The Media and Women Without Apology

Whether it is a rejuvenated sense of urgency or simply the last straw of impatience in the latest "year of the woman," something new is in the air when people talk about women and the media. Conversations with people who care about mass communication, the larger society and how women are portrayed in or employed by print and electronic media have taken on a new, sharper tone in recent years, especially in 1992.

Something seemed to snap with the spectacle of Anita Hill's testimony to an all-male Senate Judiciary Committee during confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas. That sense of unease was amplified in observing the rape trials of William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson, and expanded in allegations of sexual harassment against Oregon Sen. Robert Packwood. Women and men alike were cheered and inspired by the success of women political candidates and other visible signs of women in leadership roles, but it was with considerable agitation in the wake of these and other events—and in the context of the media's coverage of them—that the Year of the Woman concluded. That term, encompassing as it does multiple facets of the lives of women in America—equity for women in public life, political participation and leadership, sexual harassment and other violence against women, workplace discrimination, public and media attitudes toward women and myriad other important issues—is fraught with conflicting meanings and questions still awaiting resolution.
Naturally, the media were conduits for this important and excruciating debate. But the media by their own admission are a somewhat flawed vessel, given their less-than-robust track record as employers of women with career goals beyond entry level and middle management, and given their lackluster performance in covering topics of interest to women. One facet of the nation’s renewed attention to women’s issues has been the positive but sometimes painful by-product of more critical scrutiny—from both within and outside—of the way that women are portrayed in news and information, entertainment, opinion and advertising media.

Inasmuch as women constitute 52 percent of the adult population, 45 percent of the work force and have as much as a 2-to-1 edge in journalism school enrollments, the issue of women and the media becomes not the parochial interest of special pleaders in our society, but a majoritarian one. Questions of women’s involvement in society are viewed perhaps most intensely in the important intersection of social concerns and the media, which may (or may not) lead, but certainly reflect the culture in which they operate. The recently renewed and expanded debate has sometimes been strident, with women and men from many quarters—feminist activists, institutional leaders, media executives and scholars, among others—joining in. What seems different today is the sense of optimistic speculation that fundamental change really may be one of the culminating events of last year.

Women in 1992 not only exercised a reawakened political influence and used the strong examples of such figures as Hillary Rodham Clinton and Anita Hill—among many others—as inspiration, but there is a sense that a sleeping giant—a force larger and more lasting than the news—also had awakened. A new role model emerging from 1992, television producer Linda Ellerbee says, is that of “women without apology,” women who can successfully resist efforts by others to define them and their lives. The frustration of a women’s movement that seemed to stall and sputter in the 1980s came to be expressed as, “You just don’t get it.” What was seen as a sweeping dismissal of
men—implying not only that they didn’t understand but, more importantly, couldn’t or wouldn’t—may now be reverting to a more neutral device implying the need for further discussion and productive cooperation. If the style of many women was once persuasive and importuning, it is no longer for those who have learned from the examples of the Year of the Woman. What example could be clearer than that of Hillary Rodham Clinton (whether one is a supporter or detractor) in the days since President Clinton’s inauguration? Without apology, women in 1992 moved beyond asking others to “get it” to showing them what “it” is, who they are and what they want and expect from the society as well as from the media. Whether this is a fleeting mood or a movement with lasting impact only can be determined by future historians. Still, the mood of the country is open now to a less contentious and more constructive debate, which may also presage the decade or even century of the woman.

LONG BEFORE WOMEN GOT THE VOTE and became highly visible in the professional work force, they had a relationship with media. Mention “women and media” today and talk most often turns to workplace issues or how women are portrayed or covered in news and entertainment. While these are crucially important issues, they do not constitute the only territory where women intersect with media.

Women as audience members constitute a majority of the total national media audience in America and globally, as well as important but more limited parts of other select audiences for news, opinion, entertainment and advertising. As such they are cajoled, courted and sought after, sometimes with literal and honest appeals, sometimes with cynicism and manipulation. All communication is conditioned by the audience and successful communication is responsive to it. However, when men make up the majority audience of a given medium or represent its greatest buying power or personal influence, communication by and about women is molded and shaped by men.

Until quite recently, histories of communication or journalism
barely mentioned women and when they did, it was to acknowledge exotic individuals who had triumphed in the field, overcoming the odds in a male-dominated enclave. Other modest attention was given to women's magazines and women's media organizations, but these were seen as peripheral to the mainstream.

Against the backdrop of greater attention to women and women's issues spurred by the women's movement of the 1960s and since, the intersection of women and media—women's experience with the media and the media's experience with women—has attracted sustained attention. Press historians, for example, recognized the important role of women in the press of the colonies. The partners of early colonial printers and editors often outlived their husbands and thus not only carried on their work but extended it considerably. And there are scores of other examples, effectively documented by scholars and writers who began to retrieve women's history from marginalia, charting the role they had played in the development and evolution of communication and proving conclusively that it wasn't such a man's world after all. Much of that work continues with new finds and important earthing of women's innovation and influence that are both wide in scope and deep in impact.

In media, as in other major social institutions, the structure is the message. Thus, questions of ownership, leadership, management and control are of prime importance; how women fare, to what extent their concerns are also the media's, their role in the media workplace and much more are explained by simple structural facts. Here the role and influence of women, while growing, are still modest at best. While media organizations clearly reflect the society around them, the overall relationship between women and topics of special interest to women is filtered by media owners, leaders and key gatekeepers for a variety of reasons, some of them social, others economic. At one level, media and communication—especially technology—do have some value-free and gender-neutral aspects, yet at another, the tools of communication and the people who direct them determine how society's central nervous system (the
media) responds to, interacts with and/or rejects messages and information content.

Whether the audience is active or passive has inspired much debate, and the question arises more frequently now as critiques of media fare consistently point to inequities in the way women are represented to the larger society. Some critics argue that media content reflects the larger society. If, for example, women hold few jobs in government or business, it would be dishonest to engage in media portrayals that artificially inflate references to women. But if women are underrepresented in the media work force or in media content compared with their numbers in the available candidate pool or with society at large, this provides evidence both for analysis and action.

In contemporary America then, any consideration of the role of women in the media comes at an opportune moment. Certainly, there is value in taking what may be an overdue fresh look at the media and their commitment (or lack of it) to women as people involved in the media process, whether as leaders and executives, mid-career workers or entry-level employees. At the same time, the current wave of feminism and other trends affecting all women appropriately reverberates in the media, which is society's map, mirror and surrogate.

In this, the media have been more often followers than leaders, treating the imperatives of feminist critics cautiously and often arguing against too much involvement with women as an interest group promoting their own cause. Others in media have disagreed, positing the opposite, that the media—whether for social or simply self-serving marketing reasons—ought to be in the forefront of a society suddenly more conscious of its majority gender group, which had more often in the past been treated as a minority seeking recognition in a world dominated and ruled by men. Here the media are, in fact, consistent with the patterns of society itself, where the now-minority gender—men—has been in charge for centuries.

In devoting this issue of the Media Studies Journal to women and the media under the heading "The Media and Women Without
Apology," we signal interest in advancing the larger discussion of this complex and multifaceted topic beyond the passionate polemical calls of advocates, the entrenched resistance of the status quo or the turgid ruminations of scholars. Recognizing that, while the most frequently visited topics in this arena are content and employment, with conclusions on the table before the investigation is adequately made, we believe that there is more to a full-scale discussion of women and the media than images and jobs.

While anyone with a sense of social justice empathizes with the plight of women in the postmodern media era, it is important that the Journal be both understanding and systematic in its assessment of problems and solutions alike. As always, we have gathered some of the country's most important and intriguing thinkers, media professionals and scholars—women and men who know what they are talking about. Stipulating at the outset the inequities of the workplace, ranging from salary to upward mobility to assignments, and the limitations of media content, we have asked our authors to provide us with a more comprehensive and far-reaching perspective on the many elements affecting the intersection of women and the media. This expanded double issue of the Journal reflects our belief in the importance of the topic and the need to broaden the debate.

In the introductory section of "The Media and Women Without Apology," three commentators provide a sweeping overview of many of the issues that define that debate. In "Bandwagons, Women and Cultural Mythology," Boston University journalism Professor Caryl Rivers examines how the media seize, retain and perpetuate myths about women. If we were viewed by alien beings, Earth would seem to be inhabited by two kinds of humans—reasonable and rationale creatures called men, and dangerously unstable ones called women. PMS, "Mommy Track," the desperation of working women—"Old myths about female unreliability and weakness still drift through the media like smoke," Rivers contends. "Too often today, the American media look like a fun-
house mirror, reflecting back images of women that are distorted and grotesque.”

Then, Kay Mills, author of a 1988 book on women’s place in the news, moves from content questions to broader issues in “The Media and the Year of the Woman,” including employment and structural concerns for women in the media. “Having just completed a political cycle hyped as the ‘Year of the Woman,’ some whiff a change in the air,” she observes. “Don’t kid yourselves”—the structural and attitudinal barriers are still in place. “At best, 1992–93 will be just another step on a long road to a more equitable world, but I doubt we’ll be there even by 2010.”

Marion Tuttle Marzolf, a University of Michigan journalism historian, offers a look back over the century in “Deciding What’s ‘Women’s News.’” The media—and society—need to take a fresh look at what’s news and how women are central to the larger culture, not some second-class “other.” “It may be time for the media to see the issues and concerns of women as those of the society as a whole and to find a way to help illumine those problems and make reporting on women a challenging new specialty,” she suggests.

Having identified some of the issues, we move on to tour some of the “Landscape” affecting women and the media. “Symposium—In the Media, A Woman’s Place,” offers the perspectives of 15 experts on the most pressing concerns of women in the media and on the future for both. From Linda Ellerbee’s view of Anita Hill, Hillary Rodham Clinton and Murphy Brown as “women without apology” who helped define 1992 to Geraldine Ferraro’s take on 1992 campaign to feminist critic Camille Paglia’s wake-up call for the media, our expert panel offers provocative insights. Others in the mix include author Susan Faludi, columnist Ellen Goodman, PBS’s Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Seymour Topping of the New York Times and Columbia University journalism Dean Joan Konner.

In “Framing Feminism,” media researcher Pamela J. Creedon of Ohio State University offers a “primer” on feminist issues for the mass media. “The cutting edge of feminism is no longer about convincing
anyone that sexism exists or about counting female faces on the
evening news," she argues. "Women want their own voices heard."

And as a larger geographic map of the landscape, 18 deans and
directors of some of the nation's top journalism and mass commu-
ication schools give media industries—newspapers, broadcasting,
cable, magazines, advertising and public relations—a report card.
Our survey of these journalism educators yields "A Field Guide for
Women in Media Industries," and some telling and frank insights
into how professors view the media world they study.

THE JOURNAL THEN MOVES ON to examine
"Industry Practices." In an opening salvo, New York Times writer
Maureen Dowd focuses her sharp pen and wit on colleagues from the
1992 presidential election campaign. Dowd's "Requiem for the Boys
on the Bus" debunks complaints that women on the campaign trail
have ruined the fun of political reporting. "That is such a crock!" she
responds. "It's the guys—the bores on the bus" who have changed the
character of campaign journalism.

For a longer view of male-female conflicts, Betsy Wade of the
New York Times muses on "Surviving Being a Survivor" in a piece she
subtitles "Whatever Became of What's Her Name?" Wade, one of
seven named plaintiffs in the landmark 1973 sex discrimination suit
against the paper, reflects on the cost of being a woman without apol-
ogy. Now, 20 years later, "though we may walk invisible among our
legatees, we know that we opened doors for a new generation that
may not know they were ever closed," she reflects.

Moving from the courtroom to the newsroom, Columbia
Journalism Review editor Suzanne Braun Levine describes another kind
of battle—the story meeting. In "News-speak and 'Genderlect' (It's
Only News If You Can Sell It)," Levine examines how men's and
women's different styles of communication affect the editorial outcome.

Where are the women pundits? wonders Jane O'Reilly in "The
Pale Males of Punditry." The New York columnist and co-founder of
The Getting It Gazette observes that “pale males”—the white men who dominate the media as pundits and commentators—don’t get it at all. “When I watch the pale males I feel I am seeing imminent extinction,” she says. “And I hope they feel that way, too, when they see the women who speak to me, for me, about the world I live in.”

Next we take up the questions of “Media Performance,” from advertising to newspaper content to sexist language. As an opener, we look at “Who’s Covering What in the Year of the Woman?” via a study of the front pages of 10 of the nation’s elite newspapers selected between January and December 1992.

We then direct attention from news pages to advertising pages in “Fresh Lipstick—Rethinking Images of Women in Advertising.” Advertising professor Linda M. Scott of the University of Illinois reviews feminists’ aversion to advertising and the fashion industry to reveal flaws in their criticisms and progress in advertising’s portrayals of women.

In “A Matter of Opinion,” Jean Otto, former editorial page editor of the Rocky Mountain News, takes a look at how women in that last bastion of white men—the editorial page—change the soul, perspective and conscience of newspapers. “Women who write opinion welcome the death of the dinosaur that editorial pages used to be,” she concludes.

Susan Miller, a senior news executive at Scripps Howard Newspapers, expands that look at women and content to evaluate what she calls an “Opportunity Squandered—Newspapers and Women’s News.” “What keeps newspapers from changing is that journalists are saddled with outmoded and counterproductive philosophies, attitudes, practices and organizational schemes from which they judge the news,” she contends, offering a prescription for change.

Concluding this section is a critical evaluation of how the media don’t say what they mean. In “Talking (Fairly) About the World,” journalism Professor Jean Ward of the University of Minnesota offers “A Reprise on Journalistic Language.” In 1980, Ward invited journalists in a Columbia Journalism Review article to “check out their sex-
ism,” and she revisits that topic here, 13 years later. Even in the Year of the Woman, the media regularly use language that belittles women, she says, offering a six-point style guide.

**Five Essays Provide “Different Worldviews” in our next section.** Starting with Deborah Howell of Newhouse Newspapers, these articles look at Ms. magazine, the conflicts of a male feminist, women in Chilean journalism and Aunt Jemima.

In her “True Confessions—My Life as a White Male,” Howell reveals how she learned the news business. But now, she says, “I’ve given up being the complete white male editor.” In “The Evolution of a Male Feminist Journalist,” Andrew Merton of the University of New Hampshire traces his own development—journalistic and personal—and his changing view of women. We then move into magazines’ and other media’s “split image of black women.” Essence magazine’s editor-at-large Audrey Edwards looks at those images in “From Aunt Jemima to Anita Hill,” concluding that the media’s view of black women, at least as seen through advertising images, is warped and one-dimensional.

Mary Thom was executive editor of Ms. until 1991, when she left the magazine to write about her experiences and to collect oral histories of America’s first feminist magazine. In “The Personal Is Political—Publishable, Too,” Thom reviews how Ms. editors developed “a recipe for consciousness-raising” and a new kind of journalism.

And concluding this section is a report from Santiago on the impressive gains women and the media have shared in Chile. Journalism school Dean Lucía Castellón and teacher and TV anchor Alejandro Guillier describe in “Chile—The Emerging Power of Women in Journalism” how “times are changing for women, journalism and Chile.” In a traditional, male-dominated society, Chilean women have found journalism a means of expanding horizons—both their country’s and their own.

Finally, Maurine Beasley of the University of Maryland provides
the *Journal's* book review, a synthesis of seven important books about women and the media, in an essay she calls "Myths, Media and Women." From Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* to new books on how media treat women's news, it has been a bumpy ride, she says.

The 21 essays in this special issue of the *Media Studies Journal* contribute to the largest *Journal* we've ever undertaken, evidence of both the breadth of the debate on the question of media and women, and our view of its significance to the media industries and the public. This examination of "The Media and Women Without Apology" will, we hope, stimulate renewed commitment to this subject in other venues—the media industries themselves, major institutions of society, the academy and, most crucially, among ordinary people, women and men alike.

The Editors