

THE POLITICAL IS VERY PERSONAL: A REPORT ON THE 1985 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF MEDIA WATCH

Judith Posner

**This is dedicated to all my new found friends at Media Watch*

Fondé en 1981, "Evolution-Média" se décrit comme "un organisme dédié à l'amélioration du portrait des femmes et des filles dans les médias par l'élimination des images sexistes et pornographiques et par son encouragement à la promotion d'images qui reflètent l'évolution des rôles des femmes dans

la société canadienne." Judith Posner, nouveau membre du conseil d'administration, a assisté dernièrement à leur assemblée générale annuelle qui eut lieu sur l'île Bowen, près de Vancouver.

It was April. Classes were over, but my grades weren't in. And I was recently invited to sit on the Board of Media Watch – which meant attending their annual meeting. This year it was held at a lodge

on Bowen Island, off Vancouver. It sounded great, so I said I would go.

In fact, I was looking forward to it. Beautiful lush Vancouver. Away from job and family. Sitting around with a bunch of activist women all concerned with the media – my obsession. It was all too perfect. I was not disappointed.

As soon as I got to the airport, I knew I was going to be with kindred spirits. I knew none of the women beforehand,



Illustration: Jane Northey

save the Ontario representative Jane Farrow. I didn't even know the Director, Sylvia Spring, who fast talked me into joining over the phone, and got me so involved in a conversation that by the time I met her I felt as though I'd known her for years. Luckily for me, Jane Farrow was on my flight and we fast talked some poor middle-aged businessman into moving so we could chat on the way there. She filled me in on the organization and what it does and, more importantly, on group gossip or who was who.

Media Watch is a national women's organization devoted to monitoring and improving the image of women in the media. It was founded in 1981 to provide a voice directed to advertisers, broadcasters and government. It has also presented briefs to the CRTC and has been actively engaged in educating the public about sexist imagery. The organization is currently distributing its own massive monitoring report on the Canadian media which should have a significant impact on the forthcoming Fall CRTC hearings in Ottawa. And in the coming year – International Year of the Youth – Media Watch will be focusing on teenagers, getting into the schools, and creating educational materials dealing with media literacy (for example, a videotape of rock videos).

While I had heard of the organization and I have frequently distributed their infamous complaint forms after doing my own media presentations, I had never been in formal contact with them. I had heard rumours, of course, most of them unkind, from people in the advertising industry who dismiss most feminists as 'fringe.' (I should add here that I have spent the last few years sitting on the Advertising Advisory Board as a representative from the feminist community. Although I personally learned a lot about the industry and how it works, politically speaking, I was more than slightly disillusioned and quite prepared to hit the streets.) Even one female academic (who shall remain nameless) rumoured that they were involved with the burning of the Red Hot video stores, which is untrue. So much for apocryphal stories!

When Jane and I arrived at the Vancouver airport some more of the Eastern contingent (Montreal, etc.) had arrived on another flight and the introductions started; following this, twenty more of us arrived in various stages at the Media Watch Vancouver office and we began to

break into groups to grab a bite and compare notes about who we were, what we did, and where we came from. Then we all headed out to the Ferry around dinner time. We had a light snack and after a few formal introductions, some of us headed for the lodge's newly constructed hot tub. The latter turned out to be the favourite meeting place, rain or shine! And as everybody knows, in Vancouver it usually rains.

Breakfast was at 8:00. And while I'm on the topic of food: it was also appropriately chosen – and avoided standard male meat and potato fare. A vegetarian menu was even provided. And there was hardly any smoking! Meetings began at 9:00 and continued through the day, sometimes into the evening. On Day 1 we started with success stories related either to Media Watch or general feminist activities. Everyone related some small positive experience from the past year. And so it began.

The next four days were filled with a lot of laughter, tears, hugs, and hot tubbing in the mist. I knew things were going to be pretty interesting when, on the first day at lunch, I sat next to a lesbian who genuinely asked "How do you cope with being a feminist and being married and having kids, etc." We became great friends after I nearly choked on my spinach salad! Evening events ranged from skit nite (which allowed us to do our own version of mini pads ads for men) to positive image nite in which women shared magazines, videotapes, etc. We also viewed Media Watch's own educational tapes dealing with sexist advertising as well as slide collections by various members. (I had actually brought a copy of my poster exhibit on violent images in advertising to be left with the main office for public exhibits and presentations. Everyone was very appreciative.) There were complaints that there was not much (any!) free time during the day to just walk along the beach, and it was true – but the group only gets together once a year and there was a lot on the agenda. Events ranged from small discussion groups dealing with political strategies or various media problems to meetings of the whole group (nearly 30) which looked at budget, the soon-to-be released monitoring study, and even topics as general as liberation *within* the movement.

This particular session, which was the highlight for many in terms of breaking down barriers, focused on the way in which we are all members of various

minority groups even within our gender caste, and the ways in which we stigmatize one another. We focused especially on the lesbian issue as an archetype of the way in which we work against one another. Francophone and working class women also expressed their distress and disappointment with other women. One woman confided over lunch that she was tired of being discriminated against for wearing make-up and posh clothes. There was a lot of joking towards the end of the meetings about "politically correct" behaviour, culminating in a hairy leg contest in the hot tub. It certainly was very upbeat for me to be with committed feminists who not only did not insist upon imposing their dogma on others, but were even willing to joke about it. All in all, it was an incredible relief, to just be.

In addition, we also had a small revolution within our midst – par for the course. Without going into all the details, it is fair to say that hostilities were eventually healed with lots of crying and hugging, just as you would have expected. The whole weekend I kept reflecting upon how different this would all have been if it were a mixed gender group. Different is an understatement! (It is interesting to note, however, that the uprising did have to do with leadership and power and all that stuff with which we women have had some trouble dealing.)

But clearly the most wonderful part of the meeting, besides some solid information exchange (and of course the hot tub), was spending such an intense time with feminists of all ages from across Canada, including the Yukon and North West Territories. It was a radically different experience from the comparatively homogeneous feminist ghettos in which we all tend to get stuck.

So after fond farewells I came home. I should have been exhausted, having stayed up 'til all hours in the hot tub, chatting and strategizing, but I wasn't. In fact, I was high for a week. Usually I hate meetings because they require me to hold so much of myself in abeyance that they are literally quite painful. But the Media Watch AGM is an experience I will never forget. And from the sound of things at our last "confessional" circle – neither will the others.

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