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### The portrayal of women in the Australian media

#### Abstract

The portrayal of women in the Australian media conveys the characteristic of the economic and socio-cultural context in which Australia is immersed. The first aspect can be summarised as follow. Australia forms part of the capitalist system, and is consequently regulated by the market, although some effects are lessened by government regulation. The media is an economic activity, as an economic activity is sustained on economic relations. Those relations are between media producers and advertisers. Advertisers want to sell their products, media producers have to sell them consumers who want to buy their products. The socio-cultural aspect is related to the patriarchal system as is the sense of national identity which has dominated Australia since white colonization over two centuries. Therefore, the portrayal of women in the Australian media is sexist, racist and classist.

#### The stereotype

Physically, women in the Australian media are portrayed as blonde, Anglo-Celtic in feature and generally anorexic looking (Brook, 1994: 58). The bloneness conveys "a hotchpotch of sentiments, moods and idealised social relations into a totally mundane image" (Martin, 1994: 74) represented in a middle class, 'functional' and nuclear family. The behavioural characteristics place them within that 'ideal' family, in this situation they sell food, detergents and other family related goods (Martin, 1994: 75). The other image is that of women as a sexual object where the "body is taken as a project" (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991:13). The look is accorded to the current sexual ideal and has a "responsive sexuality" coherent with patriarchal ideology which evident in both magazines and television ads. and soaps (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 14). In economic terms the message says that by buying certain products that woman will became sexually desirable (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 13). The development of non-sexist ads. and TV programs is in an early stage. There is scarce bibliographic account about non-sexist soaps which can be understood as almost non-existent.

The representation of non-Anglo Australians is usually ridiculed. Non-English speaking women are absent in both ads and television programs. When they are present, they personify stereotypes, or Anglo actors personify them in a sort of play of burlesque genre. The representation shows them as people with comic accents whose only contribution has been food and frequently paralleled to the working-class (Martin, 1994: 76). The other 'ethnics' are token Aborigines, who are compared to Anglo-Australian males as a way of defining masculinities, synonymous with white masculinity. In this representation Anglo-Australian virility is related to the power over the land where Aborigines are part of the land landscape. The image of an Aboriginal woman is regarded as opposed to this content of femininity. However from the 1980s onwards this racist image has started to change (Martin, 1994: 76-78) and the sexist image has been mitigated by a process which will be explored later in this paper.

#### Interrelation media-public

Is the media creator or legitimator and perpetuator of the social order? or posing the question from another angle, is the audience "free" or "programmed"? Some authors argue that "media is a legitimator rather than creator of the social order" (Edgar cited in Wyndham, 1984: 27).

Gilbert and Taylor consider that the message received, in particular by young women are crucial in the construction of notions of their own understanding of femininity, which in turn, is essential to the notion of that ideal, for example the family (1991: 2). In this sense the media is a creator as well, because it shapes likes, dislikes, preferences and subsequently generates a tendency of behaviour for the future. Cultural texts and images are used by the media to impose and promote products in the market, they "are 'made' in a patriarchal consumer culture, in the sub-culture of young women" (Gilbert and Taylor, 1991: 2).

Jakobowicz et al explain the relationship between media and audience as symbiotic, there is an interrelation through which "the audiences seek security in media rituals, the media seek audiences that they can secure, a symbiosis in which social values are offered confirmation and reinforcement." (1994: 48).

It is undeniable that the social order pre-existed the media. The patriarchal capitalist system of which Australia is clearly a part existed prior to the moment that the media came onto the scene. According to this point of view media seems to be a magnifying mirror-glass. If stereotype is understood as a set of generalization which are inaccurate, this is a typical example in which some aspects are distortedly represented. Not all 'Aussie mums' are blonde (Martin, 1994: 74), not all women are able to reflect the image given in ads., not all families are 'functional'. In fact, the representation of families are unrealistic, first, among those 'Aussie mums' there are a great number who bear the category of single mother. The rest who are married or who has been married, belongs to the category of families which have a high divorce rate, are childless, remarry or have more than one member is employed (Preston in Wyndham, 1984: 27).

#### The economic component of the portrayal

The media governed by two imperatives, one of an economic nature which has to secure a sufficient audience to be attractive to advertisers. The other is the cultural imperative that confirms and legitimates the social order (Jakobowicz, 1994: 48-9). The former affirmation of the statement reflects a typical market case. Media is founded by advertisers, advertisers want to sell their products, therefore, they need a market, that market has to be either wealthy enough or big enough to be profitable. The significant portion of the population-which of course is heterogeneous- is made up of middle aged Anglo-Celtic descendant brought up within a patriarchal ideology.

#### The cultural components of the portrayal: the racist features and the patriarchal features

The slowing of the sexist and racist portrayal has had three main contributions. The work of feminism -which perhaps push the other two factors-, Government regulations and a shift in the unit of consumption which was mainly family based before and now that position is shared with 'non-familial' agents. These non-familial agents are, for example, the increasing numbers of working women who have their own disposable income which markets are keen to attract.

The racist features of the portrayal. The racist aspect of the portrayal is related to development in the Australian national identity. This was constructed as "white, masculine, outdoor person originating from the British Isles" (Castles, 1988: 7). This male was often depicted in the stereotype of a pioneer. During the 1950s and 1960s the depiction was modernised to appeal to post World War II affluence and consumerism but still largely directed at men who were the main breadwinners. Later on this century the pioneer was transformed into a blonde-haired Anglo life saver. The reflection of this image of the 'real Australian' -Anglo male- is the 'Aussie mum' to safeguard the real 'Aussie family' (Martin, 1994: 74).

The patriarchal features of the portrayal. The influences of the feminist movement becomes evident in government regulations and recommendation. The office of the status of women conducted a survey, in 1983, and recommendation were drawn on the results. It consists of a guide to construct a positive portrayal of women in the media.

How is the audience composed nowadays? If the eventual purpose of the media consists of gaining an audience to sell to advertisers, all the medium will have to treat that audience with respect, "fair treatment is an intelligent market decision" (Wyndham, 1984: 26). The message in both visual and text forms can be explicit or implicit. In the first case the message is easily recognised because is read literally. The second can say that a person belongs to a certain social class by describing behaviours, physical characteristics, tastes or lifestyles. It draws upon the knowledge readers have about linguistic and the socio-cultural system (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 172). Women has always been a target for consumption, however the products and the way they have been addressed has taken different forms throughout the history of the media. In this respect women's magazines, although bearing the same characteristics as the rest of the media have conducted in a particular way.

### Women's magazines

Women's magazines deserve special attention. They have headed the transformation in the portrayal of women in the media following the transformation of the role of women in society. The Australian Magazine Publishers' Association argues that Women's magazines has been the only

vanguardist medium in relation to women's liberation (b&t cited in Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 254).

There are three main points to consider, the first is perhaps the most important because it explains the others. The public of women's magazines are mostly women. The second point is because of this first point there is a need to be less insulting than the other media and therefore board relevant women's issues seriously. The point is that they are economically grounded on an oligopoly, as a consequence of this the message is ambiguous and controversial.

There is a notorious difference since the image of women with an embroidered cap during the colonial years to the last issue of any of the magazines which are in the market today.

Cosmopolitan, for example, according to Rayner is "aimed at the woman who wants to improve herself, her mind, her looks, her sex life, her job and so on. They are women who believe men are integral part of their lives and are not liberated to the point where they think they are self-unit." (Edgar and McPhee, 1974: 23). The first part of the quote is a clear market issue, together with the products they advertised they sell the secret of success. The second sentence changed over the last twenty years. 'Independent women' and 'gay people' "are categories whose members can often afford to travel, who are likely to buy expensive furniture, sound and video equipment, jewelry, cosmetics, perfumes, and who go in for lavish entertainment" (Bonney and Wilson, 1983: 189).

The message is ambiguous because on the one hand this genre of magazines offers liberation and on the other hand they advertises products which do not confirm that idea and who are advertised in a controversial way, considering that idea. As Bonnet and Wilson points out "Cleo and Cosmopolitan, articles about sexuality, for example, cannot contradict the claims made by advertisers of cosmetics and perfumes for the sexual role of their products" (1983: 252).

## Conclusion

The change of this portrayal requires time and ideological push. It will transform gradually as a parallel of the transformation of the society. If women make up an increasing portion of the labour force, that means that in the future they will be an attractive target for the market. If this immigration policy continues, the number of 'ethnic' women will be higher and therefore they will become attractive to producers. The ideological work enables this as well as government policies to decrease offense.

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