Chapter 9

Sexism in the Media?

Mandy Merck

A request for a contribution to this collection on sexism in the media presents certain difficulties. The phrase itself has come to suggest a view of the representation of women, indeed of representation in general, now widely debated within the left and the women's movement. To make a virtue of necessity, then, this article takes as its subject a brief review of that debate and an investigation of its implications for feminist analysis.

'Sexism . . . '?

In 1974 the American textbook publishing company, McGraw-Hill, issued 'guidelines for equal treatment of the sexes' to its editorial staff and authors. 'The word sexism', the guidelines state, 'was coined, by analogy to racism, to denote discrimination based on gender. In its original sense, sexism referred to prejudice against the female sex. In a broader sense, the term now indicates any arbitrary stereotyping of males and females on the basis of their gender.'

Similar directions issued by another US publisher, Scott Foresman, put the matter like this: 'Sexism refers to all those attitudes and actions which relegate women to a secondary and inferior status in society. Textbooks are sexist if they omit the actions and achievements of women, if they demean women by using patronizing
language or if they show women only in stereotyped roles with less than the full range of human interests, traits and capabilities.'

These definitions, with their use of terms like 'prejudice' and 'stereotype', conformed to similar understandings in this country. Indeed, the American guidelines were models for a draft 'non-sexist code of practice' adopted by a conference of Women in the Communications Industries held in London in 1975: for example, 'There should be no sex stereotyping of abilities, characteristics, interests or activities.'

Such understandings culminated in *Is This Your Life? Images of Women in the Media*, the first book-length investigation of the representation of women in the mass media published in this country. The Introduction reads:

Our aim is to identify the stereotypes which are still generally accepted in the mass media, and to question whether they are relevant or in the best interests of women. We think we should look closely at how our attitudes are conditioned, and even manipulated, by the media through selection and suggestion. Are the images put out real ones? In what ways are they 'unreal'? And is this due to omission or falsification?

Such a position throws up a host of questions: What would constitute 'reality' in the presentation of women? Are terms like 'conditioning' or 'manipulation' appropriate descriptions of our relation to the mass media? Are the individual media themselves undifferentiated and neutral, functioning only as envelopes around true or false messages? Is the coverage of women's 'achievements' necessarily liberating? Unless we ask such questions, I would argue, feminist intervention within the media are condemned to idealism—lacking analysis either of the materiality of our subordination or of the media operations which contribute to it.

That said, it would be equally idealist to neglect the 'anti-sexist' agitation conducted thus far. The American publishing codes, it should first be noted, were produced under severe legal and financial imperatives. Federally funded American educational bodies are now forbidden by law to purchase teaching or reference materials deemed sexually discriminatory. In Britain, despite the Equal Pay Act and the 1975 Sex Discrimination Act, no such prohibitions exist, although a test case over the 1975 Act's provisions on educational opportunities