

A COURSE IN WOMEN AND MEDIA FOR THE WOMEN'S STUDIES CURRICULUM

**Judith Scrimger and
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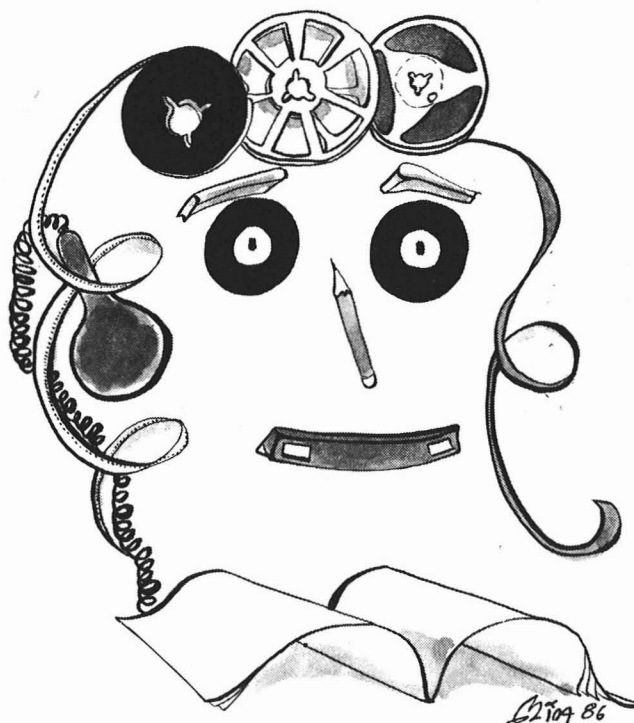
Un cours portant sur les femmes et les média est une excellente addition au curriculum des études de la femme. Celui développé en 1986 à l'Université Mount Saint-Vincent suit une démarche inter-disciplinaire et met l'accent sur la question: les média sont-ils des mécanismes pour l'oppression des femmes, ou des instruments de libération? La lecture des média à partir d'une perspective féministe offre une structure dans laquelle sont étudiés les journaux, les revues, les films, les vidéos-clips, la télé, les disques, les romans Harlequin, les feuilletons. Cet article offre des suggestions et des ressources pour celles et ceux qui voudraient développer un cours semblable.

In January of 1986 the Women's Studies Program at Mount Saint Vincent University introduced a semester-long, senior course, Women and Media. As with any course taught for the first time, there are still a number of issues of content and delivery which need resolving. In that sense, we are still developing the course; nevertheless our experience may help others planning similar courses. Although there are courses dealing with media and women being taught in sociology departments and communications programs, a quick review of calendars from across the country suggests that there are few such courses being taught in the women's studies curriculum in an interdisciplinary fashion.

The primary goal of any women and media course must be to teach students how to "read" the media. This obvious point may strike some beginning students as not so obvious, perhaps even bizarre. After all, they've been reading, watching, listening and dancing to the media since their diaper days. They have been force-fed the notion that the press is objective and that music is just entertainment. But reading, in our sense of the word, means to understand the possibilities of oppositional readings.

For example: Princess Di visits Canada; the media go wild over her slimness, hats, smiles and yachts. A feminist reading of these media effusions is surely different than that intended by the "objective coverage" of CBC, CTV and the local newspaper. And remember, different feminist theoreticians may well "read" media effusions over Princess Di in substantially different ways.

There are many aspects of oppositional readings. We can touch on them only briefly here (and in a half-unit course, it is difficult to develop various theories adequately). One is aware of what isn't there and why it isn't there. For instance, why is so much political news *not* about women? Why hasn't the press given wide coverage to the fact that some countries (Norway, for



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Illustration par Mira Falardeau

example) have placed quotas on the minimum number of each sex that must be represented in parliament? Another is the dominance of males in certain kinds of stories. For instance, we bet if you asked the average Canadian to name five people associated with the abortion debate in Canada, they would be stuck after naming Henry Morgentaler, Joe Borowski and perhaps a parish priest. Why do we recall only male leaders in the debate?

There are a variety of resources available for teaching students to read the media. Just a few of the sources we found useful included *The Disappearance of Childhood* (Neil Postman); *Ways of Seeing* (John Berger); *Feminist Collage: Educating Women in the Visual Arts* (Judy Loeb); *Signs in Contemporary Culture and Media Analysis Techniques* (Arthur Asa Berger); *Semiotics and Interpretation* (Robert Scholes); *Reading Television* (John Fiske and John Hartley); *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion* (Michael Schudson); *Women and the News* (L.K. Epstein); *Women in Media: A Documentary Sourcebook* (Maurine Beasley and Sheila Gibbons); *Women's Reflections: The Feminist Film Movement* (Jan Rosenberg); *Inside Women's Magazines* (Janice Winship); and *From the Center* (Lucy Lippard). Two sources we found particularly useful in designing the course were the *Syllabus Sourcebook on Media and Women* (Dana Densmore, Editor), published by the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, and an article "Teaching Media and Gender" by Eileen Saunders in the *Canadian Journal of Communication* (Vol. II, No. 1).

Since our course is a thirteen-week course (three class hours per week), a staggering amount of information simply must be discarded. Newspapers, magazines, films, videos, TV, records, Harlequin Romances, soap operas... any of these would make a meaty course. Indeed, any of them could generate at least two quite different courses. Take film as an example. One course might be Women in Film, a course looking at the depiction of women in movies. Another interesting course might be Women Film Directors, focusing on directors such as Margarethe Von Trotta and Liliana Cavani who are currently making their mark on international film making. In short, the selection process for a course of this nature must be quite ruthless. In our course on women and media it meant spending three hours on film. As one student put it in the course evaluation, "The strength of this course

is the diversity in that it touches on film, television, print, etc. The subject matter is intriguing and a lot of thought-provoking questions were raised. While the broad range is a plus, it is also a weakness in that discussion must be limited." A full year course would alleviate, but not solve, the problem. Indeed, media now invade our existences so insistently that a whole undergraduate career would not exhaust the material.

An important tendency to guard against is the assumption that women are passive in the face of the media. That is why we divided the course into four sections: woman as object, consumer, subject and actor. We feel that there can be no doubt that mainstream media are anti-feminist, perhaps anti-female, instruments of oppression rather than liberation. But there is no escaping the observation that the burgeoning of new media and new media outlets in the past three decades has been accompanied by a growing feminist consciousness. Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem and others are known because of the coverage (often trivial) by mainstream media. There is a dialectical process here that cannot be ignored.

We strongly recommend as pre-

requisite a course in Women's Studies. There are staggering amounts of material available these days on feminist theory, the patriarchal nature of language and institutions, and so forth. There are staggering amounts of material available on the mass media. Our prerequisites are the introductory Women's Studies course, Focus on Women, and one other Women's Studies course at the second year level. Focus on Women is an interdisciplinary course presenting a variety of perspectives on the role, function and expression of women. Students may choose from a number of second year courses in the Women's Studies program to fulfill the second prerequisite. This provided the students with the necessary preparation to apply feminist critiques to the specific material in a media course.

Students read articles such as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Susan Barrowclough's critique of *Not A Love Story*, Monica Morris's "News Blackout as Social Control;" analyzed television shows like *The New You*, *Cagney and Lacy*, *Mary*, and *General Hospital*; analyzed television and magazine advertising from perfume to accounting services; analyzed femi-



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nist newspapers and magazines; discussed feminist-made videos made by a local collective called Women and Video Exploration; and tried writing and producing their own media productions. Students, who at the beginning of the course conveyed a sense of anger fuelled by a sense of powerlessness in the face of the mass media, gained confidence in their own abilities to sift media products. A class discussion with two feminist producers of a video on economic issues, along with the students attempts to create their own productions, enabled the students to see in a very real way what it means to try to step outside the constraints of media defined by a patriarchal culture. Those students who had no understanding of the editing process were astonished by the power of editing techniques to shape material. In short, our primary goal of teaching students how to "read" media was achieved. By understanding the assumptions, purposes and practices of the mainstream media and by applying a feminist analysis to those assumptions, purposes and practices, students are no longer passive consumers. In the short run, they are less vulnerable to media manipulation; in the long run, perhaps they will contribute to changing the media.

A cautionary note is needed about the research necessary for this kind of course. Academics are trained to be vigilant searchers of library bibliographies. But there will be little scholarly material available about much of the mass media that will be shaping your students as you teach the course. You'll probably need to spend more time with *Rolling Stone* than with the *Canadian Journal of Sociology* and as much time with *MuchMusic* as with weighty tomes. Soap operas make the same point. There is a growing literature on soap operas but you're likely to embarrass yourself before your students if you know the scholarly literature and not the soap operas themselves. Catch up on them: this will be a horrible or satisfying experience depending on the extent you're into junk TV.

Choosing a textbook for this course is next to impossible. A text such as *Women and the Mass Media* (Matilda Butler and William Paisley) is popular in sociology courses but is not particularly useful given the inter-disciplinary approach of women's studies. This sort of text provides plenty of research based on content analysis to verify the limited portrayals of women by the mass media, but provides little in the

way of alternative strategies for reading the mass media. The library reserve desk will be critical to the success of the course, as will the availability of audio-visual resources and good contacts within the media community from which to draw guest lecturers. One of our most successful classes was a discussion between the students and a panel of three women journalists, only one of whom would have described herself as a feminist.

The proper attitude to many university courses might be one of disinterest (in the true meaning of that word). The premise must be different in a women and media course. That is, the information should be useful in advancing the cause of women's rights and feminism (keeping in mind that there is no room for dogmatism in the debate over what feminism means or should mean). Women have made real, if marginal gains over the past decades. But these advances should not be taken for granted. History does have a reverse gear. Traditional Marxists argued that capitalism will inevitably be replaced by a better state of affairs. Rosa Luxembourg argued that, while the contradictions of capitalism inevitably meant its destruction, socialism was not inevitable. Capitalism might be supplanted by a worse barbarism. Similarly, the gradually winning of more substantial opportunities for women should not be taken for granted, as Margaret Atwood warns us in her latest novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*.

While difficult because you are developing a course largely from scratch, a women and media course is rewarding. It is eye-opening for both student and instructor. It is intellectually challenging. Because the content is constantly changing, the instructor must be prepared to make revisions, not just from year to year but often from week to week. For example, the recent introduction of federal legislation to amend the Criminal Code and the Customs Tariff Act to create new laws against pornography, along with changes in VCR technology, means that more than one section of the course must change. Moreover, while the term 'multi-disciplinary' is becoming an academic cliché, there probably isn't a course more interdisciplinary than women and media.

There's one more fringe benefit. Most people who are watching TV are goofing off. If you're teaching mass media and women and spend a Thursday night watching *Bill Cosby*, *Family Ties*

and *Cheers*, you can always claim you're working. And in fact, you may be.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology is planning a special issue of feminist scholarship. Preference will be given to papers that develop feminist theory and/or are informed by recent feminist theoretical work. Papers will go through the normal CRSA review process and should conform to the regular journal format and length. Deadline: 15 May 1987. Send papers to:

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