Why should we focus on the media?

The various forms of media have become inseparable parts of our lives.

Our knowledge and experience of the world come to us directly or indirectly from many sources, and the media are an important source. The media play a central role in the lives of children, women and men all over the world.

Take a moment to think about how the many types of mass media have become indispensable parts of our daily lives. When roads are to be closed or water turned off, we rely on public service announcements for this information; we buy newspapers as a connection to our world; we listen to the radio at home, but also on the bus or in our cars. We can upload music and movies directly onto our cell phones and iPod.

The media influence our opinions, beliefs, attitudes, standards, and value systems, as well as our notions of self. Our ideas of who we are as women or men are continually influenced by value-laden media messages. Thus, the media have joined the ranks of social institutions such as the family, schools and religious organizations, in becoming a powerful socializing agent.

An analysis of the media consists of the critical and systematic study of the:

- messages and images conveyed
- methods used to convey these messages
- interaction between these messages and the people who receive them.

An analysis of the media, therefore, looks at techniques used by the media, and how these techniques affect readers, viewers and listeners.

The media: a window to the world?

What we see and hear in the media is usually a reflection of selected viewpoints and experiences. It is often said that the media offer a "window to the world".

But how wide is this window?

In fact, the view from the media 'window' is limited and selective. As mentioned earlier, television, film, video games, and other media are often involved in selecting, constructing and representing perceived realities—while obscuring others.

The media tend to emphasize and reinforce the priorities and values of those who create the messages, while at the same time turning a blind eye to the experiences of the others.[1] The final media product presented to consumers is the result of commercial interests, as well as political, racial, class, gender and other cultural factors.

Inevitably, the interests that prevail are those of the people who own and control the media. Often, these owners, a relatively small number of people, are not representative of the majority. How closely do the interests of wealthy business owners coincide with the interests of the working women and men who read, view, or listen to the media? Often the perspectives and experiences of some people are left out or shown in a biased way.

Media messages are therefore often stereotypical portrayals of society, based on the preconceived notions and values of a small group of people—yet impacting upon the lives of many.

Ask yourself . . .

It is said that the media offer a "window to the world" ... to whose world?

14   *Women's Media Watch Jamaica*

Whose Perspective? A Guide to Gender Analysis of Media Content   15

1.1
1.2
1.3
1.4

What is gender?

The word gender is often used interchangeably with the word sex. The two words are related, but they have very different meanings. **It is important to understand the difference between sex and gender.**

Sex is about human biology. Male and female are the categories assigned at birth, based on the presence of a penis or a vagina. Different meanings and values are attached to these biological organs and as such, society assigns females and males distinct roles, behaviours, activities—and value.

An example of this is society's acceptance of women in nurturing roles (such as nursing) and non-acceptance of men in the same fields. We **LEARN** to become girls and boys, and later women or men. We **LEARN** how we should behave as men and women; the activities deemed appropriate; and how we think women and men should relate. These learned behaviour patterns are referred to as **gender roles**.

Gender thus refers to the meanings and values we associate with femininity and masculinity or being womanly or manly. Remember that these meanings and values are dynamic—they vary between cultures and societies and may change over time. Socio-economic class, ethnicity and religion all intersect to determine a person's gender identity.

For example, a child in an inner-city community may learn different ideas about what it means to be 'man' or 'woman', compared to a child growing up in an affluent area or in a rural area. And whatever she learns about being 'woman' or 'man' may vary according to her race, class or social environment.

Another example: a young woman who decides not to have children will face social stigma or social acceptance depending on where she lives. An inner-city Jamaican community may label her as 'barren' or a 'mule', whereas a middle class setting may be more accepting of a young career woman who makes such a choice.

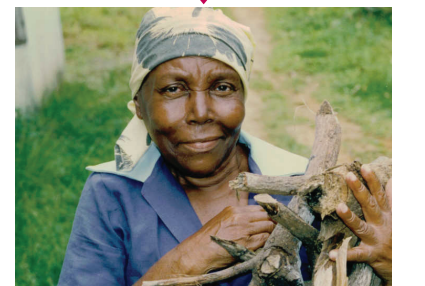WITH THE POWER OF KNOWLEDGE, NO DESTINATION WILL BE OUT OF HER REACH.

Years ago, society allocated specific work to women inside and outside the home. Today, women are in leadership roles, working as airline pilots and civil engineers. Men can choose to enter nursing or cosmetology, although such moves are uncommon and highly shaped by culture. We see, then, that change is possible and that gender is dynamic.
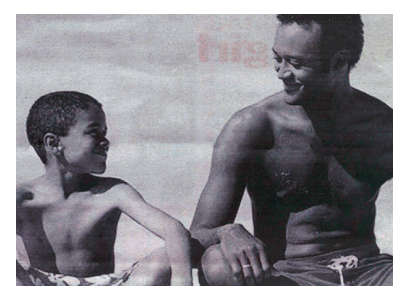
Think about it . . .

Women have different femininities, men have different masculinities . . . but we are all women and men.

My SEX is female, my GENDER is woman.

We are ALL women

We are ALL men

My SEX is male, my GENDER is man.

1.2

1.3

1.4

18   *Women's Media Watch Jamaica*

Whose Perspective? A Guide to Gender Analysis of Media Content   19

How do the mass media portray stereotypes?

The media often use stereotypes to portray people, communities and societies. In this way social realities are often simplified, with different groups of people being placed into boxes on the basis of stereotyped ideas. But whose ideas and values are used? Let's look at some social categories to answer that question ...

Persons of lighter complexions tend to be idealised in mainstream media (top, an ad for moisturizer; bottom, a photo used in advertisements.)

Class

White-collar professionals, business persons and politicians are often represented in mainstream media, along with their values and views. Rural and inner-city persons and their communities are less visible and their viewpoints are under-represented or not given at all. When their experiences are presented, it is often in a way that demeans or ridicules them.

Race/Ethnicity/Shade of Colour

Persons of lighter complexions tend to be idealised in mainstream media. The treatment of persons who are visibly black or belong to other non-white ethnic groups varies from mainstream media to those media specifically targeting certain ethnicities. In Caribbean mainstream media, we notice different treatment of persons from the various ethnicities and shades of colour who make up our diverse region.

Gender

Research around the world shows that more men than women appear as newsmakers in the media. For every woman who appears in the news, there are five men, despite the fact that women account for more than half (52%) of the world's population.[4] In "hard news" such as business, finance and politics, men are overwhelmingly represented. Women, on the other hand, are most often represented in "soft news" such as entertainment and fashion, 'lifestyle', social services and family relations.[5]

What do you think?

When we look at biases in the media, it raises the question of whose values and whose ideals are being promoted.

We are led to ask what value we have come to accept as the norm and why?

Family Structure

Advertisements tend to portray a nuclear family, ignoring the many different types of family structure that exist in the Caribbean. This limited portrayal is in sharp contrast to the reality that many women are heads of households throughout the region. Nearly half (45%) of all households in Jamaica are headed by women (PIOJ Survey of Living Conditions, 2007) and in Barbados 58% are headed by women.[6]

Sexuality

Throughout the media sexuality is used to attract viewers, readers and listeners. In particular, advertising and many forms of entertainment media exploit women's and men's sexuality to attract consumers. We have all heard the expression "sex sells". Often, sexuality is over-emphasized or distorted, resulting in unrealistic portrayals of both male and female sexuality and unachievable sexual "ideals".

Disability

Persons with disabilities are seldom portrayed in the media and their interests are rarely represented.

What about showing successful women and men with disabilities as media ideals? Persons with disabilities are seldom seen selling trendy commercial products. Aren't their lives important too?

28   *Women's Media Watch Jamaica*

Whose Perspective? A Guide to Gender Analysis of Media Content   29

Power and Violence in Video Games

The video game industry has produced many non-violent computer and video games, which provide practice in the use of motor and spatial skills, and problem solving and logic. However, 'action' and fantasy games increasingly expose children and particularly men to extremes of gender stereotyping and violence—including sexual violence. These games vividly transmit cultural messages about male power and female subordination. Characters may appear surreal—part machine—but distinctly male and with excessive physical strength.

In such games:

- success as a player is achieved through violence and killing
- violence works as a solution
- players are rewarded by being active participants in violence

In video games characters appear in highly stereotyped gender roles: men are aggressive, sexually powerful and ruthless; women are highly sexualized. In Duke Nukem for example, players shoot or kill naked and bound females who are portrayed as strippers or 'prostitutes'. In the top-selling video game Grand Theft Auto, players can beat and kill prostitutes after having sex with them. What might be the effect of linking sexuality and violence in this way?

As with movies, even when women are portrayed as combatants (eg. Lara Croft: Tomb Raider) a very traditional female sexuality is emphasized (large breasts, tiny waists, large buttocks). Is there is an inextricable link between physical strength and sexuality? Are women being over sexualised?

Clearly, some of the key belief systems of our culture relating to femininity, masculinity and power, come into focus when viewing video games.[19]

For some children who see many hours of television violence each day, violence appears normal and inevitable, it may reinforce their worst fears, they become insecure and suspicious of others, and yet they come to see violence as an effective way to solve problems.

Source: Gerbner, G. (1994). Reclaiming our Cultural Mythology: Television's Global Marketing Strategy Creates a Damaging and Alienated Window on the World., p.40, The Ecology of Justice, retrieved Nov. 1, 2007 from http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC38/Gerbner.htm

How Does Media Violence Affect Young Viewers?

- **Imitation**
  Youngsters often imitate positive behaviour they see in the media—but they also may imitate violence and aggression in media.

- **Violent Heroes**
  Youngsters emulate media 'heroes' whom they find appealing, who are powerful—and solve problems using violence.

- **Violence Rewarded and Justified**
  Violence that is rewarded and brings success teaches that violence is an acceptable response to conflict. Youngsters will imitate violence if it seems "okay to be violent as long as you are in the right."

- **Realistic Violence**
  Young people respond emotionally to realistic portrayals of violence, such as graphic violence in news. Emotional responses vary greatly.

- **Desensitization**
  Repeated exposure to violence leads to desensitization—it numbs emotional reactions to it. There is less concern about victims of attacks.

- **Increased Appetite for Violence**
  Desensitization increases tolerance of violence: the more violence some viewers get, the more they want.

- **Increased Fears**
  Media's emphasis on violence makes the world look like a frightening place. Fearful children may become either victims or aggressors.

- **Culture of Disrespect**
  A steady diet of violent entertainment feeds a culture of disrespect so that abusive behaviour seems normal.

Source: American Medical Association 1996

2.2

2.3

78 *Women's Media Watch Jamaica*

Whose Perspective? A Guide to Gender Analysis of Media Content 79