Mirror Image

A Reflection on Mainstream Media and its Effect on Women
In the United States an average YOUNG ADULT spends approximately THIRTY-ONE hours a week watching TV, SEVENTEEN hours listening to music, THREE hours watching movies, FOUR hours reading magazines and TEN hours a week online. When all of these factors are ADDED UP together, that is an average of about TEN hours a day spent on different kinds of MEDIA.¹

With so much time, ENERGY and MONEY spent consuming mass media, the question is not whether or not we are AFFECTED by what we see and hear or read and watch, but HOW we are affected and what that means FOR SOCIETY as a whole.

MY GENERATION was born during the technology boom of the mid-1990s. We witnessed the SHIFT IN SOCIETY from magazines and books to the Internet and television. Most of us barely remember a time before Google and Facebook, Skype and text messages, before Apple computers and DVR TV. With the advent of HIGH TECH DEVICES, such as iPads, smartphones and portable computers, endless Internet access and the 24/7 news cycle, INFORMATION is at our fingertips in seconds. Our WORLD continues to become smaller and smaller as technology WIDENS its reach.

I developed this Zine because of my EXPERIENCES with mainstream media. I GROW UP watching television, going to movies and surfing the Internet. I have no doubt that my own VIEWS and BELIEFS have been greatly shaped by what I see on TV, read on the Internet or in magazines and watch in movies. I have always been interested in the ROLE media plays in our society. Our culture is a REFLECTION of what we see in mass media. At the same time mass media has the POWER to be innovative, to guide society in a new DIRECTION.

The role of WOMEN in media is an issue that has always interested me. Popular culture helps TEACH young girls what it MEANS to be a woman, how to ACHIEVE SUCCESS as a woman, and what is EXPECTED of women. However the messages are not always positive and in some cases can even be DAMAGING. Women are still UNDERREPRESENTED in mass media, especially behind the scenes, STEREOTYPED in TV shows and movies, and OVER-SEXUALIZED in advertising and magazines. This can have a negative impact on young women's SELF-ESTEEM, BODY IMAGE and SELF-WORTH.

People are always saying things are getting BETTER for women in media. But many STUDIES are showing that things are either UNTANGLED or getting WORSE from year to year. The Internet, television, movies, magazines and news are generally the most ACCESSIBLE forms of media and will be the FOCUS of this zine. I plan to explore the GAINS of women in media, the STATISTICS of women in prominent media positions, and the STRUGGLES women continue to face to be REPRESENTED.
Influence of Media

Women have a particularly interesting history with media starting as far back as half a century ago. In the 1950s media was used to push women who had been working to support their families during World War II back into the home. In *The Problem that Has No Name*, Betty Friedan discusses this redomestication phenomenon and its effect on the modern woman.¹

During this time women were bombarded with images of what it meant to be a middle-class, successful women. They were supposed to be feminine, support their husbands, care for their children and live happy and quaint domestic lives.

These messages were perpetuated and supported by the mainstream media. Magazines taught women how to look, dress and act in order to attract men and keep them interested one they were married. Newspapers discouraged women from entering the workforce, insisting that the best place for women was at home. The popularization of TV shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *I Love Lucy* which portrayed happy housewives who stayed at home while their husbands worked also played a role in this movement.

In the 1970s the feminist movement began to take off and thus started the second wave feminist movement. Women utilized the same media outlets that had focused on keeping them at home to spread their messages. They wrote books and magazines, organized meetings and marches and were able to influence political decisions. *Roe vs. Wade*, *Title IX* and the formation of the National Organization of Women are just some of the accomplishments women achieved during this time.⁶

The women's liberation movement began to lose momentum in 1980s. During this time the media industry was deregulated and large media conglomerates began to take the place of smaller network companies. These largely conservative media companies began to depict feminists in a negative light. Tension in the feminist movement eventually led to the end of the second wave.

These huge corporations are largely in control of the information we see in the media, specifically on television and news broadcasting networks, today. Their influence and power shape the messages we receive and reflect and influence the beliefs and values our culture holds. The Third wave feminists are utilizing the resources of the media to spread their message of choice and equality for women.
Ode to the Internet

There's something about anonymity that seems to affect people's ability to censor their thoughts and behave like decent human beings. Maybe it is the protection of the computer screen that allows people to spew forth their most vile and cruel opinions with no thoughts to how their words will affect the people on the receiving end. Or maybe they would act like that in real life too, given the opportunity. Either way people seem to forget that on the other side of that computer screen sits a real life person with feelings.

There are several ways in which hateful comments manifest themselves, including, but not limited to, racism, ageism and homophobia. But perhaps one of the more subtle, less talked about and more easily dismissed of the “isms” is sexist comments and attitudes towards women online.

These comments extend far beyond the occasional “bring me a sandwich” joke your friends may post on Facebook or Twitter. They delve into something much more dangerous and damaging psychologically and emotionally. Women online are threatened, their security shaken; they are demeaned and sexually harassed; they are chased away from forum discussions, fansites and sometimes even their own websites.

This is especially true for women bloggers, writers and columnists, who receive a range of hate-mail from gendered insults such as “slut” “bitch” “whore” or “cunt” to sexually explicit content threatening rape or death. This phenomenon known as trolling is not new to the Internet, but lately people seem to be taking it to new and terrifying levels. It is especially scary when trolling is taken a step further to stalking or in-person harassment. Yet when women dare to complain about it, they are told to stop being so emotional and not to take it so seriously. After all, everyone gets attacked on the Internet.

But in this case it's not so much the attacks but the nature of the attacks. Revealing yourself as a woman online subjects you to what is considered “normal” Internet abuse as well as abuse specifically reserved for women. And when intersectionality comes into play, when different social categories such as sexuality, race and social class are combined with gender for instance, that opens women up to even more hatred. This is the reason why when I am online, I always make sure to keep my gender and race as ambiguous as possible.

It is a level of aggressiveness that most straight, white cis-men will never have to experience online. And yet they still continue to tell women to either toughen up or log off. As if simply leaving the comments unacknowledged changes the fact that they still exist, that people out there still think them and that there is a cultural backing that says that kind of behavior is ok, or at least above being reprimanded.

As a result women have begun to form their own websites and communities in order to interact with more like-minded people in a safer environment. Websites like Jezebel and Feministing give women the space to talk about issues that concern or interest them without fear of being harassed or threatened online. More and more websites have taken to banning commenters that use derogatory language to belittle other people. Still with so many hours a day spent surfing the web it is almost impossible to ignore all the misogynistic, racist, homophobic content out there.

Women are left with two options, ignoring the comments or actively fighting against them. Neither is a great solution but until the tone changes, they are the best ones.
The ABC’s of Reality TV

Audience
These days it seems like anyone can become a celebrity, that everyone wants to be a celebrity and that reality shows are handed out to unknown people like candy. You only need to do something interesting one time in order to be handed several million dollars, your own show and more fame than you know what to do with. So if everyone is becoming a reality TV celebrity, then who has time to watch all these shows? It turns out millions of people flock to their TVs to watch these shows every week. Reality TV is particularly influential to young boys and girls.

Binaries
If you watch any reality television show, you realize that there are different expectations for male and female behavior. Neither gender is portrayed favorably but women especially are given a bad reputation. Women are shown to be catty, shallow and self-absorbed. If these women are competing for something, a recording or modeling contract or the approval of a man, they can be downright mean, hostile and abusive to one another. In certain reality shows women’s main aspiration seems to be looking attractive in order to beat out other women and win the affections of a man.

Camera-Ready
Studies have shown that increased viewing of reality TV can lead to self-esteem and body issues in girls. The women portrayed in these shows often exert enormous amounts of time and effort to maintain their looks. They are often dressed in expensive clothing, they wear plenty of make-up and many have undergone various techniques and surgeries to perfect their bodies. Women on these shows are expected to “do” gender by appearing and acting overly feminine.

Drama
One of the main reasons people tune into reality television shows is to witness the occasional showdown between the characters. Unfortunately the drama often occurs between the women featured in these shows. Whether they are fighting with their fists or their words, women are shown to be confrontational, spiteful and petty when they come together. According to reality TV there is no age limit for this kind of behavior. Shows like Dance Moms and Toddlers and Tiaras depict mothers engaging in the same childish behavior that is often found in young women. The type of behavior that women are supposed to grow out of by the time they reach adulthood.

Escape
Another reason people watch reality television is a chance to escape from the real world. The problem is that many people are being influenced by reality TV despite knowing that most of what they’re seeing is not real. Perhaps the biggest issue concerning reality TV is that it offers a very narrow view of the human experience. Minorities, including women, people of color and gay, lesbian, transsexuals, are often stereotyped and portrayed negatively. While reality TV can be entertaining, the effect it has on society, especially young boys and girls, is troublesome. Especially because there are few other programs to counter the messages they are receiving.
Sex sells. The proof is on every magazine cover, in every television show and on every movie poster. The proof is a porn industry worth over $13 million that produces a porn film every 30 minutes. The proof is a handful of studies that show that children, specifically boys, are viewing porn at younger and younger ages. The proof is all over the Internet, which has made porn not only accessible, but sometimes unavoidable. Sex, or the suggestion of sex, is a powerful image in America. It is also a topic of great debate and controversy.

Feminists have been debating porn, sex and sexuality and the role it plays in the women's movement since the second wave. Sex positive feminists believe that expressing sexuality in healthy and consensual ways, whether that is through sex work or in the privacy of one's home, can be empowering. On the other hand radical feminists believe that certain aspects of female sexuality, such as pornography or submissive sex acts, are symptomatic of an oppressive society that only values women for their bodies. The sexuality debates, as they are called, are still ongoing and continue to be a source of tension within the third wave movement.

The problem arises in mass media when a woman's sexuality becomes her only path to empowerment, or when movies are more interested in objectifying women than writing complex stories for them.

In 2008 a study of some of the top movies of the year, including The Dark Knight, Iron Man and Twilight, showed that men had 67% of the speaking roles while women only had 33%. Women were five times more likely to wear provocative clothes than men (26% to 5%) and were more likely to appear partially or completely naked (24% to 8%). In 2011, the number of women working as directors, producers writers and editors increased slightly to 18% of the people working on the top 250 domestic grossing films. However the number of speaking roles for women remained the same.

The numbers were even worse for teenagers who were more likely to wear revealing or sexy clothes than women 21-39 and just as likely to appear semi or completely naked in movies. They were also more likely to be called attractive by another person in the movie than women older than them. Overall 56% of women in movies had comments made about their looks. In comparison, only 24% of men had comments made about their appearance. The gap is even wider for television and advertisements.

So not only do women have fewer speaking roles, but for the most part they are only there to display their bodies. Despite the fact that women make up half of all movie goers, and that movies featuring and supported by women such as Twilight and Bridesmaid can make a lot of money, advertisers and movie executives still insist that young men are the target movie-watching demographic. And what do young men like? If Hollywood is anything to go by, they like gun fights, explosions, men achieving power, success and fame and sexy, quiet women.

So all of this talk about empowerment and whether or not women can find it by being sexy seems kind of moot in this aspect of media. Women may feel empowered, but in reality they're not in power. They're not writing, directing or producing these movies. They're not starring in them or even speaking much in them.

If these women are empowered by this display of sexuality, then what are they empowered to do? Be sexy? That should-