

Role Reversal:
A Different Take on Gender Expression in the Media

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Gender portrayal in the media is hardly a new topic, but it is an ever-evolving socially relevant discussion point for media consumers, liberal and conservative alike. Whether it be how each gender is represented differently or the very idea of gender identity, most people have an opinion on gender representation in the media. For the purposes of this reflection, I intend to attempt to highlight ways in which the media has improved its attempts to represent gender and succeeded in the area of how men and women are depicted.

As with any highly debated topic, what one person could consider a “success” could just as easily be considered by another as a “failure” on the part of the media. Not surprisingly, there is no lack of research on the topic and most of it shines an exceedingly negative light on the media’s representation of gender issues. It is easy to find any number of educational editorials on how the media has, and continues to, cause irreparable harm to how men and women view themselves and each other.

Author Julia Wood said, “All forms of media communicate images of the sexes, many of which perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical, and limiting perceptions” (2014). This is the prevailing opinion of people who study media and its impact. These are valid observations and the media’s role and importance should not be understated. However, that being said, I believe that those media personalities, franchises and outlets that have begun to do their part to help gender misrepresentations should be recognized, set apart, and praised. Focusing only on the negative will inevitably perpetuate the behavior.

For example, the documentary viewed in class regarding how the media depicts men and refuses to attribute the commonalities of violence prevalently committed by men. The documentary, using 10-20 second clips from news reports, films, and sporting events suggested that the media is teaching men to be violent. That the movies being made and the sporting

events being produced are teaching boys and young men that “boys being boys” means boys solving any and every issue with violence. This documentary, though well intentioned completely failed to show any context for the media used and as a result failed to fully support its thesis argument.

While it is impossible to ignore the prevalence of violent images in television and movies, it seems easy to ignore the instances of men being shown in any other lights. It is easy to grab a clip from Fight Club or Rocky and show men beating each other to bloody pulps or utilizing high-powered rifles to rip holes into whoever happens to be in the way. It’s a simple feat to grab images from an altercation during a football game that shows big burly men getting in each others’ faces resolving a conflict with “violence.” The argument, however, seems to overlook a 6’3” football player channeling his inner ballroom dancer or the actor who starred in an action-packed film portraying all kinds of less than “manly” characters on SNL. Basically it would seem that any time there is a representation in the media that does not support the idea that there is a bias, negative, and harmful image of gender it is ignored.

If there is one thing that I have noticed in the past months, it is that the media does not reflect the opinions of the general public. I’ve seen very little to no positive coverage of Donald Trump, and yet he somehow is winning primaries left and right meaning that there are millions supporting him. Millions of people supporting this man baffles me, but if it weren’t for the results of these primaries and caucuses, anyone relying solely on the media would think he had zero support. I say all of that to say this; the media is obviously skewed.

The media is filled with bias too blatant to ignore, and yet while it is easy to cling to the obviously negative, that comes at the expense of the less obvious yet still prevalent positives. My opinion is based primarily on shows like “Dancing With the Stars,” a mainstream media

program that often has prominent sports figures, known for “violent” sports like American football, hockey, and wrestling fox-trotting and waltzing around a dance floor. It is a show that shines a light on men being “manly” while dancing.

One of the biggest arguments about media and gender, however, is the idea that the media shapes how each gender should behave. According to a paper written by Eoin J. Trolan, “Individuals are inundated with magazines, and newspapers containing photographs and narratives of what it means to be a woman or man, and more specifically the gender imbalance between men and women” (The Impact of the Media on Gender Inequality Within Sport 2013). The idea being that kids consume media and feel inadequate if they fail to meet the standards set in front of them by their respective sex.

Arguments suggests that children are socialized to believe that sports and masculinity are synonymous and also that women are taught sporting activities are “reserved only for men” and that “the media further produces, reproduces and sustains” such concepts (Trolan. 2013). I would not begin to presume that there is no truth to this, as to an extent, and at some point in time, this was correct. However, I do not believe this is the current or predominant trend. I am a sports fan, though I will be the first to admit that my fandom does not extend much pass football. That being said, I am aware of a number of female athletes who are readily portrayed in the media. Mia Hamm, Shawn Johnson, Venus and Serena Williams, Paige Vanzant, and Ronda Rousey just to name a few. They are involved in all types of sports and are regular fixtures in the media. With women such as those featured on television, in the movies, and in print for girls to admire and respect, why would the believe that something like the sports world is resolved for men? If the media is shining the light on these women who are professional and talented athletes, how

can society blame the media for doing something that they're not doing (at least not to the extent that critics claim)?

An article by Kaitlynn Mendes & Kumarini Silva points out just how different the media coverage of gender, specifically women's issues, is (2011). Their article points out, "While some articles have drawn attention to societal double standards which tell women to look sexually attractive at all times, yet remain sexually pure and abstinent (Laurie Penny 2011), others continue to insist that 'how a woman dresses (and behaves in that dress) tells a man what's on her mind' (Nick Freeman 2011)". I know there was a time when the double standard was overlooked by media, however, as a media consumer in 2016, I have never watched news coverage or seen media depict women being victimized as their fault. I am aware of people who believe the sort of nonsense that "blames the victim," but the reason that I personally find it appalling, is in large part because of the media that I've consumed.

I know that there is media out there that is nothing short of gender stereotype-driven and puts incredibly unhealthy standards on girls and boys alike, but ultimately I believe that we are responsible for the media we allow our kids to consume. I am the first to admit that while I do not have any children yet, I am completely unqualified to state any absolutes on the issue. My only experience is my own childhood and I can only reflect on what the media that I was exposed to as a child.

I grew up watching Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman. I know that it may not be the "hippest" show to be a fan of, but I don't care. It's a show with a strong female lead (almost obnoxiously so as I re-watch episodes as an adult), who fights stereotypes, traditional gender roles and yet still manages to experience a rewarding life (Marg Baskin). The mere existence of this show

(and its presence in prime time in the 90s) would suggest that the media has provided some strong female leads that aren't stereotypical or unrealistic.

To be fair, I grew up with parents who did not rely on the media to dictate appropriate gender roles. I was raised playing football during school recess because I enjoyed it and yet with a brother who does not play sports, is completely comfortable in his masculinity without playing sports. I know that there was a media presence that dictated that girls should enjoy playing football and that boys that should, we just did have subscribe to those opinions and I never felt pressured by the media to act, or not act, a certain way.

The fact that gender and the media is such a complicated issue is evident in the arguments surrounding Disney's "Frozen." In an article posted by written and posted by Elizabeth Stavis, she points out how the movie was polarizing to some, writing "Much has been made of the role of the two main characters, Princess Elsa and Princess Anna. Some laud Disney for finally breaking out of the traditional helpless-princess-waiting-for-her-prince stereotype, whereas others blast the film for teaching children (girls in particular) that heroines are always beautiful, helpless without a man, and mostly just out to find their prince" (2014).

That same article began by pointing out why "Cinderella" was about the most anti-feminist film Disney released and on the other side why Mulan was the "poster-child" for feminism. First and foremost, and to be honest, I loved both of those movies as a kid, and never felt like my goal in life should be to "marry well" and that my role in life is a "domestic" as apparently Cinderella was supposed to be teaching me. On the contrary, I was not particular empowered by Mulan and her courageous and gender-stereotype defying acts.

The article, entitled *Analyzing Gender Stereotypes Using Disney's Frozen*, is honestly the best proof I can find that no one will ever be happy with the media's portrayal of gender. The author points out how in the same film, stereotypes are encouraged and rejected at the same time by the same characters. Stereotypes are encouraged by Elsa singing "'Let it Go and changes from a buttoned up, repressed princess to a sexy siren. Seriously--why does 'letting go' involved sashaying hips, whipping free your long blond hair, and a slit up to the thigh on a sexy sparkling dress?'. On the flip side, "Elsa saves Anna with true love's kiss-the love of a sister, not a man, being the important distinction," an action that is distinctly not a stereotypical movie-ending.

I fully believe that media can have an enormous impact both negative and positive on gender issues. However, I have to see the media glass as half full because it is a field that I am running toward at full speed ahead, with both eyes open, knowing full well that "ignorance isn't bliss" and that there are still stereotypes to break down. An optimistic approach is my best chance at continuing to encourage the change that I have already seen taking place in the media's portrayal of gender issues.

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