

STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE: MEDIAWATCH (AND OTHER) COMPLAINT ACTIONS

Tova Wagman

Tova Wagman, qui travaille depuis quatre ans dans le département de défense des consommateurs à Évaluation-Médias à Vancouver, croit fermement que les femmes devraient militer contre le sexisme dans les médias. Dans cet article instructif, elle décrit différentes stratégies pour porter des plaintes.

The impact of media imagery and symbolism in our culture is overwhelming. We are constantly being bombarded with media images of women that are sexist, exploitive, and degrading. When we see a program on TV that really offends us, we can sometimes see how subtle sexism can be. For example, MediaWatch had several complaints about coverage of women's events in the Olympic Games. Most of them concerned the announcers' referring to women as "girls" and "young ladies."

This kind of sexism is degrading to women. When we perceive such sexism, we may get angry, sad, and may even tell a friend. Then what? Often that's as far as it goes. The program continues, or the ad gets reprinted. The station is raking in the bucks. People continue to watch, and everyone is happy. Well, not quite. Certainly the station is happy, but what happens to those of us who have to see this every time we turn on the TV or read a magazine?

Many times it seems futile to complain or to take action against sexism in the media. Often when you do call a station, for example, you get

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To whom it may concern:

My understanding of sex-role stereotyping agrees with the definition that is spelled out by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission in its report *Images of Women*. Accordingly I have something to say about:

RADIO Call letters of station _____ Program or ad _____ Day & time _____ Canadian Media only My comment is: _____	TELEVISION Call letters of station _____ Program or ad _____ Day & time _____ Canadian Media only	PRINT Name of publication _____ Item or ad _____ Edition (date) _____ Canadian Media only
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Name _____
Address _____

SEX ROLE STEREOTYPING IS:

- Failure to represent women in their full variety of ages, shapes, sizes & colours
- Failure to reflect the increasing diversity of women's lives
- Failure to portray a representative range of the occupations that women hold
- Invisibility of women in discussions of many issues

- Portrayal of women as sexual slaves and decorative objects
- Insidiousness of female experts and decision makers
- Language which assumes that everyone is male unless identified otherwise

Sex-role stereotyping is harmful to women because it dehumanizes, misrepresents and degrades them. The extreme form of this distortion is pornography.

MEDIAWATCH

National Watch
on Images
of Women
in the Media Inc.

Send one copy to MEDIAWATCH: 209 - 636 West Broadway, Vancouver, B.C. V5Z 1G2 and retain one copy for your files

transferred from department to department. No one wants to take responsibility. There are, however, ways to complain that often produce positive results. The following includes a list of strategies that suggest how to complain, where, information on MediaWatch and our complaint forms, and a complaint form success story.

Where and How To Complain

1. Letter writing: Writing letters as a form of complaint is effective for complaining about things such as store window-displays. Send a letter to the store and to a newspaper editor, American and Canadian media, school boards, etc. Make certain your letter is written in the proper letter format, as this holds more credibility. In your letter say what you're complaining about, why, and what could have been done differently. You may want to include what you're going to do, for example: "I have read *Chatelaine* for twelve years, and if this ad continues to run, I will reconsider renewing my subscription in the fall." Sign it, get a copy, and send the original off. Try to get a few people to complain with you. If you're complaining about print media, get a copy of the ad/article to send with the letter.

2. Phone Calls: If it's a local ad/article/program, etc. you are complaining about, you can phone and let them know what you think. Recently a Vancouver printing press stopped the printing of a Red Hot Video catalogue because several people called and protested. The more people who call, the better. Note the time of the call, the person's name, and what they say to you. This could come in handy later if you want to write a letter or article about the complaint as another strategy.

3. In Person: Complaining in person is good because you're right there to speak your mind. If you walk by a store that sells porn, or has an offensive manikin display, you can go right in and ask to speak to the manager. If the manager isn't there, tell the clerk what you found offensive. You may leave a note for the manager to call you or get her/his number.

4. Demonstrations: Demonstrations are a good action when you want to complain about something that has been going on for a long time unchanged. Along with others, you can get your point across and make your objection known to the public through media

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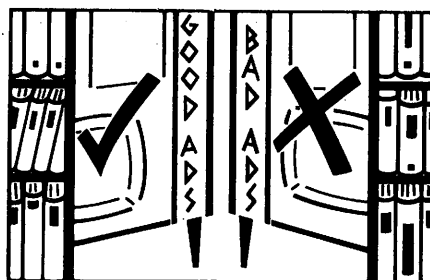


Illustration by Melanie Marder Parks

coverage. If you find something offensive in your community, call other community or women's groups you think might be interested in protesting with you. For example, when Doug Collins suggested MediaWatch and its army of snoops be raped by the Russians on CKVU television last summer, we called, among others, the Russian community centre. His comment insinuated that Russians are rapists. When organizing a demonstration:

- Be clear what you're demonstrating against.
- Think about what you want to get across to the public.
- Get together and work with others who've organized demonstrations before.
- Notify the media through press releases or by phone.
- Know in advance who in your group will talk to the media.
- Have identifiable marshalls to keep people together.
- Have petitions or printed materials (song sheets, leaflets, etc.) ready to hand out.
- If you're organizing a march, print up a map of the route to hand out (preferably beforehand).
- Be organized and loud with your protests.

5. Media Watch Complaint Forms: MediaWatch complaint forms (available in French and English) can be used to complain about any Canadian media. The complaint has a great impact on advertisers specifically, as one complaint (in their estimation) represents approximately 44 consumers. Therefore, if 10 people complain about the same ad, that's equivalent to 440 people complaining: the ad will most likely be removed. The complaint form forces the broadcasting and print industries to be accountable for their sexism. The complaint is sent to different places depending on the particular medium:

- All ads from all media go directly to the advertisers.
- TV/radio broadcast complaints go to the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) in Ottawa.
- CBC radio and TV go to the CBC.
- B.C. and other Canadian press councils sometimes receive print content complaints, as do the newspapers themselves.
- Magazine complaints go directly to the magazine.
- The Canadian Radio Television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) gets copies of almost every complaint sent out except print complaints. This includes pay TV.

Take action while the program or ad is being shown, heard, or published. Keep it current. Make sure your name and address is on each complaint form and is legible. Identify TV and radio sources by their call letters (for example, CBC, not channel 3). Include what you find offensive, and how it could be improved. A general statement, such as "that program was disgusting" will not get much consideration, but "that program was disgusting because the woman was always naked and being watched by a man..." will.

An important thing to remember when registering complaints is that you are not the only person responsible for doing something about the offensive material. The ad agency, the publisher, TV station, etc. all had something to do with distributing the content for public consumption. Somewhere along the line after you complain, someone will have to take responsibility.

For example, when MediaWatch presented briefs to the CRTC on pay TV, warning that undefined and unregulated "adult" programming would open the way to pornography on home television, the CRTC did nothing in the way of restricting the materials on First Choice/Premier Choix pay television. Now the responsibility lies in their

hands to *do* something about movies like *Vice Squad*, *Private Lessons*, and *Playboy Fridays*. They have had to propose new regulations on sexually abusive programming, and are trying to get a new clause into the Broadcasting Act passed by Parliament in order to back up this regulation. We need to pressure governments and agencies to do something about media which offend and exploit women.

A Success Story

We received an ad for Western Boot Liquidators and complaints from 16 people in Edmonton. The ad shows a young girl standing sideways wearing only a hat, boots, and underwear. Media-Watch sent off the ad and complaints with a note expressing the need for action against the ad. We received the following letter from the Advertising Advisory Board:

We agree with the complaint completely...in fact, it's being turned over directly to the Advertising Standards Council for handling under Clause 15. The ad probably will not appear again anyway as it seems to have been for a special sale. However, this kind of complaint is still valuable because it provides an opportunity to contact the advertiser and work towards ensuring this kind of message isn't used again. The Edmonton Sun and the Canadian Daily Newspaper Publishers Association are being advised too.

You can achieve success in getting media changed or removed through complaint action.

When you are launching a complaint, remember: the more people who complain about the same thing, the better; always make sure you include your name and address and that it's readable; include a copy of the ad, article, picture, etc. with the complaint (unless it's a billboard!); if you see something in the media that deserves praise, praise it.

If you would like information, complaint/comment forms, or want to read a complaint to someone and get feedback, phone MediaWatch at (604) 731-0457 or write to us: MediaWatch, 250-1820 Fir Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 3B1. We can also send you the address and phone number of the MediaWatch representative in your area.

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TRANSFORMATION SONGS

Old men wizards rune writers song singers
I can tell you about transformations

You say you have been slender sword
bridge over river eagle caught on the wind

I have been twisted out of sheep's fleece
spun on a wheel bound into blankets

I was six years a servant in a white cap—
yes missis, no missis, now can I go missis—
to a woman in a fur coat and the knuckles
of a scullery maid me twisting my fingers
for freedom

and transformed on a Saturday afternoon
into a girl taking the long high Glasgow street
in my stride—my best friend and I
in our best coats snapping our fingers
at all the young men

I have been paddle in butter churn
curds clotting thin whey squeezed out

I was nine hours a terrified animal
then transformed into a mother, stirred
by the sweet tug of a daughter at my nipple
and my husband changed into something too big
too coarse to touch her

I have been nine days sick in the belly of a ship,
sailing for a new country, a better life
for the children—me become an island,
cut off from kin and kind with no familiar hand
to reach for

I have been knitting needle darning egg
seed poked in soil buried growing

And with the children older and my husband
sick at the heart I became a supplicant
for a job, watching their clean hands tap
clean nails on paper and tell me about the experience
I did not have

I have been six years a clerk piling paper
filing folders tapping keyboards—
but for all that I can still snap my fingers
at the young men. My daughter swings down the street
with a briefcase and it buoys my heart to watch
her stride lengthen

Old men wizards song singers rune writers
I tell you about transformations

Alice Major
Edmonton, Alberta