Commentary

Sex, Money, Media: A Tribute and Political Reflection

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Ellen Riordan & Eileen Meehan's Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media (2001) haunts the imagination of many women drawn to the study of communication today. Their edited volume is the best-known comprehensive overview of feminist political economy in Anglo-American scholarship from the past 10 years and includes the work of several Canadian feminist scholars. The volume identified profound problems in regulatory regimes, audience research, and employment advocacy that remain largely unanswered to this day.

When filmmaker and activist Rina Fraticelli brought her organization Women in View to Simon Fraser University's School of Communication in 2008 as a potential partner, she was looking for a catalyst to revive discussions of a glass ceiling in the media and persistent (and new) problems in the representation of women. She was alarmed by the silence in Canadian policy research and failure of policy advocacy to raise any serious gender critique of existing film and TV institutions, interests, or actors. A steering committee, including Fraticelli, Marsha Newbery (a documentary filmmaker and doctoral candidate at SFU), and the authors (both SFU Communication professors), Sara Diamond (president of the Ontario College of Art and Design University), Beth Seaton (adjunct professor in women's studies at the University of British Columbia), and over 50 other advisors, pulled together an international conference in Vancouver October 14 to 16, 2010, attracting 170 attendees from the media, academy, and not-for-profit sector. The conference won seed funding from SFU's School of Communication and Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology, British Columbia Film, the City of Vancouver, the Centre for Policy Studies on Culture and Communities at SFU, and the Ontario College of Art and Design University. Sara Diamond also led a successful application to win Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada conference funds for the digital-themed panels.

Formal buy-in from the major policy institutions—the Department of Canadian Heritage, CBC, or Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission—was never achieved. However, many organizations ultimately provided support for

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specific industry panels on a pre-conference day of master classes, which drew in Telefilm, Shaw, Super Channel, the Directors Guild of Canada, the National Film Board, and the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) in modest but highly leveraged deployment. Both an early call for papers and later invitations for academic panels and strategic papers ensured solid representation of some of the most active academic researchers in the field. The representation of young media creators, labour organizers, and business and legal experts was strong, and it was matched by the presence of women in positions of editorial and regulatory influence in Canada. And the buzz the conference generated—the high—was absolutely exceptional. Stated American documentary producer and academic Alexandra Juhasz (Pitzer College, California): “[A]n astoundingly diverse and powerful group of women—with high-ranking representatives from industry, finance, unions, the national government, technology, academia, the arts, and non-profits—joined for two days, with the primary goal of making sense of (and providing action items towards changing) the shockingly regressive rates of women’s participation in, and representation through, media.”

Behind the scenes, the organizing committee had struggled to achieve this unprecedented but necessary mix of creative, government, and academic participants. The volunteer administrative time involved in achieving and co-ordinating participation from all these sectors was almost overwhelming, and it was frequently noted by the team how much work had to go into raising relatively modest funding, compared with other areas of public-interest advocacy. Work such as this generates excitement and renewed collective purpose, but it also raises the already high expectations women have of each other, and it can burn out the volunteer or underpaid labour devoted to it. In this respect, despite having an institutional home at SFU, the labour conditions of producing the conference mirrored those confronting female media producers.

The revelations of the conference, however, were staggering. First, there was the lack of awareness of the current empirical situation of women in the field. Most young female producers are too busy keeping their heads down to know what is going on in the field, and many are understandably reluctant to be identified as feminists. Conference organizers pulled together three areas of current quantitative empirical work to “liberate” the data and provide activist talking points. The Canadian national report of the Global Media Monitoring Project (a major international survey of women in the news in over 140 countries around the world, was released about the same time as the conference, and it provided insight into how the low representation of women as news subjects (some 30%) has not budged over 40 years. Second, Marilyn Burgess’ (2010) Needs Assessment for Gender-Based Impact Analysis of the Canadian Feature Film Policy, prepared for the Department of Canadian Heritage and Telefilm Canada, highlighted the grim reality that women are significantly underrepresented in above-the-line, higher-status, better-remunerated, and “core” culture-/content-determining positions in our media industries. Female filmmakers receive less than 14% of public-sector media investment. A mere 11% of the Directors Guild members are women. The data that hit the national media (albeit in a typical fly-by way), however, was a convenient antidote to the assumption that the battle was won when Kathryn Bigelow won an Academy Award for The Hurt Locker in 2009. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in
Media also released a major U.S. survey (Smith & Choueiti, 2010) of the last 100 PG-rated feature films released in the past five years, which obliterated any arguments of progress in representation: for example, it noted the percentage of key fictional characters by gender, which has remained unchanged for the last 30 years, and the remarkably high percentage of female characters in the PG category whose attire is sexualized.

The lesson is that we need to tell this kind of story of systemic inequity again and again. Meanwhile, the inevitable difficulty of balancing depressing and upbeat news prevails. Young women want to see stories of progress. And they do exist. So we need to increase the profile of research on gender and media work. Why? There is a strong relationship between 1970s-era agendas of job and wage equity in creative and editorial positions of control and the persistent gendered structural inequities that studies of precarious labour in the media reveal 40 years later. There is an ideological block constructing equity as a passé policy priority, a characterization that is patently not borne out by the research. Yet the disregard for quantitative data in our discipline has been strong, and the engagement of academics in generating policy-based evidence has been weak. The dissolution of second-wave feminist organizations such as MediaWatch has ended the pressure on the regulatory system to monitor representation, and in Canada no new NGOs like the U.S.-based Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media have emerged. Finally, when the federal government’s Ministry of Canadian Heritage pays the costs of industry data monitoring to produce annual reports by big-ticket consultants for the newly renamed Canada Media Fund (a merger of the former Canadian Film Fund and the Canada New Media Fund), why is the data not presented by gender?

We know that Canadian women direct, work behind the scenes on, and act in feature films at a lower rate than men, yet have more training. They less often apply to federal funding envelopes for support, they receive less support, and when they do get it, they tend to do so through programs that are “cultural” rather than “commercial.” Their wages are significantly lower than those of their male counterparts, and more women retire in a condition of penury. A British Columbia study of professionals has revealed that women workers report they are disadvantaged with respect to access to professional networks and visibility at festivals and in marketing. Two thirds of B.C. women working in above- or below-the-line occupations in the media report facing gender-based discrimination. And a U.K. study of the impact of the recession on film-makers has found that women are twice as likely as men to leave the field after the age of 35. Bulimia has become a pattern, as has new, short-term contract working. Why is this story never heard?

The second surprise was how such stories can and do arouse passions on issues of social justice that bridge generations and nations. In her opening address, Rosalind Gill, Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at the Centre for Culture, Media and Creative Industries at King’s College, London, was magisterial in mapping out the contemporary situation: things are getting worse in the media, which are even more profoundly sexist and racist than ever. Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Daniels, & James Benet’s (1978) work of 40 years ago, which explored the symbolic annihilation of the female (invisibilized, trivialized, or condemned), now seems innocent in a new culture of cruelty and extremes of physical masochism. As an American, Alexandra Juhasz, one of
the noted new feminist media theorists who is producing original and provocative feminist work in YouTube environments (see http://www.youtube.com/user/MediaPraxisme), found it almost quaint that by the end of this conference in Canada, values-based political discourse challenging Canadian public institutions to meet their responsibilities for social equity was revived and even radicalized. Juhasz wants to complement and continue to challenge statistics with critical qualitative analysis and intervention. New paradigms for understanding “images of women” have to map women in production, especially in the production of pornography and in self-production via social media; they must also grapple with the—still rare—changing representation of women as experts in news and public affairs to fully connect the relations of gendered media power.

As is suggested above, the third surprise is how under-theorized the creaking, antiquated policy and regulatory system is in Canada. The dated nature of the old Broadcasting Act (1991); the policy immobilism on copyright reform; the CRTC’s creep away from considering “public benefits” tests in approving massive ownership transfers in the “public interest” rather than direct production investment (CRTC, 2010); the policy-by-stealth in the pursuit of equity goals, with licensees avoiding public reports of compliance on advancing equity under federal employment-equity legislation; the massive concentration of ownership—all seem to require a level of expertise and legal engagement now that far surpasses the capacity of most NGOs or female industry groups such as Toronto or Vancouver Women in Film and Television to monitor. Further research and theorization is needed on the relationship between Internet access or consumption as “demand” and the evolution of self-produced media products such as micromedia productions or no-cost-to-the-distributor media products such the largest media industry, pornography. As panellists Rebecca Sullivan of the University of Calgary and Karen Boyle of the University of Glasgow pointed out, it is not an overstatement to characterize pornography production as profoundly embedded in—even exemplary of—a media culture of self-exploitation across platforms and genres. To a disturbing degree—if shock is still possible—production is routinely life-threatening both to actors and forced participants.

Feminist political economists must turn the conventional supply-driven institutions and regulations (from quotas to investment criteria to envelopes for production) that drive the current Canadian policy arena on their head. How do we disaggregate alleged demand as the basis for policy (or non-policy) from distributor-driven policy? Is there a way to re-appropriate or even radicalize neo-liberal language and assumptions? If we can have boutique (film) schools funded by taxpayers, why can we not demand boutique funding envelopes for production by women? Why not place a gender quota on production?

Even more radically, why not actually design a gender-based set of supports from the perspective of the needs of the creators themselves? The day of master classes with notable artists and activists such as Ana Serrano, director of the CFC Media Lab; Anita Lee, producer, National Film Board; Ingrid Veninger, director; Rachel Talalay, director; Mina Shum, director; Jennifer Baichwal, director; and Marguerite Pigott, Super Channel creative development group lead, was rich with practical advice and stories of life
experience. It became clear that exchange of knowledge in a same-sex environment of this type is rare in the industry, and the young students and indie producers avidly lapped it up.

From the perspective of policy, Elizabeth Klinck presented the world of the visual-rights researcher, the lifeblood of any production going into commercial release. The pioneer of a new association of visual researchers in Canada, Klinck argued that it is now easier to get Canadian material from U.S. archives than from Canadian sources, and that the CBC’s rich archive of visuals is virtually off-limits to most creators, bound up in archaic, inaccessible vaults that are a terrible brake on innovation. This is the kind of issue that is hardly a women’s issue (although most visual researchers today are women, essential to productions and especially documentaries, and ridiculously underpaid at a rate of $30 an hour) and that should be front and centre in the upcoming licence renewals for the CBC in 2011.

For those of a cultural studies bent, the reasoning and language of ethics in the discussions concerning the exploitation of images in controversial documentaries, presented by the producers themselves, was riveting. Jennifer Baichwal concluded her session on documentary production today with a rule that documentary production must “come from a clear ethical place.” Visual criticism today needs to bridge to ethics, seen from the director’s and viewer’s eyes. The labour panels agreed that it was time to reinstate women’s or equity committees within their workplaces (although some had them, the CFTPA, now renamed, does not). International organizations such as the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) are key in reminding relatively privileged women and men that from a global perspective, the pressure for gender equity can hardly be seen as unnecessary or passé.

Having Bonnie Klein meet Alexandra Juhasz represented perhaps the best of feminist media practice. Veteran and guru of the National Film Board’s Studio D, Bonnie ardently represented the epoch of committed feminist praxis in a time of publicly funded studios and the wealth of engaged work it can produce. Alexandra represented the best of the new media producers, who argue for the creation of a new feminist studio space on YouTube. Each excited the other, and the rest of us became inspired. Action items generated at the conference included creating a coalition, a policy platform, and a lobby to generate better-informed policy research. In particular, if the public-benefits test is attached to the Bell purchase of more shares of CTV, this could generate the type of public-interest research needed by feminist groups, if a bid were properly tendered. Certainly, the need to represent feminist interests in the upcoming CRTC licence-renewal (2010a; 2010b) hearings for all major networks in 2011 is urgent for scholars and their community and industry partners. But in the end, it is the vision of a virtual kind of Studio D for the age that proves most compelling and must galvanize Canadian feminists yet again. For more information, consult http://www.womeninview.ca.

Notes
1. The report can also be found at the website Please Adjust Your Set (http://www.pleaseadjustyourset.com/research.html). This site is managed by a committee of independent filmmakers (Eileen Hoeter, Sharon McGowan, Mary Bissell, and Peggy Thompson) and offers “individuals in the film and television industry as well as professional organizations, associations and agencies a central place to
find research data, share information, strategies, successes and challenges around issues and topics that impact women in this industry.”

2. MediaWatch has since been re-formed as Media Action (http://www.media-action-media.com).

3. Informed Opinions, an initiative of Media Action, trains and supports experts in making their ideas and knowledge more accessible to print, broadcast, and online information media. Headed by Shari Graydon, the project is supported by Status of Women Canada; the universities of Ottawa, Simon Fraser, Victoria, and Western Ontario; Senator Nancy Ruth; the Public Policy Forum; Ottawa Citizen; and the Trudeau Foundation. See http://www.informedopinions.org.

Websites
Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. http://www.thegeenadavisinstitute.org
Women in Film & Television Toronto. http://wift.com
Women in Film & Television Vancouver. http://www.womeninfilm.ca
YouTube. http://www.youtube.com/user/MediaPraxism e

References


