

Test paper 6

Read these statements and mark them (✓), (x) if you disagree, and (?) if you are not sure. Compare answers in pairs. Read the article and compare your answers with the thoughts expressed in it.

1. The media influences the way women and men think about their roles.
2. Recognition of gender stereotypes often results in local initiatives to give women a greater voice.
3. Gender-sensitive work can provide an important contribution to our understanding of media and communications systems.

Women, Men and the Mass Media

By Dr. Anna Reading

Does the media influence the way women and men think about their roles? The author of this article says yes, as she discusses various aspects of gender and media.

Watching Britain's Channel Four television evening news a few years ago, I was struck by "something strange" about the programme. In recording the numbers of men and women shown in the news and the kinds of stories reported, I recognized that unusually there were two women presenting the news, rather than a woman and a man. There were more women interviewed, and more stories about issues such as breast cancer and contraception. I decided to look behind the scenes and interviewed the programme editors. I was told that the usual male presenter was on holiday, as were many of the top people in government and industry, who also happened to be men. The result was the "strange" programme that I had seen: one in which the numbers of men and women shown were in fact just about equal!

This is an example of how gender can operate within the television news. It is also an example of how to do gender sensitive research in relation to the mass media. Gender, understood to be a combination of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours associated with men and women, is socially constructed and becomes part of us through a process of acceptance and rejection. Because gender is socially constructed the role the mass media plays in this construction is extremely important. Indeed there is now a broad range of gender sensitive studies in different countries on virtually every aspect of the media from the production of globally broadcast television news to the analysis of traditional lullabies that mothers and fathers sing to their children to help them sleep.

The kinds of questions asked by such studies in relation to the gender balance of media organizations in some ways are very similar to those asked of other organizations. These include questions such as how many women are there in key-decision making posts in TV companies, magazines, newspapers and radio stations? Are women journalists and editors paid the same as men? In what areas or departments do women and men tend to work? Is there an equal opportunities policy?

The result has been to provide crucial data on the position of women and men in different media organizations. We know now, for example that in every region

of the world women and men generally participate in equal numbers as journalists, but not as interviewees in stories and programmes. On television news, women tend to appear in "other news" stories rather than headline or core stories. More women appear as victims of disasters and accidents than men although in reality they are no more likely to be victims. In contrast those shown in positions of power and authority are in the majority of cases men.

Other studies have looked at the images of men and women portrayed in media as diverse as film, advertisements, TV programmes, and magazines. Work has focused on the ways in which women in different regions and countries are represented through cultural stereotypes, for example the mother, the virgin, the whore or the good daughter or wife. The media, from this perspective, is seen as playing a detrimental role by providing women with a limited number of role models which ignore the diverse character of women's lives. What is needed, it is argued, are more positive role models for women.

For her study of women in the Ugandan media (1997), Linda Nassanga examined press images of women in national newspapers over several months. She categorized them and discovered that women were rarely portrayed in relation to economic or political issues. When women were quoted in newspapers as interviewees or photographed, they were mostly shown in their roles as mother or wife. They were rarely included as experts in subjects outside the home except as victims of national disasters or global development. Rural women in particular had virtually no voice, despite the fact that many women run small family holdings or are key food producers. Nassanga suggests that Ugandan editors need to become more aware of gender in relation to development issues when writing news and features.

Another gender sensitive approach to the content of the media concerns studies that have involved literally counting how many women and men are shown in particular programmes on television, or included in plays or songs. Studies have shown again and again the virtual absence of women in particular genres such as news and documentary in contrast to their presence in less valued genres such as soap operas or telenovellas. Next time you watch the television, or read a newspaper or listen to the radio do your own analysis with a headcount of the numbers of men and women included. You can take this one step further by indicating what roles men and women take when they do appear. The next step is then to consider how this relates to the variety of situations and roles men and women have in your country or region in everyday life.

One flaw with this, however, which is known as "the image of women" approach, is as author Myra MacDonald points out, the idea that what the media is there to do is to simply represent something to us which we call reality as truthfully as possible. Yet what is reality? What about the important use of fantasy and imagination in stories, song and soap operas? What about the historical and cultural context of particular stereotypes or images?

Indeed, a more recent gender sensitive approach taken to media content is in terms of taking apart and looking at both the continuity and changes in myths of femininity and masculinity. This approach stresses the importance of examining

historical changes in the ways in which men and women are talked about and written about and visually constructed. It also looks at other factors in the putting together or construction of femininity and masculinity such as class, race and sexuality. A number of studies on the construction of femininity through advertising in India suggest, for example, that the construction of femininity in terms of a traditional submissive Indian wife has given way in the past 30 years to a different construction of femininity in which urban Indian women successfully juggle professional life with domestic responsibilities. Imported American images may have contributed to these changes by introducing new possibilities. However, in some instances they can also conflict with indigenous culture and religion.

This approach has also given rise to extremely interesting studies examining aspects of the media which were previously ignored such as the way in which masculinity in many cultures is constructed through the media's portrayal of men in national sports such as football. In South Africa Larry Strelitz, for example, has examined the use of the South African rugby team in advertisement for beer. He found that ideas of masculinity were being constructed through changing ideas of a new racially inclusive South Africa (1997). Recognition of gender stereotypes often results in local initiatives to give women a greater voice. In the Pacific, for example, Fiji launched a national women's newspaper, *Fiji Women*, in 1989. The editor, Bernadette Rounds Ganilan, said: "I feel that the paper is a gentle reminder of what is being done by women in the home, workforce, and village." In the *Papua New Guinea Times*, editor Anna Solomon, includes a monthly special section, "Women's Times" as well as making a positive effort to include more news about and by women (Emberson, 1994: 191).

Finally, gender sensitive approaches to the media can contribute to our understanding of why women and men like or dislike particular cultural forms. More specifically, it may lead us to revalue aspects of popular culture traditionally seen as "women's culture" which were previously derided by critics as worthless. Cultural forms and aspects such as soap operas or telenovellas and romance tales which are, worldwide, extremely popular with women viewers and readers have now been examined in a number of studies in different countries. For example, one study rather than asking what do American soap operas such as "Dallas" do to people from non-western cultures asked what do people do with soaps such as Dallas in different cultural and domestic contexts? While the assumption was that if people watched Dallas they would want what they saw and become more materialistic, they instead treated the programme as a fantasy which they could enter into but not necessarily emulate. Some even did the opposite of what was expected and rejected American culture.

The results of such work have provided a way of understanding how men and women resist the effects of media imperialism, rather than assuming that audiences and consumers passively sit back and gobble up uncritically the corporate media fare doled out by world media players such as CNN. It has also contributed to enabling our understanding of the ways in which we use popular culture to construct our very varied identities across the world.

A classic example of this in the UK is Marie Gillespie's study of a Hindu family living in London, in which the parents and children construct differing identities through watching devotional Indian videos. Gillespie spent several years getting to know the family in order to understand their consumption of Indian videos from their perspective. This method, of talking to people about media use in their own homes, was very useful in revealing both gender and generational differences. The mother, born in India, treated the characters in the films as deities, lighting candles and making offerings before the video began. In contrast, the British born children watched the videos with less reverence, often chatting during the film. The mother attempted to use the films to assist in her traditional gender role of bringing the family together for devotional purposes.

The concern with gender in relation to the media has also highlighted the ways in which men and women in different countries use media technologies differently. Work on the cellular telephone in Australia, for example, has shown how women use it to bridge the gap between their domestic responsibilities and work outside the home. Other work in the African region has shown how older technologies such as the radio and cassette recorder are being used by and for women in rural areas in preference to other more expensive technologies such as television, or, written communication that requires basic literacy. Research in India has shown how the use of street theatre and song are more effective media than print or broadcasting in rural areas and amongst poor city dwellers if one wants to communicate with women about important issues such as our legal rights or family planning.

Some of the most useful work in this area is that which compares the different situations of several countries. Ellen Balka (1996) looked at gender issues and computer networking in six countries with different levels of industrialization and with different political systems: Canada, Spain, Poland, China, South Africa and Indonesia. She found that women tended to be excluded more than men from computer technologies because of social issues such as literacy. She suggests that when it comes to new media technologies such as e-mail and the World Wide Web, the different social positions and resources of men and women need to be taken into account to facilitate more equal access.

Overall, gender-sensitive work can provide an important contribution to our understanding of media and communications systems. It can also, perhaps more importantly, provide women and men with the possibility for new media practices by highlighting gender bias and imbalances and indicating more inclusive ways forward. As the mass media continues to construct both local and global relationships between men and women, gender sensitive work provides an approach which is, ultimately, empowering to us all.

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