

Resisting Media Representations.

How Women Can Effectively Challenge the Way They Are Represented.

A Literary Review

by

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TV shows, advertisements, magazines and fashion displays are some examples of media that construct and represent women in a very standardized, offensive and stereotypical way. These media forms tell women how to look, and which behaviours are acceptable by creating a unique recipe for beauty, success and happiness: be white, be ridiculously small, and be perfectly ok as an object of sexual desire. Not conforming to this ideal is not considered different, it is wrong and shameful. Race, class, gender, ability, education, sexuality are some of the intersectional categories which are ignored most of the time in the way media socially constructs and represents women. While not all women are equally affected, younger women become more vulnerable to this misleading reality. But the question is: What can women do today, tomorrow and in the future to resist and challenge these messages? How can we fully realize that what we see in the media is an inaccurate representation of what womanhood is supposed to look like?

Battered Women Support Services' (BWSS) goal is the elimination of all violence against women. Therefore women's representation in media becomes a crucial element of this mandate. BWSS' statement of philosophy recognizes that "...battering is the result of a world view which supports the right of some people to oppress others. That right is granted by the privilege of status associated with gender, race, religion, class, sexual orientation, age and physical ability"¹. This battering takes places right before us, as women are represented by media in a unequal scenario: a scenario where the powerful, privileged media presents a monolithic and oppressive view of womanhood. In this context –and this will be explored in detail in the next sections- women are constantly reduced by the media to body parts (i.e. a set of legs, a pair of breasts, etc.) or objects of sexual desire. This creates the ideal environment to perpetrate abuse

¹ Battered Women Support Services (BWSS) Web. <http://www.bwss.org/home/about-bwss/>

and violence. Women are not human anymore, but dismembered objects lacking of dignity. Sadly, we get this message every day, many times a day.

This literary review aims to explain how diverse organizations through different means have challenged and resisted media representations of women. How these organizations work, their backgrounds, target population, actions, as well as strengths and weaknesses will be addressed here. At the same time, general information about key concepts will be provided (i.e. representation, media literacy and literary review).

Finally, the conclusion aims to inform what Battered Women Support Services can do, take and reproduce from some of these organizations in order to eventually create a media literacy program that fits its current principles and goals.

What is a Representation?

Media portrays women in different forms, and these portrayals should be understood as representations. But what is a representation? By looking at three definitions, we will be able to establish a conclusion.

In a theoretical framework, a representation "...is often taken to mean the making present of something that is in fact, absent. Or to use slightly different terms, one thing is taken to stand for or symbolize another thing."² The Oxford Dictionary tells us that the noun representation is "1. the action or an instance of representing or being represented. 2. an image, model, or other depiction of something"³. On a class on Visual Semiotics at the Aberystwyth University (United Kingdom) a representation "...refers to the construction in any medium (especially the *mass media*) of aspects of 'reality' such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities and other abstract concepts... The term refers to the *processes* involved as well as to its *products*"⁴

Using these three different perspectives, it is possible to conclude that: 1) a representation is a construction –usually by those in power-, something that does not exist; 2) representations symbolize something that tries to look real, but it is not; 3) representations are produced and consumed. Hence, those messages that media creates and reproduces are constructions, the women we see in advertisements do not exist in the way we see them. Their images come with a purpose, trying to create a specific message in the audience; they are not real in the way we have

² Seward, Michael. "Representation." *Encyclopedia of Political Theory*. Ed. Mark Bevir. Thousand Oaks, CA:SAGE, 2010. 1186-89. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 20 Feb. 2012.

³ "representation *n.*" *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, Twelfth edition . Ed. Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson. Oxford University Press, 2008. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. University of British Columbia. 5 March 2012

⁴ Chandler, Daniel. "The Representation of Gender" *Visual Semiotics Course* Aberystwyth University, United Kingdom, 2012

been told to see them. That is were these representations become dangerous, when we are unable to differentiate that women trying to sell us makeup are digitally constructed, that is why they don't look like anyone we know. But the problem is that media produces thousands, millions of these images up to the point when our brains cannot easily differentiate between what is real, and what is a representation. Distinguishing what is real and what is not becomes a challenge.

What is Media Literacy and Why it Matters?

Media scholars unanimously agree that media messages are constructed. "TV commercials, newspaper news items, captioned photographs, and billboard slogans are all created by someone working within a discernible set of social, political, historical, and economic institutions, and seeking to achieve a particular effect on the targeted audience"⁵. The problem lays in the fact that just a minority of the audience are fully aware of this. While many people may say: "yes, I know I'm watching TV, that is not real life", or "yes, I'm aware company 'X' is trying to sell them certain product", the constant bombardment of images penetrates in our brain to the point that we are convinced that beauty means thinness, and there is no other way. It can be very difficult to fully realize that what media is selling us are pure representations, distant from reality. And here is where media literacy enters to play, as a way of helping us understand how media operates and how we can effectively analyze, discuss, critique and challenge what we see.

⁵ Sibii, Razvan. "Media Literacy." *Encyclopedia of Journalism*. Ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009. 884-87. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 13 Feb. 2012.

“Media literacy is the ability to sift through and analyze the messages that inform, entertain and sell to us every day. It’s the ability to bring critical thinking skills to bear on all media— from music videos and Web environments to product placement in films and virtual displays on NHL hockey boards”⁶. This ability aims to examine the “...techniques, technologies and institutions involved in media production...”⁷

Like the definitions above, media literacy is something that needs to be learned; therefore its importance lies in preparing people for this activity. From this perspective, media literacy as a learning tool has two standpoints: media producers and media consumers. Regarding the producers, “...many media literacy researchers hope to influence the process so that entertainers and journalists might modify their messages to accommodate a more informed and critical audience.”⁸. As we will see later on, many of the challenging ways to resist media representations are in the hands of those in the media business. On the other hand, consumers of media representations should be instructed beyond the scholarly environment, but even in “...other venues, such as community events and, most importantly, everyday family life”⁹. Also, we will be able to see, not just the crucial roles of teacher, educators and parents, but also how some organizations present simple tools to challenge media representations from ordinary environments like dinner time.

⁶ Tallim, Jane. “ What is Media Literacy” Education Specialist, The Provincial Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health Children’s Hospital of Eastern Ontario. In, web: *Media Awareness Network*

⁷ Rick Shepherd, "Why Teach Media Literacy," *Teach Magazine*, Quadrant Educational Media Services, Toronto, ON, Canada, Oct/Nov 1993. In web, *Media Awareness Network*

⁸ Sibii, Razvan. "Media Literacy."

⁹ Ibid

Special attention has been paid recently to training young learners in media literacy. These programs, usually targeted to teenagers, are very connected with activism and engaging youth in different ways. Youth media programs "...emphasize media production as a form of social activism in local communities... Authentic representation and "voice" are emphasized in programs that are designed to give adolescents opportunities to strengthen leadership skills and advocate for issues of concern to them"¹⁰ .

As the popular phrase says *knowledge is power*, research in the effects of media literacy has shown that "...education is associated with reduced susceptibility to tobacco use among children and adolescents and increased skepticism about perceptions of the thin ideal in beauty and fashion magazines among adolescent girls"¹¹. This is just a simple example of the powerful effects that media literacy programs can have in the life of people.

Literature Review. How it Works

What is a literature review and how does it work? Understanding these ideas is fundamental in order to successfully read this work. A literature review is a "...systematic syntheses of previous work around a particular topic..."¹². The works that will be discussed here are organizations which through different means, locations, audiences—among other categories—are trying to challenge media representations about women.

¹⁰ Hobbs, Renee. "Media Literacy." *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2008. 650-53. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 13 Feb. 2012.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Card, Noel A. "Literature Review." *Encyclopedia of Research Design*. Ed. Neil J. Salkind. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010. 726-29. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 13 Feb. 2012.

The number of organizations/blogs discussed here was selected by *snowball sampling* informed by reading some entries in BWSS blog. (i.e. when a single blog entry leads to a particular blog or organization, or if it was connected to person's link, and so on). Undoubtedly, at some point the information needed to be contained, so the information was restricted to only include Canadian and American websites.

The categories that will be analyzed in the literary review are:

- *Name of the organization* (web address). Some of the organizations discussed in this review are not organizations per se, but on-line communities that function on the web through different forms of activities. There is also the case of person's personal blog that does not conform to any organization at all. In these particular cases, the following categories were omitted or altered.
- *Background*: This section will outline the origin, purpose and goals of the organization.
- *Financial Overview*: How these groups finance their activities is very important for the purposes of this review. Donations, government funding, all these financial channels are important aspects to understand to connect the organization's activities with the way in which BWSS operates.
- *How Do They Resist?:* This includes information about how this organizations actively challenges media representations. With large and complex organizations, sub headings will be presented.
- *Strengths and Weaknesses*: Positive and negative aspects of each organization will be presented here. Some strengths may be included in the section of conclusions and recommendations.

Jean Kilbourne

<<http://jeankilbourne.com/>>

Background

Jean Kilbourne is considered the pioneer in media literacy as well as an American feminist, author, speaker, and filmmaker. In the late 1960's "...she began her exploration of the connection between advertising and several public health issues, including violence against women, eating disorders, and addiction, and launched a movement to promote media literacy as a way to prevent these problems"¹³. Jean Kilbourne's personal website is not an organization, but instead a compilation of her work, education, achievements and interests.

Jean Kilbourne's website links her most representative books, films and videos for purchase. It also presents a very rich list of resources –divided in specific categories- on media representations. It also serves as a space for organizations to advertise for involvement in challenging ways to confront media representations. Additionally, it provides a schedule of her future activities.

How Does She Resist?

Kilbourne works in a wide range of activities in order to spread her message: films and videos, speeches at universities and public lectures, newspaper articles –i.e. New York Times, Washington Post, Globe and Mail, etc., books and articles from academic journals. Her most

¹³ Jean Kilbourne Website: <http://jeankilbourne.com>

recent publication “*So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents Can Do To Protect Their Kids*” co-written with Diane E. Levin is also available.

Many of the ideas and concepts that are part of our modern vocabulary were developed and created by Kilbourne “These include the concepts of the tyranny of the beauty ideal, the connection between the objectification of women and violence, the themes of liberation and weight control exploited in tobacco advertising aimed at women...”¹⁴ Perhaps her most well-known work –and speaking series–, is the various award-winning films *Killing us softly* where Kilbourne encourage young audiences to challenge and critique the media representations that inundate our daily lives. Kilbourne’s success has been highly influenced by her extraordinary skills as a public speaker, “She was named by *The New York Times Magazine* as one of the three most popular speakers on college campuses”¹⁵. She is available for lectures -contact information is provided in her website. The Kilbourne website provides a long and impressive list of resources in different areas. Because of Kilbourne’s website’s nature, is not possible to create a section on strengths and weaknesses. However, Kilbourne’s work and its influence will be addressed in the Conclusion section.

Beauty Redefined. *Taking Back “Beauty” for Girls and Women Everywhere*

< <http://www.beautyredefined.net/> >

Background

Beauty Redefined is a project that started in Utah, by twin sisters Lindsay and Lexie Kite, whose area of interest is the representations of female bodies in popular media. As MA students

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid

they focus their research in this topic, and they've continued this field of investigation in the current Ph.D. program they are pursuing at the University of Utah.

Financial Overview

Beauty Redefined is in the process of becoming a non-profit organization, under American law, which will allow them, depending on funding, to receive money in order to promote their goals. However, they still encourage people to be donors and support the organization by buying specific products. These products are postcards and sticky notes, inscribed with the fundamental messages that *Beauty Redefined* tries to communicate: *If beauty hurts, we're doing it wrong; Your reflection does not define your worth; There is more to be than eye candy, You are capable of much more than being look at.* Postcards and sticky notes are can be purchased on-line. The cheapest product is sold at \$20, but donations can start at any amount.

Perhaps their most tangible action done through the donations is the *Billboard Campaign*. In the summer of 2011, "the nation's first non-profit body-positive billboards..."¹⁶ were displayed in the streets of Utah. Enough donations had been raised to fund twelve billboards.

How Do They Resist?

Beauty Redefined uses three ways to spread their message:

1. Beauty redefined –the website-
2. Facebook page. This section will not be explored as it's basically a mirror of their website, only using Facebook features.
3. Live speaking engagements (mainly targeting young audiences in high schools)

¹⁶ Beauty Redefined Web: <http://www.beautyredefined.net/roadside-beauty-redefined>

Their Website

Beauty Redefined is dedicated to taking back “beauty” for girls and women everywhere.” Based on this statement, this blog offers and encourages girls, boys, women and men to follow specific tips on how to challenge the media messages on beauty. Next are the tips – each tip has a short titles and a brief paraphrased explanation of the goal or suggested action. *Beauty Redefined* encourages girls and women to:

- Stop negative self-talk: Stop negativity.
- Think nice thoughts instead: Embrace positivity and reflect it in how you treat yourself.
- Unreal ideals: Most images you’ll see in the media are not real; instead they’re highly airbrushed and manipulated. Women in ads are representations, not real women.
- Go on a media fast: Starting with one day, or even longer, try to stay away from media influences and try to get connected with the real beautiful women whom are around you.
- Fight for fitness: Set a fitness goal and work towards it. Focus on what great mental and health improvements you’ll gain, and not about unrealistic media beauty standards.
- The power of kindness: Compliment women because of their talents, virtues, knowledge instead of their nice clothes or fancy hairstyles.
- Run from Normalized Pornography: Highly sexualized media portrays (TV, catalogues, shows, magazines, etc.) make our perceptions to be altered in what men and women should like and are looking in others. Pornography does that as well, avoid it in every sense.
- Object objectification: Challenge the notion that women are just sexual objects as the media is constantly trying to show. Women are human beings, not body parts.

- **Be an Advocate:** If these suggestions are not enough for you, then become an advocate. If there is an ad that you feel misrepresents women, complain about it: blog it and create links to spread your inconformity. Write to the company that shows the ads, write to your newspaper, etc.
- **Redefining Healthy:** Fitness and health is not related to what people look like.
- **Forget yourself:** Volunteer and stop focusing solely on yourself.
- **Get back to reality:** Beauty is more than looks. When surrendered by the women you love, see how their beauty goes beyond looks.
- **Tell the truth:** While watching TV or reading magazines, recognize that what you see are representations and not real people, speak aloud and hear it yourself.
- **Take media into your own hands:** Based on your own resources, either with links, Facebook, blogs, or social networking, constantly have conversations on the media's misrepresentations about women. Make this an ongoing discussion.
- **Be critical of media, not yourself or others:** Be critical of what you see. If you don't like it, embrace the messages that really speak for you.
- **Reconfigure Health.** For those who are in the health industry, develop realistic standards for healthy weight.
- **The power of media makers:** For those in the media industry who are decision makers in what gets published, display positive and realistic images of women
- **Health and Activism Play:** Speak out about the unrealistic portrayal in media of women by volunteering and engaging in this conversation, by talking to politicians and leaders.
- **Check your vision:** Be aware of the enormous amount of media messages we get every day, and constantly question these messages.

- Be a positive example: Set the goal that you'll never again speak or think negatively about yourself.

In a different section of their website, *Beauty Redefined* also encourages boys and men to resist media messages with some tips. Some of the tips are repetitions of the female tips with masculine examples provided (only the different tips are presented in the following list).

- Remember, some jokes aren't funny: Do not make jokes about women's or girl's appearance. You might think they're funny, but instead they devalue women's perceptions of themselves and can very negatively impact their lives.
- Be a positive example: Be careful on comments you make about women's or girls appearance. Most women and girls around you will care about what you said about them.
- Turn Away from harmful images: Reject images that represent women in degrading or unrealistic ways (i.e. do not have pictures like this in your locker or subscribe to magazine that see women this way)

Besides these clear and simple tips to challenge media representations, *Beauty Redefined* has numerous posted articles from a wide range of topics that easily relate to young audiences (i.e. articles about such mainstream magazines as *Cosmopolitan*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Sports Illustrated*) as well as many others.

Speaking Engagements?

Since 2009 both sisters provide, upon request, one-hour speaking engagements about media literacy, specifically targeting young audiences (high schools). This is a very well informed and documented area in their blog, as the speaking series are based on their academic

research and have been scholarly approved and are supported by the University of Utah. Special emphasis is shown in how media literacy can have a huge impact on young audiences. The formal academic rationale of their speaking is easy to access, as well as a form addressed to the school or organization interested on having them to conduct the talk. Promotional ads are provided to encourage participation in the lecture. The title of their visual presentation is “The (Mis) representations of Women’s Bodies: A Strategy for Recognizing and Rejecting Controlling Images in Entertainment Media”.

Weaknesses and Strengths

There is very little focus on interseccionality. While it’s true that *Beauty Redefined’s* media literacy project positively openness the dialogue about the unrealistic women’s and girls’ representations, the concepts of “woman” and “girl” are quite static and monolithic. Few articles speak about the intersection with race. Furthermore, class is not confronted as another oppressive category that marginalized women’s and girls’ media representations and standards of beauty.

Gender and sexuality are only manifested in the context of the highly sexualized image depictions that media generates. It is assumed that some of women’s and girls’ struggles are in the context of a heterosexual nature of relationships, where one gender is trying to please the other in order to achieve companionship and the ideal of heterosexual relationships. Any other forms of sexuality or gender (i.e. lesbianism, bisexuality, transgenderness, etc.) are not explored at all.

Issues regarding a multiplicity of religious views or disabilities are not addressed. The first point may be related to where this organization and movement takes place. It is possible to

have access to the spiritual version of the speaking engagements talks, which creates the assumption that there is one religion that is favoured.

Beauty Redefined is a great example of how two young women by sharing their skills, knowledge and time can have an enormous positive impact in a community, and reach different audiences through the Internet.

The fact that both creators are privileged, educated women positions and legitimizes their knowledge and writing beyond the classic “blog user”. Some of the blog posts are adaptations of scholarly papers and assignments that were written with academic standards in order to be considered knowledge by university research rules. Instead of creating a boundary between the academic and non-academic, the Kite sisters transgressed this binary category by modifying their work into more accessible versions. The results are scholarly informed and well-written blog posts that can be read and understood by large audiences. An important example of this broken boundary between academia and non-scholar public is the explanation of Laura Mulvey’s theory on the “male gaze” which is clearly explained, allowing women and girls to create their own critical eye.

On the other hand, the blog effectively uses popular culture elements to connect with young audiences. (Their 2012 blog post on the *Mayan End of the World* and the creation of the *Body Hate Apocalypse*)

There is personal acknowledgment (by one of the sisters) in how difficult, despite efforts, resistance or education is to actively resist the messages that media construct on women, this statement makes the audience realized the they are not alone in their battles and that perhaps, this is a fight that must be faced constantly.

Miss Representations

< <http://www.missrepresentation.org/> >

Background

Miss Representations is a documentary directed by Jennifer Siebel Newson, and released in 2011. The film aims to expose “how American youth are being sold the concept that women and girls’ value lies in their youth, beauty and sexuality”¹⁷. Newson is a spokesperson as well as a film director and actress. Based on her recent film, Newson founded and is the CEO of MissRepresentation.org

Miss Representations.org “...seeks to empower women and girls to challenge limiting media labels in order to realize their potential.”¹⁸. The organization believes that small actions can create a dramatic and lasting change.

Financial Overview

One of *Miss Representations*’ biggest actions is the screening of the film, which is only available at a fee. The film is not yet available in their website or in DVD. Upon request, a member of the Miss Representations.org site will contact the person/organization asking for the information and clarify the details about costs and copyright information. Therefore, screening the film undoubtedly creates the funding required to run the organization.

Donations are another source of income, but visitors are encouraged to contact the San Francisco Film Society (see following section on weaknesses) .

¹⁷ Miss Representations.org web <http://www.missrepresentation.org/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

How Do They Resist?

The actions in which women and girls are encouraged to resist the constant media images are mainly based with the use of social media (blogs, media, Twitter, Facebook, etc.). There are many actions that encourage everybody (not just limited to women) to fight back. Here are the most important ones.

1. Educate, Engage, Empower

This first action is done through the use of *Miss Representations* curriculum, which is basically a tool for media literacy specifically focused on gender. This curriculum kit tool includes the film, but also customized working material for specific age groups (university, high school, middle school, 4th-5th grade, and kindergarten-to-3rd grade). These materials will allow the students to achieve several goals, from understanding how media communicates, to examining the impact the images have in our lives, and how can we positively influence these misrepresentations.

2. The Social Action Representative Program

This program is open to everyone and recruits people to join the “*Social Action Team*”. Members of this team will receive every two weeks “...specific instructions on how to further the cause of gender equity”¹⁹ The actions these members are supposed to take are broad and diverse, from writing to local newspapers, writing blogs, to hosting meetings.

3. YouTube Video Upload

This action encourages participants to upload a YouTube video expressing their ideas, feelings and emotions in how media represents them and how they would like to be represented.

¹⁹ Ibid.

4. #NOTBUYINGIT in Twitter

These actions required the used of the hashtag #notbuyingit²⁰ in Twitter when participants see a video, add, TV show or comments, etc. that negatively affected how media is portraying women or men.

5. Dinner Conversations

This interesting and family/friend orientated kit tool is aimed to encourage critical thinking in how media portraits women during a dinner time setting. Once registered in the mailing list, the person will received mini kit information tool (about 2 pages) that questions ordinary aspects of real life and daily shows, especially in movies, TV shows, etc. This kit is simple, yet powerful and interesting in the way it facilitates a conversation in the topic.

6. Watch The Film And Screen It

As described in Financial Overview, the core component of *Miss Representations*' actions is the screening of the film, which can be made available on request from the website.

7. Weekly Action Alerts

The weekly action alerts are a list of tips, actions and suggestions that members in this specific mailing list will receive in order to continue the job as active members of a community

²⁰ The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages. People use the hashtag symbol # before relevant keywords in their Tweet to categorize those Tweets to show more easily in Twitter Search. Clicking on a hashtagged word in any message shows you all other Tweets in that category. Hashtags can occur anywhere in the Tweet. Hashtagged words that become very popular are often Trending Topics. Source Twitter Help Centre <http://support.twitter.com/entries/49309-what-are-hashtags-symbols>

that challenges and questions what the media represents. The alerts may be focused in diverse subjects, such as specific alerts regarding Super Bowl advertisements or other media events.

8. *Sexy or Sexism?*

This campaign aims to *REDEFINE sexy*, *IDENTIFY sexism* and works by monitoring major television networks, the film industry, raising awareness and provide opportunities for honest and open conversation. Their website is separated from *Miss Representations.org* (<http://www.sexyorsexism.org/>) . This campaign works in conjunction with the *Women's Media Centre* (see following sections on this Centre). Joining this campaign connects its participants with information and awareness in sexism in different media venues, but also, actively redefines what sexism can be (e.g. being smart, not related to physical appearance, etc.) and join a national movement. To join this campaign, people are encouraged to: sign in, join them on Twitter (hashtag #femTV) and Facebook and write articles for their blog.

9. *Resources and Tools for Actions*

These sections are informational resources (info-graphics, statistics) available for downloading with the purpose of being shared in different spaces. Current books in the media representations field are featured and updated.

Besides these very clear and specific nine actions, *Miss Representations.org* has an active blog that questions and challenges their main are of discussion. These articles addressed current topics happening in the media world: Oscar night, Super Bowl, etc.

Weaknesses and Strengths

The is no clear information about the sort of organization *Miss Representations.org* is, which may be confusing while visiting their website and may leave potential donors questioning where funding is going. The website argues that “financial support will go directly towards sustaining our social action campaign. Your generous donation helps us give women and girls the tools to challenge limiting labels and realize their full potentials”²¹. However, the question remains: through what media? Keeping their website and employees? Through their Blog? These questions are important, especially because the majority of the organization’s actions are based on social media activities by the public. There are no free screenings of the movies for certain organizations; the possibility is not even addressed in their website. This creates a scenario where *Miss Representations.org* audience is a middle-class one, privileged enough to have constant access to social media tools (computers, laptops, smart phones) and still to be able to pay to screen the film, or at least pay to see it. There is no evidence that a discount or cheaper price is available for NGOs trying to screen the movie.

Despite its recent creation, *Miss Representations.org* is a stable and very well-organized group. With less than a year of existence, the organization has attracted many followers and created interest in their actions. Excluding the option of the movie screening, all of their options to resist media representations are practically free (although technological or social media tools are necessary) and guided towards a young audience for which social media is something they know, understand and use. As part of this literary review, I joined their mailing list and became a *Social Action Representative* (I also signed up for the Dinner Conversations kit tool). Reading these written sources has given me chance to confirm how well organized, prepared, readable,

²¹ Miss Representations.org web

yet very powerful this information is. It's evident that a knowledgeable team of people works hard to create these results. It's also clear that the *Miss Representations.org* team knows its audience, and therefore effectively communicates with its followers. The organization has become popular enough, that interested people are able to find volunteer or internship positions with their offices in San Francisco or Los Angeles.

Media Awareness Network

<<http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/index.cfm>>

Background

Media Awareness Network (MNet) see themselves as "...one of the world's most comprehensive collections of media literacy and digital literacy resources"²² This non-profit organization is based in Canada –Ottawa– and they aim to "...promote media literacy and digital literacy by producing education and awareness programs and resources, working in partnership with Canadian and international organizations, and speaking to audiences across Canada and around the world"²³. As part of their mission, MNet focus is to "Develop and deliver high-quality Canadian-based media literacy and digital literacy resources; Provide leadership in advancing media literacy and digital literacy in Canadian schools, homes and communities; and Contribute to the development of informed public policy on issues related to the media"²⁴

MNet's basic organization has two main areas to navigate their website, but also to effectively provide media literacy resources. These two groups are teachers and parents.

²² Media Awareness Network (MNet) Web: <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/index.cfm>

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

Financial Overview

As a non-profit organization, MNet’s funding comes from different donor and sponsors, and through licensing their media literacy materials. This means, MNet develops unique and copyright materials that can be purchase, creating in this way funds to run the organization. Some of their partners “...include Canadian Library Association, Canadian Teachers' Federation, Canadian Association of Principals, PREVNet and the Association for Media Literacy²⁵”.

Membership is another way in which MNets receives funding. Membership is available to the general public, as well as other organizations or charities. The annual membership fee for an individual is \$25, and for a non-profit organization is \$100.

How do they Resist?

MNet’s target audience is not the young, but instead work with adults in their lives (parents and teachers) so they can inform younger audiences through media literacy programs. Most of their resources are available in both official languages, and can be used in different contexts –urban, remote, and indigenous. MNet’s resources “...are developed to reflect Canadian values and culture, current public policy, and education frameworks and are supported by original research.”²⁶. These resources fall specifically in two categories:

²⁵Ibid. In order to access materials under the category “for teachers”, it is necessary to have a license as part of the school board district. Materials cannot be freely accessed or even preview. If teachers are interested in this, they are encourage to contact MNet by phone, fax or e-mail.

²⁶ Ibid.

- Web Based Resources: Again, there are two areas in which people can access these materials: as parents or teachers. These resources cover several areas of media awareness like Internet, television, film, video games, newspapers, advertising and popular music.
- Digital Literacy Program: Started in 1996, this program aims to target the impact the Internet has in young audiences. “Its primary focus is to bring teachers and librarians up to speed on the issues related to children's Internet use.”²⁷

Other form MNet spreads their work through is research. The *Young Canadians in a Wired World* (YCWW) longitudinal research program is Canada's largest and most comprehensive investigation of the role of the Internet in the lives of children and youth”²⁸.

Materials Available

On Media is a category in the MNet website that allows visitors to browse media literacy information under different categories. Each one of the following categories is explained in context, background and current state. If interested, the information can be ordered via the site.

- Media Violence (violence in media entertainment, business of media violence, research on the effects of media violence, government and industry responses to media violence, media violence debates, media education and media violence)
- Media Stereotyping (Ethnic minorities, aboriginal people, girls and women, men and masculinity, gays and lesbian, whites and whiteness privilege, persons with disabilities)

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid

- Online hate (what is hate?, online hate and free speech, online hate and the law, deconstruction hate sites, tactics for recruiting young people, protecting children and teens from online hate, responding to online hate)
- Information privacy (why is information privacy and issue?, how information privacy in compromised, information privacy and children, Canadian privacy legislation, Canadian voluntary privacy codes, US legislation, international guidelines)
- Media and Canadian Cultural Policies (media and Canadian cultural policies chronology, Canada's cultural policies, Canadian content rules, international agreements and Canadian Identity)

Free games and materials are available, all of them with a target audience and theme.

Special initiatives is a section that develops extra information on media literacy special programs. These are:

- Media literacy week
- A web aware
- MediaPulse
- Web awareness
- Media awareness for girl guides
- Media toolkit for youth

*The Media Literacy Week*²⁹

The Media Literacy Week, is an interesting and positive project started in 2006 that tries to "...promote media literacy as a key component in the education of young people and to encourage the integration and the practice of media education in Canadian homes, schools and

²⁹ Media Literacy Week. Web http://www.medialiteracyweek.ca/en/about_overview.htm

communities”³⁰ (MNet’s website). This year, media literacy week’s theme will be *Privacy Matters*, and events will take place in different places around the country between November 5th to 12th, 2012.

Materials for parents are available under different categories:

- Television (the good things about television, television’s impact on kids, special issues for young children, understanding television rating systems and codes, managing television in the home, talking to your kids about television, taking action)
- Movies (the concerns, special issues for young children, special issues for tweens and teens)
- The internet (parenting the Net Generation: Parental involvement can ensure kids stay safe while benefiting for the Internet, safe passage: teaching kids to be safe and responsible online, etc.)
- Video games (good things about video games, the concerns, special issues for girls, special issues for young children, special issues for teens, understanding the rating system, managing video game playing in the home, choosing good video games for your kids, taking action, voice your opinion)
- Music (inappropriate content, online music, managing music in the home, taking action)
- Marketing and consumerism (advertising: it’s everywhere, how markets target kids, special issues for young children, special issues for tweens and teens, understanding advertising guidelines and codes, dealing with marketing: what parents can do, taking action)

³⁰ Ibid.

Especial emphasis is given to parents in terms of speaking out. This relates to making parents understand that, if they see something in any media form that they perceive as a poor or as a misleading representation of girls/boys women/men in media they should not be afraid to speak to whoever is in charge: TV channels, newspaper editors, government agencies, members of parliament, etc.

Weaknesses and Strengths

MNet is an extremely completed source site with several areas of interest for media awareness approaches to kids and teens. This is a Canadian resource guide with bilingual materials which approach the Canadian context by addressing issues as aboriginal people media representations (i.e. stereotyping). Materials are broad, complete and accessible for all audiences. By focusing on teachers and parents, materials become specific, which leads to concrete areas to inform kids with clear examples, objectives and -possibly- results.

MNet considers that a lot of negative consequences in the media's impact on teens and kids stem from the lack of attention and understanding given to them from those who are in charge and interact with them on a daily basis – the children's parents, teachers, family, and friends. On the other hand, not all materials are free; in order to access them all, it's necessary – for teachers– to get the license through the school board or district. Parents, to have full access, must buy a membership, and while this is probably worth it, it denies the possibility to many working class parents who try to inform their kids in media literacy issues.

Women In Media And News

< <http://www.wimnonline.org/> >

Background

Women In Media & News (WIMN) is a US-based media analysis, education and advocacy group. Founded by Jennifer L. Pozner in 2001 in collaboration with a wide range of “...journalists, feminists, social justice activists and media reform advocates.”³¹. One of WIMN’s objectives is to “...increase women's presence in the public debate, emphasizing those who are least often heard”³² as well as analyzing media representations on women and trying to create equity. WIMN works within an intersectional perspective, where women, race, gender, sexuality, LGBT and other categories are equally treated and developed in terms of their activism.

Financial Overview

WIMN identifies as a grassroots organization working with a small budget. Based on this, there are three ways in which getting involved in the organization are encouraged. Some of these initiatives involve monetary support.

- Contribution: WIMN accepts tax-deductible donations and encourages individuals to ask their company to match contributions. There is emphasis in the fact that just 5% of the donation will go towards administrative fees, and the remaining 95% will benefit WIMN’s activities.
- Whilst: WIMN proves a list of specific items that would be greatly appreciated for donation. Before proceeding to donation, people are encouraged to contact WIMN.

³¹ Women in Media and News (WIMN) Web <http://www.wimnonline.org>

³² Ibid

- Volunteer: There is no clear number of volunteer positions needed for WIMN, however, skills and activities that the volunteers can undergo are many, ranging from web maintenance, fundraising, to research, etc.

How do they Resist?

WIMN has four basic programs to challenge media representations.

- Media Analysis: This section is formed by written material –articles, editorials and other publications created by WIMN’s staff and board. There is also an interactive lecture directed to college campus in topics on media representations on women, pop-culture, etc. Part of this media analysis is a group blog called: WIMN’s voices, where guest bloggers and different people involved in media awareness project post their ideas on the subject.
- Media Education: This program focuses of workshops in media awareness for college groups and community organizations.
- Media Outreach, *WIMN's POWER* (Perspectives Of Women Expand Reporting). This project tries to open the panorama in which women are represented in media through open discussion and negotiation with people involved in the production of media messages –editors, producers, journalist, etc.

- Media Reform: This multi-layered activity, "...engages in ongoing coalition work, public awareness campaigns and other advocacy efforts to transform the media through structural changes in media policy"³³.

Professionally edited and written, many of WIMN's publications can be found in a variety of mainstream sources (newspapers, TV and radio shows). Members also provide presentations and training workshops on women and media, conferences, targeting students, different communities, etc.

Becoming a media activist is another way WIMN offers to resist media mis-representations on women. A "Resource Guide for Media Activists" is available for those who want to connect with organizations, books, or blogs that discuss and challenge the issue on media awareness.

Weaknesses and Strengths

Because of its own mission and purpose, WIMN basically works with women who are already part of the powerful hegemonic apparatus which produced representations of women like journalists, TV producers, editors, etc. Therefore, to effectively engage in this organization requires specific skills strongly attached to privileges like high education.

On the other hand, working from an interseccional perspective legitimizes WIMN's work in different areas. The workshops they offered informed effectively wide range of topics to audiences that can later on reproduce the acquired knowledge starting in this way the dissemination on a new and challenging way to question media representations of women.

³³ Ibid.

Reel Grrls

< <http://www.reelgrrls.org/>>

Background

This unique and interesting program aims to encourage young women in the developing and strengthening of leadership skills through media production, finding in this way a form to resist media representations. This organization works exclusively in the Puget Sound region (Seattle) with girls aged 13-19.

Financial Overview

Monetary donations are encouraged, especially in terms of getting the materials for the workshops (i.e. tape stock, scholarships for low income girls to join the workshops). Donations can be done monthly, although donations in-kind are accepted companies (food companies, like Whole Foods, provide snacks). *Reel Grrls*' online store has options for buying some of the produced DVD's, or branded clothing. Some of the programs offered have a cost (for example a day camp costs \$275). However, *Reel Grrls* encourages participants to pay what you can. In this context, companies are encouraged to sponsor a specific project. As a registered non-profit, all donations are tax deductible.

How do they resist?

Reel Grrls offers "...a variety of hands-on workshops for teenage girls in specific skills including animation, cinematography, script writing and more"³⁴. They also have the after-school program, where "...participants meet one or more times per week over an extended period of

³⁴ Reel Grrls Web: <http://www.reelgrrls.org>

time such as 3-9 months. They work on creating a 3-15 minute video, and often produce polished videos for submission to film festivals”³⁵. Besides these programs, they also have a weekend program, day camps and normal camps that are planned and scheduled according to funding, time of the year and other events. The topics for these activities are broad, from “A Disability Justice and Media Camp” to more specific skilled areas in film production like lighting and camera work, or graphic design.

Reel Grrls mentors are a key element for the success of the program. Women with different backgrounds and skills are perfect candidates for this project, and appear as technical mentors, youth development mentors, curriculum mentors, and workshop leaders. Volunteers and interns are required to commit between one to six months in different areas: marketing, program and technology, development and planning.

Weaknesses and Strengths

Reel Grrls is a unique and interesting way to engage young girls in challenging how media represents them, by enabling them to create their own representations. Young women in this program, don’t just gain knowledge in how to challenge media representations, but they also obtain professional skills that have a long and lasting impact in their lives beyond the conclusion of their weekend camps. The duo of creating-challenging gives young girls the opportunity gain confidence, especially when some of the works by former participants have had success in international events. The work of *Reel Grrls* embraces women’s intersectional reality, including categories like race, ability, gender, etc.

³⁵ Ibid.

The program's activities are restricted to a limited geographic area, creating barriers for girls that cannot access this location.

Women, Action & the Media

<www.womenactionmedia.org>

Background

Women, Action & the Media (WAM!) founded in 2004 "...connects and supports media makers, activists, academics and funders working to advance women's media participation, ownership and representation"³⁶ Resisting media representations of women is not their only focus, however, it is part of their general activities.

Financial Overview

WAM! is in the process of becoming an independent non-profit organization. Donations and memberships are encouraged. Membership has a cost of \$45 US dollars.

How do they Resist?

WAM!'s main activities are in training people, especially women in different areas within the media representation issues. One of WAM!'s main goals is to train women to start writing (in their blogs, jobs, newspapers, etc.) about topics that reflect and challenge not just women's media representations, but issues of social justice by challenging hetero-normative/white hegemonic views. WAM! aims to create a form of conscious journalism. They try to achieve this by:

³⁶ Women, Action and Media! (WAM!) Web: www.womenactionmedia.org

- Organizing workshops, training sessions and conferences
- Maintaining an active member list that constantly challenges media and gender issues
- Creating networks (locally and globally)
- Encouraging people to challenge themselves to work together while evaluating their strengths and differences.

If a chapter does not exist in the visitor's immediate area, *WAM!* encourages people to start their own new chapters. However, one needs to contact *WAM!* to initiate the process of creating this so-called chapter. *WAM!* networks function actively in Boston, Chicago and New York, and new networks have recently been created in Los Angeles, Portland (Oregon) and Vancouver (Canada).

WAM! Vancouver is a new organization, and this coming March 31st they will be hosting their second annual meeting where the discussion will be centered in the theme of *uprising*. The aim of this conference is to “examine the media’s coverage of various important “uprisings” that have taken place in the past year – SlutWalk, the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and others – and discuss how the media helps to shape popular perception and opinion of revolutionary movements such as these”³⁷

Weaknesses and Strengths

WAM! Basically targets middle- to upper middle class female freelance journalist, leaving outside a wide range of women. Becoming a member is not free, but membership includes

³⁷Women, Action & the Media. *WAM!* Vancouver Web: <http://wamvancouver.wordpress.com/>

discounts to places, services and organizations that are also connected to upper middle class activities.

There is no clear evidence in how their workshops or training sessions function (i.e. topics covered, duration, etc.) or how contributions are used.

On the other hand, freelance journalists, and journalists in general, are a key point in how women are constructed in media. It is true that many times, a magazine's or newspaper's policy defines what get publish, under what perspective, etc., limiting the journalists' opinion. However, it is also true that journalist have an important amount of power in directing their lines of investigation and presenting articles from a different perspective, and it is here, where *WAM!* activities can potentially influence journalists and other activists to challenge media representations.

The Association for Media Literacy

<<http://www.aml.ca/home/>>

Background

The Association for Media Literacy (AML) "...is a voluntary, non-profit organization dedicated to promoting media education as a means of understanding the influence of the media, and the impact of rapidly evolving technology, on our culture"³⁸. *AML* is a Canadian organization, founded in 1978 in Toronto. Because of *AML*'s efforts in lobbying, "Ontario was the first educational jurisdiction in the world to mandate media literacy as part of the English

³⁸ The Association for Media Literacy Web: <http://www.aml.ca/home>

curriculum...³⁹ The organization is composed by "...teachers, librarians, consultants, parents, cultural workers, and media professionals"⁴⁰ who work in the field of mass media and study its consequences.

Financial Overview

AML does not provide specific information about their finances. Unlike Media Awareness Network, *AML* does not give guidelines in terms of copyright or licensing material taken from their website. For the moment, memberships are free. Their sites does not have a clear section regarding their policy on donations or contributions.

How do They Resist?

A concern of *AML* is creating a large and efficient network of teachers where sharing information, events, activities, etc. is central to the success of *AML*. The network is supposed to function locally and around the world. Online newsletters (access to which requires membership), workshops and conferences, publications of anthologies and constant support for media teachers are some of the ways in which *AML* networks stay up-to-date. Some of their activities are lobbying the multiple levels of government, the school boards, and the media industry within the themes of media literacy. They also execute different activities, like film screenings, their own *AML* Youtube Channel, publication of articles and reviews in different media forms and well as *AML*'s website.

Weaknesses and Strengths

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Articles, readings reviews and materials are easily accessible and range from a wide variety of topics in media literacy. The articles come from knowledgeable sources and informed experts in the topic.

AML is primarily a first world organization. Its members mostly belong to “English-speaking countries where the educational system has given some priority to media literacy, notably England, Australia and Scotland as well as the U.S.”⁴¹ . While this should not be considered a negative aspect, it does undermine the plurality in research that has been happening around the world by establishing English as the dominant language.

AML informs a privileged and educated audience. *AML* articles are not unreadable, but they do not attempt to reach young audiences; it is clear that their focus is towards people with certain education level.

Feminist Frequency

<<http://www.feministfrequency.com/>>

Background

Feminist Frequency is a video blog created by feminist and popular culture critic Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian’s research and area of interest focuses on “...privilege and systems of oppression specifically focusing on representations of race, gender, sexuality, class and ability in popular culture”⁴². Precisely in those topics, Sarkeesian writes and expresses her ideas in videos, which are well informed –even used in classrooms- and still interesting for young learners and

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Feminist Frequency Web: <http://www.feministfrequency.com>

audiences which are able to articulate connections between popular culture, feminism and different forms of intersectionality.

Financial Overview

The video-blog works thanks to donations. Sarkeesian argues that her goal would be to create a video per week, but as a blogger who is not willing to use advertising to earn money, she solely depends on donations to keep her blog updated. While some dollar amounts are suggested, it is up to the reader to decide the way to contribute (if at all).

How Does She Resist?

Anita Sarkeesian's main way of resisting media representations is through her video blog. Sarkeesian's academic background, like the case of the Kite sisters in *Beauty Redefined* legitimizes her ideas (Sarkeesian holds a MA in Social and Political Thought) and at the same time makes them available to different audiences. Besides the blog entries, Sarkeesian is a speaker in different events related to media literacy and women's representations –panels, workshops, and she is available upon request to attend or speak at specific events. Her website also offers a wide range of resources categorized in diverse themes (i.e. books, blogs, TV shows, etc.). Another way in which *Feminist Frequency* spreads its work is through the collaboration with its volunteer fans that commit some time and help to translate Sarkeesian's videos to different languages.

Weaknesses and Strengths

Feminist Frequency is a wonderful example in how in a few minutes, a powerful and well developed video can be informative, interesting and consequently create a positive impact. An excellent feature this website offers is the opportunity for a volunteer to engage in the translation of the materials, breaking the enormous barrier that sometimes language can create. The wide range of topics that *Feminist Frequency* covers is part of its success: from Oscar's night, to the new prime time shows in TV, to media marketing ideas that sexualize and objectify women in humorous ways, better known as retro-sexism. The entire video blog content can be followed via Facebook, Twitter and other social media forms.

Perhaps a weak point in this video blog is that it is not updated as often as the author originally recognizes.

Not Cool

<<http://nownyc-notcool.tumblr.com/>>

Background

Not cool is a simple yet highly effective mini website (run by the NYC Chapter of the National Organization for Women!⁴³) Their premise is well-captured in their easy high-energy mission statement “SEE IT, SNAP IT, SHARE IT! See something Not Cool? Snap a photo, and post it here! It's easy: take a picture of the ad or poster and show us that it's #notcool, then post your pictures here” (Not Cool)

⁴³ “NOW-NYC's charitable sister organization delivers educational forums on key women's issues and has been providing direct services and referrals to women for the past 25 years” From:

<http://www.nownyc.org/women/index.php/about>

Not Cool! is a tumblelog which works based on the Tumblr experience⁴⁴.

⁴⁴ “Tumblr is a microblogging platform and social networking website....The service allows users to post multimedia and other content to a short-form blog, named a "tumblelog." Users can follow other users' blogs, as well as make their blogs private...” Source: Wikipedia

Conclusions

It is clear that despite the powerful influence of the media in women's constructions and representations important measures haven been taken in order to fight this issue. Women have challenged, critiqued and stood up to make direct complaints against the media discourse that keeps objectifying and sexualizing them. As we have read, they are different ways to fight this constant battle, from personal and every day tips, to joining organizations, or even becoming an activist. Some of the organizations and blogs presented here, as mentioned in the strength's sections, have great inputs for further discussion of media representations and media literacy.

The role of social media has proven to be very effective in challenging issues on women's representations in the media. Young audiences feel attracted to engaging in activities that involve technology, like social media. However, using only this one form as a way to critique media and educate and empower women is limiting, as it the technology is still only primarily available to privileged groups.

Another important element in this battle against women's mis-representations on media is family and education. Teachers and parents are crucial figures in developing and connecting children and teenagers with the right tools in order to empower them in this topic. Proof of the important role of parents and teachers have in this issue is the many media literacy tools exclusively dedicated to this sector. It is important to notice that, concepts like media literacy and its relevance nowadays are not themes that all parents question. For many families, while deeply loving their children, parents (especially mothers) find their minds focused in their current stressful realities. This may even include violence, financial instability, unemployment,

immigration processes or other issues that limit the time and resources available. Globally, only some parents have an understanding of media literacy or media mis representations of women and men. It is very important to make this information accessible to all sectors of the public, so people can understand why media literacy matters and how its influence penetrates in our daily lives.

Partnership

Creating a single and individual program on media literacy can have great benefits like independence and individual decision making, but it also involves practical issues, like funding. For Battered Women Support Services starting a media literacy program in partnership with different organizations can be a good way to initiate the discussion on resisting media representations. Next I will suggest some general examples of partnerships that could eventually work. It should be stated that issues like scheduling, timing and availability should be considered, as well as the willingness of everybody to work together. Despite good intentions and efforts, sometimes coordination represents a great challenge in putting activities together.

Creating volunteer run workshops –weekly, monthly, etc.- on media literacy could be organized by different universities (University of British Columbia, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver Community College, etc.). Students in upper-level courses or even in Graduate School could create and develop this program and offer it for free to organizations like BWSS. Both sides would gain wonderful skills; students would be able to establish connections with academia and activism, while the rest of the public can gain access to well informed, prepared, supervise and no-cost programs and workshops. The themes and possibilities of these programs

could be in a wide range of topics, but most importantly it would be a joint partnership of academia and non-profit organizations.

Continuing with the partnership idea, creating a media literacy week, or joining the existing one by Media Awareness Network can be a functional way to join the national conversation in this topic. This could culminate into a media literacy week in Vancouver for all non-profit organizations that want to join the discussion in media literacy and media representations of women.

In the same context, a free (or low-cost), easy and accessible way to start challenging media representations could be creating a similar list of tips like the one offered by *Beauty Redefined*. Simple tips that can be added to anyone's life on a daily basis can have huge impact in young women's lives. These tips could be offered in a brochure form, and could be part of an after-screening activity or panel discussion on the topic. The great advantage of this option is that it can be customizable to a Canadian-, or even Vancouver-context, with examples and references that really speak to the target audience (including themes on intersectionally: indigenous population, immigrants, class, gender, etc.).

In terms of films screening, films like *Miss Representations* or some of Kilbourne's works could be presented in partnership with the Vancouver Public Library – in order to have the appropriate copyright license.

Related to films and partnerships, the work that *Reel Grrls* offered is a very interesting way that could be adapted in a city like Vancouver, where the Vancouver Film School and

numerous film festivals –like the DOXA documentary Film Festival. Putting this program together could be challenging, but if it eventually works the results could have great rewards.

Overall, the scenario looks positive, the possibilities there, ready to put together and waiting to be used and exploited. In fighting the battle to end violence against women, media literacy plays a key role, and the opportunities to have another tool to be used are ready to empower women in this constant battle.

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