

# HEARTH AND HOME

*Images of Women  
in the Mass Media*

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## Contents

— Introduction: The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media <i>GAYE TUCHMAN</i>	3
<i>Part I Television</i>	39
Introduction	40
1 The Dynamics of Cultural Resistance <i>GEORGE GERBNER</i>	46
— 2 Dominant or Dominated? Women on Prime-Time Television <i>JUDITH LEMON</i>	51
3 Spot Messages Appearing Within Saturday Morning Television Programs <i>STEPHEN SCHUETZ and JOYCE N. SPRAFKIN</i>	69
4 Where are the Women in Public Broadcasting? <i>MURIEL S. CANTOR</i>	78

<i>Part 2 Women's Magazines</i>	91
Introduction	93
5 Imagery and Ideology: The Cover Photographs of Traditional Women's Magazines MARJORIE FERGUSON	97
6 Magazine Heroines: Is Ms. Just Another Member of the <i>Family Circle</i> ? E. BARBARA PHILLIPS	116
7 Jackie! CAROL LOPATE	130
 <i>Part 3 Newspapers and Their Women's Pages</i>	 141
Introduction	143
8 The Most Admired Woman: Image-Making in the News GLADYS ENGEL LANG	147
9 The Women's Page as a Window on the Ruling Class G. WILLIAM DOMHOFF	161
10 The News of Women and the Work of Men HARVEY L. MOLOTCH	176
11 The Newspaper as a Social Movement's Resource GAYE TUCHMAN	186
12 The Women's Movement and the Women's Pages CYNTHIA FUCHS EPSTEIN	216
 <i>Part 4 Television's Effect on Children and Youth</i>	 223
Introduction	225
13 Sex-typing and Children's Television Preferences JOYCE N. SPRAFKIN and ROBERT M. LIEBERT	228
14 "What Do You Want To Be When You Grow Up, Little Girl?" LARRY GROSS and SUZANNE JEFFRIES-FOX	240

<i>Contents</i>	xi
Conclusion: Will Media Treatment of Women Improve? <i>JAMES BENÉT</i>	266
The Image of Women in Television: An Annotated Bibliography <i>HELEN FRANZWA</i>	272
References	301
Contributors	321
Index	325

*Chapter 1*

GEORGE GERBNER

*The Dynamics of  
Cultural Resistance*

Can the image of women in the mass media be changed? My answer is: It depends to a large extent on how one defines change. There are two kinds of change. One kind is a further extension or intensification of the built-in tendencies in the social structure; the other is a change in the structure itself.

My research indicates that the image of women in the mass media is changing within the existing structure, and is changing for the worse, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. As to the second question, can the structure itself change, the realistic answer is that it cannot change unless and until the structure of social relations no longer works, unless the cost is too high, or unless institutional relationships collapse, none of which has taken place. The structure is still going strong and is entering a phase of counterattacking challenge.

To understand this, one must understand the political dynamics of the cultural management of social movements. It consists of two parts. One is the tactic of resistance and the second is the function of images. By social movements I mean move-

ments that somehow threaten or promise to restructure a particular set of social relations. Once such a movement arises, and this is true for any movement, the dynamics of cultural resistance come into play.

Today television is, for all practical purposes, the common culture. Culture is the system of messages that cultivates the images fitting the established structure of social relations. As such, the main function of culture is to cultivate resistance to change. It functions to make people accept life as good and society as just, no matter how things really are. We have been misled by many of the social scientists and researchers into considering television just another medium. But all other media have been used selectively. That makes a crucial difference because when you can select, you can have a greater variety of uses and gratifications; you can support a greater range of idiosyncratic or family or group cultures. Television is not used selectively. It is used by practically all the people and is used practically all the time. It collects the most heterogeneous public of groups, classes, races, sexes, and nationalities in history into a national audience that has nothing in common except television, or shared messages. Television thereby becomes the common basis for social interaction among a very widely dispersed and diverse national community. As such, it can only be compared, in terms of its functions, not to any other medium but to the preindustrial notion of religion.

Television *is* the new religion. It has to be studied as a new religion, an organic structure of rituals and myths, including the news and documentaries, but primarily serial drama. It is religion in the sense of preindustrial pre-Reformation religion, in the sense of one's having no choice—a cosmic force or a symbolic environment that one was born into, and whose assumptions one accepted without much questioning. If one does question these assumptions one must look at cultural dynamics of resistance to change and the functions of images. There are

three main tactics of resistance to change: discrediting, isolating, or undercutting. All have been used by television to resist the changing status of women.

1. *Discrediting.* Suppression does not work under conditions of rapid and omnipresent mass communication. It is more effective to pick up the most bizarre or provocative manifestations of the threatening movement in order to try to discredit it and to mobilize conventional sentiment against it. For instance, when "women's libbers" (as they are pejoratively called) appear on television, they are usually hostile, aggressive, unappreciative of men, and won't listen to reason.

2. *Isolating.* The tactic here is to then pick out a "responsible" (i.e., relatively safe) element of the movement and give it its own limited place—barren though that may be of life's opportunities and choices—such as a reservation, a ghetto, or a kitchen. Once isolated, the media encourage women not to let anyone tamper with their sacred right to rule over "their place." For example, in this volume Muriel Cantor analyzes female participation in programs of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. There, women are virtually segregated into "Womanhood" kind of programs instead of having their issues considered by all public-affairs programs.

3. *Undercutting.* This is basically the tactic of terror. Terror undercuts the will to break out of the isolation of minority status. In our case this tactic consists of two steps. One is what I call the "institutionalization of rape," which has occurred in the past five years. Television increasingly treats rape as a normal crime, something akin to theft. Rape has even been made a topic of humor, and in one show a woman raped a man. The second step is the acceptance of pornography as a "liberating force" without recognizing its exploitative social content. Pornographic depictions of women exploit them as sex objects; pornography does not identify women as full human beings with hopes and fears and jobs and families. Here sexual liberation may be used as a ploy for sexual exploitation.

The second part of the dynamics of cultural management of social movements concerns the functions of images. An image (sometimes called a stereotype) is a projective device used to make it easy to behave toward people in socially functional ways. You call a group "barbarians" if you want to be brutal toward them. You call people "criminals" if you want to suspend normal laws of decency and behave toward them in what would otherwise be considered a criminal way. You call a group "insane" if you want to suspend the rules of rationality and reason in managing them. That is not to say that there are no real criminals or insane people, but television uses these terms as a projective cultural apparatus to encourage isolating newly identified deviants from "normal people." This has the social function of coping with threats, for it justifies both dismissing and brutalizing these groups.

The image of women has a very particular significance in this regard. It is the major battleground for the development and perfection of cultural instruments of all kinds of domination. It brings the issue of power into every family and every home. The tactics of degrading women that work with women are transportable and exploitable in other areas such as class, race, and minorities. That is why I consider this a seminal issue in the theory and practice of group relations, and probably the most difficult to resolve.

Finally, the imagery of the group that is dominated is likely to exhibit images of victimization. The higher the rate of victimization in the group the more the idea of victimization is felt to be acceptable. Our television studies (e.g., Gerbner and Gross, 1976) include a violence-victim ratio that we found to be an interesting index of social power. We found that women are the victims of violence, not its perpetrators. One can see at a glance the plethora of women as victim images—women lying prostrate in the hands of males who range from noble rescuers to rapists—all showing the same power imbalance.

One of the most interesting double-barrelled cultural tactics—



most visible on television drama—is that when women or other groups that have been denied full access to power are shown as independent, adventurous, or powerful, they are portrayed as *enforcing* rather than challenging the laws that oppress them. They become policewomen, detectives, or soldiers. In other words, they are accepted into the ranks of power provided they act on behalf of the rules designed to protect the interest of the majority groups. And even then they usually need to be rescued by male partners.

What we see in the media is less a reflection of, than a counterattack on, the women's movement as a social force for structural change. Instead of mediating even the actual social change that is taking place, the media appear to be cultivating resistance and preparing for a last-ditch defense. And the gap between actual social reality and what is portrayed in the media is widening. The news that never gets through is that a new breed of women and blacks and Hispanos and old people have appeared like no other that ever lived.