Gender, Sexuality and Violence: Media Representations
Panel for the Media Democracy Day 2010

Vancouver Public Library, November 6, 2010.

Sponsored by Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies, Simon Fraser University

Chaired by Kathi Cross (GMMP), Jen Sung (Out in Schools), Marsha Newbery (Women in View) and Mary Lynn Young (Sing Tao School of Journalism, UBC).

A capacity crowd of 90 listened to Kathi Cross (Director, Global Media Monitoring Project and lecturer, School of Communication) present the dismal results of a day of monitoring the media in 108 countries to analyse the representation of women. Women appeared as just 24% of the subjects, an incidence only slightly higher (30%) in Canada. Such comparative underrepresentation has plateaued in North America over the past 40 or 50 years, in her view, suggesting there is a very real glass ceiling. Dr. Cross argued vigorously that visibility, framing and qualitative representations of women need to be researched to combat systemic media sexism. As long as the world of news is predominantly male, the dream of media democracy is hollow (See http://www.waccglobal.org/component/content/article/2421:women-see-modest-gains-in-world-news-media-portrayal-coverage-still-betrays-significant-gender-bias-.html)

Marsha Newbery (Director of Women in View, a Canadian independent coalition of women in film) reinforced the data on systemic underrepresentation presenting the results of all the family (PG) rated films released in Hollywood since 2006 collected by the Geena Davis Institute in the US in order to lobby the big production companies. Just 29% of all the characters are women, and there has been no change in 20 years. The picture worsens. Just 10% of all family films had directors who are women and not even 3% of the cinematographers. Even more interesting was the exploration of the question: does it matter who makes it? On sets where there are women screenwriters, there is much more gender balance on the screen. Without that presence, one in four women in family films are depicted in sexually revealing clothing, reinforcing stereotypical expectations. Newbery talked about the recent Sex, Money, Media conference as a way to bring together those women working alone on the production sets to develop an agenda for action (www.womeninview.ca/).

Jen Sung talked about the repression of heteronormative assumptions, and her work with the Out in School project mobilizing youth to create a safer space for gay, lesbian and queer sexuality in the media. Those who walk in the margins continue to suffer violence (drinks spiked) and encounter daily the reality that homophobia kills. Fully 70% of gay youth see their schools as unsafe. One in four experience physical harassment. Out in Schools, established in 2004 has produced programs
reaching 18,000 youth in the Lower Mainland (http://www.outinschools.com.) Their extremely exciting competition sponsoring youth made public service announcements (coming up April 22, 2011) is seeking contributions from more females. A sample award winning PSA was played, focusing on the need to overcome the silent bystander effect. Lamestream media produces lesbian porn for the male gaze, heightening the daily risk of assaults.

Mary Lynn Young presented her very topical anger at the outcome of the Norman Webster awards where yet again the lifetime achievement award went to a man. Pointing to the plenary sessions of Media and Democracy Day’s lineup, she noted the tendency of the democratic media movement to also skew white, middle aged and mail. Just 2 in 21 years of the Lifetime Norman Webster awards have gone to women (Moira Farrow and Vicki Gabereau): conclusive proof that the newsroom culture remains male, despite the fact that 60-70% of students in journalism today are women. Dr. Young with Dr. Alison Beale, SFU, will have a new study published in the spring of 2011 that will provide more information on the practice in the newsrooms in Canada. Dr. Young reminded us of the history of ‘lesser’ gender roles in news production dates back to the tradition of the sob sister in generating crime news reporting, covering the human angle in crime, and helping their male colleagues by exploiting higher trust among witnesses. The contemporary sob sister role was repeated, subject to historical amnesia, when the National Post unveiled Cindy Blatchford’s beat as ‘innovative’. In Young’s view, we need to understand the structural dynamics of sexism in the news, and remember the past.

The panel concluded with a tribute to Gaye Tuchman, who warned against the symbolic annihilation of alternative constructs of democratic media, and recommended activists connect with the International Women’s Media Foundation. A lively question period challenged that democratic media critique also speak to the traps of conventional expectations of masculinity in media reproduction, and called for new feminist parody of the Drag King, not the Drag Queen to respond to new theories about the fluidity of sexuality in trans theory.

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