing daytime television shows and reruns that contain sexist, slanted views of women. Change cannot come about too soon.

Conclusions

Television is one of our most influential mediums. The messages that it sends out about women are still backward. Women should not be portrayed in small, confining boxes like house-wife or sex object. Nor should they be portrayed as ineffectual, dependent or brainless. Women are not given enough credit in our society and are not afforded enough power. Television is one of the factors that can be held accountable for the negative way women are often stereotyped and treated. Instead of molding negative opinions and attitudes about women, television could mold positive images to help bring about societal change. Women should not be shown as subservient to men because they are equal to men in intellect, determination, independence, and resourcefulness, if they are given the freedom. Right now many rights and considerations are still held back from women because of traditional, sexist views. However, things are changing and television can be an integral part of this change for the better. The change can benefit all. Women can help take on the burdens of men and this in turn will give women more responsibility, more of a voice, more power.

Television can be a positive, useful tool to improve women's image.

The purpose of this paper was to alert people to televisions sexist portrayals of women, to provide evidence of these negative representations and to explain why they are harmful for all of society. If people can recognize the stereotypes against women and understand why they are dangerous, then we can start to bring about a change in the way women are viewed by the media and by us all. When women are viewed as equals and are treated as such, there will be benefits and positive results for everyone.

Glazer and Waehner (1977) state:

The idea of the inferior status of women is deeply rooted in the society and will take a great deal of effort to eradicate. But once the structures which produce and support that idea are changed, then and only then, can we hope to make progress. (p. 10)

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