

"BE TALLER, BE THINNER..."

THE PERILS OF A FEMINIST JOURNALIST

Joanne Kates

Joanne Kates examine les difficultés auxquelles elle a du faire face, en tant que journaliste féministe travaillant à l'intérieur des média canadiens. Parmi ses cibles sont: le syndrome des "experts"; la sélection des sujets et des questions qui sont considérés dignes d'attention; le mythe de l'objectivité; la perspective féministe sur ce qui est politiquement "correct" dans l'idéologie; et la censure silencieuse des média libéraux.

"Be taller, be thinner, be sparkle, be glitter, be sure." (Holly Near)

It was International Women's Year, a heady historical moment for women. Suddenly they would let you talk on the radio even if you weren't the Weather Girl flying your very own helicopter. Oh joy, a voice at last. Or so one thought. I was working on air at a Toronto radio station. A book came in for review. It was called *22 Women Talk About Their Orgasms*, and I (foolishly) assumed that I, as the only woman on-air commentator, would review it. Silly girl! One of the (male) deejays was also assuming he would review the book, because he was the in-house intellectual. We fought loud and long over the right to review the book. His chief negotiating point was: "I know more about women's orgasms than you do, because I give them."

One tactic won that battle for me: bullheadedness. I talked louder and longer and meaner than he did. And so I started to be known as a tough bitch around the office, which was mostly all right — and still is. You get fewer dates and more money. But the more profound lesson of that day had to do with the female voice on air and in print, and its lack of presumed validity. The rule is that you have to quote the experts, who are either male or, if female, have

titles (like Doctor or Professor) that render them genderless. The experts are supposed to know more about women's lives than women do, and under the system of silent censorship, writing without experts is rarely published or aired in the mass media. The exceptions are those wonderful "My baby got a movie star disease, my husband lost his job but our family survived, thanks to God and our local church" first-person accounts in the magazines. I devour them because sometimes they're the only thing that seems real, but we all know, from the way those human interest stories are titled and boxed, that they're not REAL JOURNALISM. It's always made clear that this is just a housewife sounding off, and her voice is allowed no authority.

After being fired from the radio station for being a feminist, a socialist, a bitch and bringing my dogs to work, I went to a major Canadian newspaper, where I am still allowed to write about food and restaurants. For two years they let me write a column called *Women*, during which time I found out that feminists should be seen and not heard. Let's face it: we're out of style. And once you leave the hard news pages of the newspaper, current style has a strong effect on what gets printed and aired. By definition, style changes. The only style that's deemed interesting is new style, as in the very word: "News...paper." If it's not new it's not news and if it's not news it doesn't belong in print or on the radio or on TV: that's the rule. The exceptions, such as retrospectives, exist — but only as exceptions. Taking a careful look at an issue is usually impossible because almost every issue (especially women's issues) has already been mentioned. That makes it old news, ergo unprintable. Take day care. Every time I tried to write about day care in my *Women* column, the editor would shake his head in exasperation and say: "Jesus Christ, I'm bored with day care. Can't you think of anything new to write about?" Ditto gay rights (only there it was: "I'm sick to death of the fucking faggots. They're all I ever

hear about.") And double ditto political analysis from a feminist perspective: "I'm sick to death of all your party lines," he would say, and then he would go on to remind me about the two pieces of "women's writing" worth emulating. One was the column on breasts written by Nora Ephron in *Esquire* magazine. Ephron spent about two pages lamenting her small breasts and talking, tongue always firmly placed in cheek, about how hard it had been to grow up in Middle America with small breasts. True, the piece had a certain pathos, but within strict limits: it was personal. It dealt with issues on a micro, not a macro level. And Nora made sure everything was a joke, with herself as the butt. The other piece of women's writing oft cited to me as really good was Nora Ephron's *Esquire* column on Kate Millett, which began: "Kate Millett was crying." That was terrific writing because it let us peek under Kate's hard-boiled, competent exterior and find out that she was really vulnerable. In the eternal game of journalist versus subject, Ephron scored on Millett because she gave us a Millett that (a) Millett would perhaps prefer to be kept private (that's called a scoop) and (b) a Millett we had likely never seen before. (Remember the rule of the new.) That made my editor salivate. Screw Millett's litcrit and political thoughts. Show us tears. Let women be girls and they're welcome in our pages. It was a knack I found impossible to acquire: I was like a baby learning to crawl. They crawl backwards for a long time, but once they get the hang of forward locomotion, they never want to go backwards again. It wastes too much time.

The other big problem was (and remains, in my work as a journalist) my lack of objectivity. The myth much cherished in every mass media editorial office I've frequented is that a journalist approaches every story with fresh eyes. This pleasant liberal fiction pictures the journalist as objective, a squeaky clean *tabula rasa*, a blank slate with a brain. We are supposed to arrive at the scene of

a story with a million questions and no answers. Being able to keep your distance from a subject is one of the most critical criteria for success as a journalist. When an editor is unhappy with a story, a favorite criticism is: "She got too close to the material." Writers who care too much about their subject, who are obviously rooting for the people they portray, do not prosper. We are supposed to examine both sides of every question and give them equal time in print. Bias is bad. *Ergo* feminism is bad. After all, it's a bias, isn't it?

The painful germ of truth in what they say is that I often write with the Feminist Central Committee sitting on my shoulder. As one of the few representatives of feminism to crack the mass media, I feel responsible to women and to our struggles. And that feeling, which is kissing cousin to guilt, is counter-productive to good writing. Which is not to say that I renounce my feminist bias; I swear by it, because the kind of writing I believe in is passionate and committed and caring. But if you're scared of how the Central Committee will grade your work, its creativity is stillborn in the labor room.

The delicate balance also depends on a writer's relationship with her community. If other feminists can say to a writer: "It's great that you're writing and we don't expect you to carry the correct feminist line," then we're fine. I've had lots of wonderful support from the women's community. But there is also the expectation that the professional journalists will carry the flag for everybody; and when we don't say it all and say it right we have to apologize to the sisterhood. Getting in trouble with the very community to which you look for support is alienating, and I suspect that this correct-linism is one reason why a lot of pro-woman journalists hide their principles under a bushel: it's just too daunting to try to get it right, so why bother trying at all?

As a journalist, I sometimes think of myself as working in an ideology factory. My job is to give readers a way to see their world. This is not exactly a popular view in the newsrooms of the nation. Most of the editors I've worked for seem to be liberal fundamentalists: that is, they take liberal Gospel to be the Truth, and they clutch to their breasts the liberal tenet that says journalists are objective and without ideology. Funny how ideology becomes invisible when it meshes with your own! So a writer who strays too far from liberalism is seen to be ideological, i.e.

biased, i.e. bad. If this rule were stated everything would be simpler. But it never is. I always come away from rewrite meetings feeling that I'm an inadequate writer. But after sixteen years of hearing the same criticisms and yet getting all the writing work I want, I have come to believe that "bad writing" is, in many cases, a code phrase for "the wrong bias." The writer (and of course the reader) has an easier time of it in Europe, where most mass publications are frankly ideological. In France, for instance, everybody knows that *Liberation* is socialist, *Le Monde* is genteely leftish and *Figaro* is right wing. Writers and readers gravitate to the bias of their choice and nobody has to play the game of faking objectivity — which to my way of thinking is as boring as faking orgasms.

Here in the land of the invisible ideology my perennial question is: at what level are the powers aware of the

world view they're creating? Maybe liberalism is so efficient that even the publishers think we've all got 100 per cent free speech, as long as we dot our "i's" and cross our "t's" well enough. Certainly nobody I've ever worked for was a conscious part of a conspiracy to protect the system. All the editors I've worked for sincerely believed in their critiques.

Noam Chomsky, the prominent American social critic, has said publicly that during the Vietnam War he was blacklisted by the *New York Review of Books* and *The New York Times*, because his views on the war were unpopular. (When liberals were saying the U.S. ought to get out of Vietnam because it was an unwinnable war, Chomsky said the U.S. was an aggressor against South Vietnam, and this was a morally wrong trespass.) Chomsky talked about this on CBC Radio's *Morningside* recently and Peter



Cartoon by Christine Roche

Gzowski, Canada's nice guy journalist incarnate, howled with incredulity and got mad at Chomsky for seeing conspiracies behind every bush. Gzowski is not alone in this response. Whenever I've talked about the invisible ideology in Canadian journalism, the word "conspiracy" has been dragged out. It's a great way to make leftists and feminists look paranoid. But there really is someone following us. The silence censorship of the liberal media works so well partly because it is invisible: I don't believe that anybody, editors or publishers, makes conscious political decisions about what to print and what to refuse. The publishers of papers like the *Toronto Sun* may occasionally say: "Let's keep Commie creeps out of this paper," but basically they don't have to be so overt, because editors don't get hired unless they're attitudinally correct (i.e. liberal and not too screamingly feminist) so nothing ever has to be stated. The system trains you both in terms of skills and politics as you go along, and if it can't train you, it spits you out.

Of course there are exceptions to this rule. After all we do live in a democracy, where free speech is sufficiently cherished to be necessary. Every paper needs a Michelle Landsberg, June Callwood or a Doris Anderson. The mere fact that most of us recognize these three names underlines the special place they occupy in the mass media.

Take a look at the cover of most glossy magazines and you know what they're selling inside. If there's a woman on the cover she is usually young, gorgeous, hair by some guy, makeup by some other guy, pouty red lips open just enough to suggest... She's a consumable object, just like all the other attractive objects in the ad pages. Magazines survive economically not from readers' money but from ad revenue. The marriage between feminism and advertising is rocky at best. Let's face it, serious discussion of what's screwed up in the world doesn't mesh well with the glitz and the gloss of the Champagne lifestyle that ads suggest. When advertisers get nervous, publishers get nervous and then there's trouble.

So in magazines the news usually has to be good. A few years ago a national Canadian women's magazine asked me to do a story on what it was like to be a woman working at a high level in the government. So off I went to Ottawa to interview some mandarins in skirts. These are women who are not famous for their radical views. Nonetheless, when I was called in for the re-write

meeting, the manuscript had been blue-pencilled by the editor. "Too combative... Too combative... Too combative" was the note up and down the margins. I had forgotten the cardinal (covert) rule of magazine writing: better a pretty fiction than an ugly truth. If you know where your bread is buttered, you'll never forget that girls just wanna have fun.

My latest censor has been *The New York Times*, yes, the granddaddy of them all. In sixteen years of full time writing, I have always had nagging doubts about my competence. The way we internalize oppression is to ask ourselves: Is it my fault? Is the problem really censorship, or am I just not a good enough writer? So when the brass ring came within my reach last year, in the form of an offer to write the *Hers* column (a weekly essay of personal opinion) in *The New York Times* for six weeks, I decided that I had finally arrived, and that life would be sweeter at the top. I asked the editors of the column what topics they wanted. Anything, they said, write about whatever you want. Do you really mean that, I asked. They insisted that they did. You mean I can write about sex? About my abortions? They urged me on.

I wrote about sex. I wrote about abortions. The editors of the *Hers* column loved the essays. But mysteriously, every week they would call me twenty-four hours before Sex or Abortion was to run, and ask for a fast replacement. It took four weeks of this bizarre routine before the senior editor of the section called me and apologized. She said that both of those columns had been killed by a "conservative senior editor upstairs" who hated what he saw as my "feminist rhetoric." Is it my writing that's the problem, I asked through my tears. "No," she said, "it's your ideas."

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BLACK FLIES FOR THE CRITIC

This southern gentleman was so so afraid of being bitten, the thought of something about to bite him, he would not now

leave the lodge. Though the loon he had hoped was shimmering on water was. Though the frogs he wanted to record were chortling again, balloon throats swelling.

We told him tales of deer, hides buried deep in water, men driven mad. These few flirting about his head were nothing. They hadn't learned to bite yet.

The sudden spring heat he relished, that wilted us like trilliums, had bred the flies the evening before when he had skipped out, psychopomp to the bullfrog chorus he led with his bullrush brandished.

On his way home to the city, he picniced above the buzz of traffic, lamenting that

women poets in Canada were respected by male peers only when bitches or mad. Or, he snickered, beautiful.

I conjured flies now but we were already too far south.

Penny Kemp
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