

# Gender Dimension in Media and Communication Studies: Main Concepts and Illustrations in Mass Mediated Texts.

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## Abstract

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This article defends the notion that incorporation of the gender dimension in all Communication and Media studies is highly desirable because of its contribution to the study of ideology, ethics, and balance in media. The first part of the article explores the main reasons for the need of such transversal integration of gender studies in university curricula, especially in the field of Communication and Media Studies and indicates the main concepts that should be part of undergraduate degrees that include these areas. The second part of the article provides an illustration of the pervasive presence of gender bias in mass mediated texts including mainstream news stories and television programs. The exposition of insights related to gender stereotypes and biases in these two areas are intended as illustrative examples that point to the range and significance of scholarship on gender and communication/media more generally.

**Key words:** gender, media, stereotype, bias, ideology, news, television, Spain, ethics, education

**Resumen.** *La perspectiva de género en los medios y los estudios de comunicación: conceptos clave y ejemplos*

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En este artículo se defiende la idea de que la incorporación de la dimensión de género en los estudios de comunicación y medios es muy conveniente debido a su contribución al estudio de la ideología, la ética, y el equilibrio en los medios de comunicación. En la primera parte del artículo se exploran las principales razones de la necesidad de esta integración transversal de los estudios de género en los programas universitarios, especialmente en el campo de la Comunicación y Estudios de los Medios e indica los principales conceptos que deben formar parte de títulos de grado que incluyen estas áreas. La segunda parte del artículo proporciona un ejemplo de la presencia dominante de los prejuicios de género en noticias y programas de televisión.

**Palabras Clave:** género, medios de comunicación, estereotipo, prejuicio, ideología, noticias, televisión, España, ética, educación

## Introduction

The aim of this article is two-fold. First, it seeks to detail the rationale behind the urgent need to include the gender dimension in Communication and Media studies and to accomplish such purpose it details the main concepts and learning results to be included in the curricular agenda. Second, it attests to the benefits that students would derive from such knowledge of gender studies by exploring the pervasive presence of gender bias in television programs. The article intends to provide an illustration of the advantages that undergraduate students would obtain from the implementation of gender studies from both a theoretical and an applied perspective.

This article defends the notion that incorporation of the gender dimension in all Communication and Media studies is highly desirable. The first part of the article explores the main reasons for the need of such transversal integration of gender studies in university curricula, especially in the field of Communication and Media Studies and indicates the main concepts that should be part of undergraduate degrees that include these areas. The second part of the article provides an illustration of the pervasive presence of gender bias in mass mediated texts including mainstream news stories and television programs. The discussion of these two areas is intended to provide elaborated examples of the operation of stereotypes and biases in just two major areas of media. In outlining the specifics of the biases that have existed in these two types of media, and in discussing their implications as elaborated in scholarly works related to them, our exposition intends to illustrate the importance of undergraduate course work at the intersection of Gender Studies and Communication/Media Studies.

It is particularly important that students majoring in Communication and Media Studies be exposed to the significant field of gender studies as it intersects with their subject matter because of the important role media play in constructing our ideas about social reality. It is now a widely accepted truth that the mass media are instrumental in forming our ideas about identity, values, and social norms and roles. However, although a majority of scholars may agree about the important influence of mass media on these important elements individual and social thought, students require exposure to these insights as well as the provision of specific illustrative examples in order to fully grasp their implications. Course work that incorporates theoretical material about the social construction of reality, ethics and mass media, and ideological functions of mainstream media is essential to any university-level education in Communication and Mass Media. In these areas, the incorporation of analyses of the operations of gender stereotypes and gender biases will be a natural fit. Thus, it is likely that universities are already offering courses that cover general concepts and theories amenable to the inclusion of gender-based analyses. Our discussion below illustrates two such areas.

## 2. Gender dimension in Communication and Media Studies: main concepts and learning outcomes.

This section details the contents and learning outcomes that students should acquire in order to develop professionally in an ethical and well-informed manner. As Rosalind Gill notes, gender studies in this field have explored the relationship between the fact that we live in a world stratified along the lines of gender, race, ethnicity and class—among other variables—in which the privileges, disadvantages and exclusions associated with such categories are unevenly distributed and the reality that we live in a world increasingly saturated by media and information and communication technologies (2007: 7). In such context, Communication and Media students will enhance their appreciation of the cultural constructions of the world by understanding how such images and texts are connected to patterns of inequality and power struggles. Gender analyses of media aim to understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality and oppression. In the same manner in which media are involved in constructing our representations of reality, media are actively involved in producing gender conceptualizations. As Teresa de Lauretis suggests, gender is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema and the media, as well as institutional discourses and critical practices (1987: 8).

Universities are presently conceived as centers in which students develop the skills, knowledge, and abilities necessary to create a more civil and humane world. Jesuit universities, in particular, emphasize values such as humanity, justice and sustainability. See, for example, Santa Clara's statement: "Santa Clara University will educate citizens and leaders of competence, conscience, and compassion and cultivate knowledge and faith to build a more humane, just, and sustainable world"<sup>1</sup>. In that sense, students should be provided adequate instruction to learn to develop a way of communicating that is strongly based in an acceptance and appreciation of others and that involves communicating in ways that express respect for others regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, or any other quality. The following three concepts will now be explored: sex and gender, stereotypes and myths in social and political constructions, and message elaboration and evaluation. They are all basic, indispensable, fundamental concepts that all students in Communication and Media studies should know. At the end of the explanation of each concept, the expected learning outcomes are mentioned.

### 2.1. *Sex and Gender*

For a good understanding on the interactions and negotiations present in the intersections of gender, media and culture, students should start by acquiring a clear understanding about the concepts of sex and gender. Sex

1. <http://www.scu.edu/jesuit/University-Mission.cfm> (Accessed June 25, 2014).

is a designation based on biology whereas gender is socially, historically and culturally expressed. As Julia Wood explains, what gender means depends heavily on cultural values and practices; a culture's definition of masculinity and femininity shape expectations about how women and men should communicate; and how individuals communicate establishes meanings of gender that, in turn, influence cultural views (2009, 20).

The elaboration of the multiple perspectives and nuances of such distinction has undergone a laborious path from authors such as Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan to more recent elaborations by Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig and Judith Butler, among others. A basic exploration of such figures and major contributions should be provided, but to facilitate the explanation and dissemination of such concepts there are a number of excellent textbooks which provide a complete and accurate account of such terms, such as the one by Julia Wood, which details sex and gender particularities and historical developments. Wood emphasizes that gender is a social, symbolic construct that varies across cultures, over time within a given culture, over the course of individuals' lifespans, and in relation to the other gender (2009, 23-4) and suggests that more important than whether biological differences exist is how we perceive and treat differences (2009, 23). She includes concepts such as intersexuality and uses examples of transsexual and transgendered individuals to strengthen her explorations of sex and gender differences; transgendered, transsexed, and intersexed people challenge the idea that sex and gender are dualities that is, that male and female, masculine and feminine are opposite, stable, and the only two possibilities (2009, 26). The author provides numerous examples taken from daily life situations which help students relate to the notions being explained, but, more relevantly, she insists on the constant options for challenge, change and intervention: "The fact that the social meanings of gender are taught to us does not mean we are passive recipients of cultural meanings. We make choices to accept cultural prescriptions or to modify or reject them. Individuals who internalize and embody cultural prescriptions for gender reinforce existing social views. People who reject conventional prescriptions and step outside of social meanings for gender often provoke changes in cultural views" (2009, 24-5). To implement teaching of these concepts a variety of materials can be added to readings such as newspapers articles, television series, songs, films, video clips or artists manifestations of various kinds, to explore and analyze gender representations and gender performances.

The learning outcomes for this concept include an understanding of the differences of sex and gender and an appreciation of the complex and flexible nature of gender constructions. A basic knowledge of the key figures in the history of feminist studies should be provided. Students should be able to recognize their capacity for challenge, intervention and change in gender elaborations. Learning outcomes should incorporate a reflection on each student's position regarding gender in their culture in terms of expectation, identification and intervention.

## *2.2. Stereotypes and myths in social and political constructions.*

To understand the presence of stereotypes and myths throughout history and in our contemporary societies, it is necessary to begin by underlining the connections among concepts such as culture, communication and gender. Each culture consists of political and financial structures, primarily institutions, and practices that reflect and uphold a particular social order. As Julia Wood explains, “they do this by defining certain social groups, values, expectations, meanings, and patterns of behavior as natural and good and others as unnatural, bad, or wrong. Because gender is central to cultural life, society’s views of gender are reflected in and promoted by a range of social structures and practices” (2009, 30), and adds that one of the primary practices that structures society is communication: “We are surrounded by communication that announces social views of gender and seeks to persuade us that these are natural, correct ways for men and women to be and to behave” (2009, 30). In such context, students should be able to understand and recognize that the main barrier to gender equality continues to be gender stereotyping and various mythical differences perceived by society.

Feminist Studies have produced a rich and sophisticated body of research on various types of media and artistic productions (especially rich in the fields of literature and film), and therefore it is quite easy to access pertinent theoretical sources to be implemented in courses and workshops. Feminist literary critics, from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to Nancy K. Miller and Toril Moi, and feminist film critics such as Mary Ann Doane, Laura Mulvey and Kaja Silverman provide excellent examples of both theoretical and practical insights in their respective fields. Recently, Sheryl Sandberg has revived the debate by referring to “stereotype threat”, a phenomenon by which members of a group are likely to perform according to a negative stereotype when made aware of it (2013: 22). She specifically focus on the stereotype of a working woman, which is, she writes, “rarely attractive”, and adds: “Popular culture has long portrayed successful working women as so consumed by their careers that they have no personal life” (2013: 22).

In this case it is particularly relevant to provide students with current examples of newspapers articles, television commercials and series, and films to elicit analyses that underscore stereotypes and myths portrayed in such texts. Students are particularly original and creative when given opportunities for subverting or reversing original texts to eliminate such stereotypes and myths. The learning outcomes for these concepts include awareness and ability to critically recognize gender stereotypes and myths in past and present media texts and contexts and to provide responses that challenge such constructions.

## *2.3. Message elaboration and evaluation.*

This last section conceptually and logically follows the previous ones. As a last step in the inclusion of the gender dimension in Communication

and Media Studies, the competence of Critical Thinking should be deeply developed to provide students with the necessary skills and strategies to be able to evaluate media messages. Such competence, as elaborated by the University of Deusto<sup>2</sup> involves questioning the underlying assumptions behind our usual ways of thinking and acting, and then, on the basis of this critical questioning, being willing to think and act differently. Critical thinking is *why* thinking: Why are things like that? Why can't things be some other way? Why do you think things are like that? Why would anyone want things to be like that? Consequently, we will say that students have developed the *competence of critical thinking* to the extent that they wonder about things and are interested in the foundations underlying their own and others' ideas, actions, judgments and evaluations.

It is necessary to develop critical thinking in order to be able to recognize the conditions under which a given set of ideas can be transformed into knowledge or beliefs that will have a decisive influence on decisions and actions, as well as the way in which people construct their own mentalities based on ideologies. Critical Thinking in relation to Gender Studies is fundamental in exploring underlying ideological constructions in all kind of visual and narrative texts that are part of our daily experience. In the case of media messages, students should be provided with the necessary message evaluation techniques such as concept testing, attitude and opinion tests, emotional reaction texts and persuasion analysis, among others, to effectively implement evaluation.

Basic notions on the construction of messages in different media (press, television and film) need to be briefly explored to promote an understanding of how messages are encoded from an ideological and political perspective so that expected responses from audiences are already incorporated in the messages. The concept of power is key in understanding gender negotiations in public life; as Amy Allen has noted, Gender Studies are interested in analyzing power because they have an interest in understanding, critiquing, and ultimately challenging the multiple array of unjust power relations affecting women in contemporary societies, including sexism, racism, heterosexism, and class oppression (1999). As learning outcomes, students should be, first, capable of recognizing and evaluating messages with a sharp view on elaborations of gender, race, sexual orientation and other pertinent categories, and, second, as future producers of messages in their different capacities as professionals in the field of media, should develop an ongoing awareness that may reject any elaboration or construction of messages that oppose equality, ethical thinking and justice.

2. [http://intranet.deusto.es/rectorado/Innovacion\\_y\\_calidad/Competencias%20Genericas\\_Ingles/03%20pensamiento%20critico\\_ingles.pdf](http://intranet.deusto.es/rectorado/Innovacion_y_calidad/Competencias%20Genericas_Ingles/03%20pensamiento%20critico_ingles.pdf) (accessed May 5, 2014).

### 3. Gender bias in mainstream news and television

For many years, universities around the world have made courses on the study of gender available to their undergraduate students in a wide range of fields. In particular, students of liberal arts, humanities, and social sciences have had access to a range of these courses. It is especially important that students majoring in Communication and Media Studies be exposed to the significant field of Gender Studies as it intersects with their subject matter because of the role media play in constructing our ideas about social reality. For example, in a recent study on the influence of media in such mental conceptualization of social issues, 70% of Spanish people surveyed said that they learned about domestic violence from the media, and that they did not have first-hand knowledge of this issue<sup>3</sup>. It is important that the people we are training to be the writers and producers of media in the future have a solid grasp of gender-related issues, that they understand and are able to convey the substantive facts of these issues, and that they have a true appreciation of the ways in which existing media are currently shaping their views of important social and political issues as well as the identities and abilities of key social and political figures. Without specific education on the ways in which communications media influence our thoughts, preferences, beliefs, identities, and actions, the creators of future media will not have the skills in critical thinking and message construction that will be necessary in the coming years. Without specific exposure to the ways in which media biases have created social harms, they will not be able to avoid further perpetuation of these harms. Gender Studies related to media and message production emphasize social justice for all individuals within a society, and teach ethical presentation of the facts in a changing environment. A brief look at some of the key biases in news and television will serve as an illustration of the range and significance of gender bias in mass media. These biases can only be reduced with the education and improved insight and understanding of the writers and producers of the future.

#### 3.1. *News/Journalism*

The study of gender bias in news is very broad and encompasses a wide variety of specific subject matter. Mainstream news media are responsible for creating a fair and accurate impression of issues and events in a way that is as unbiased and ethical as possible. In spite of this requirement, news media have been characterized by certain tendencies that have worked against

3. In a survey carried out by the authors of *Tratamiento de la violencia de género en la prensa vasca* (Analysis of Violence Against Women in Basque Press), the results show that 69,97% of the respondents affirm that their only source of knowledge and information about violence against women is what they read or hear in the media (2003).

their ability to deliver on these promises. They have tended to favor personal explanations for problems and issues, focus on dramatic conflict when possible, and often omit central elements of historical background and structural explanations. Official sources and explanations are usually favored over all others. Reporters, quoted sources, and subjects of news are predominantly (approximately 80%) male (Burke and Mazzarella, 2008). The most significant are biases in news coverage of gendered violence, coverage of campaigns and politics (Burke and Mazzarella, 2008), and coverage of sports performance (Billings and Holt Duke, 2010).

When these characteristics are put in place in the production of stories related to gendered violence, such as in stories about sexual assault and wife abuse, victims have often been blamed for their own assaults and perpetrators have been understood as honorable individuals whose careers and future might be ruined by accusations of violence (see Benedict, 1992; Moorti, 2002; Meyers, 1997). News media have been very slow to reflect the reality that a preponderance of gendered violence incidents are perpetrated by men who know their victims, in cases of date and acquaintance rape, sexual harassment, and wife battering (see Cucklanz, 1996). Structural elements such as power imbalances in interpersonal relationships contribute to these problems, but without an understanding of such power imbalances, news media tend to ignore crimes by perpetrators who know their victims, focusing instead on “stranger danger” and cautioning women to be vigilant in preventing their own victimization. By placing the responsibility for prevention on potential victims or targets, media often inadvertently blame women again. Passive voice construction of stories often eliminates male perpetrators from headlines (i.e. *Woman Was Raped*), placing even more focus on victims.

News media have also contributed to bias against female candidates for political office, and even to bias against female office-holders. Studies of news from many countries have shown that male and female candidates have been treated differently by news media (Cantrell and Bachman, 2008). Stories focusing on “viability” of female candidates rather than stances on issues reinforce the idea that female politicians cannot win, without sufficiently emphasizing their positions on relevant political issues or qualifications for office. Coverage of female candidates and office-holders often treats them as women first and politicians second, with stories mentioning their clothing, hairstyle, family composition and responsibilities, personal preferences, and other elements of taste related to the private sphere. Stances on political issues are mentioned more often for male candidates, and professional titles of male candidates and office-holders are included in stories more often than those of women (Rhode, 1997). Researchers believe that these accumulated biases against female candidates and office-holders are significant factors in the continuing under-representation of women in positions of political power in many nations. Unless journalism students learn about these biases, they may simply repeat them in their future creation of news stories, further jeopardizing the ability of female candidates to operate on a level playing field in the political arena.

Sports news is also characterized by significant gender bias (Billings and Holt Duke, 2010). In addition to the notable preference given to the sporting achievements of men and boys over girls and women, sport news about female athletes often includes many other biases. Photos of female athletes are often sexualized, emphasizing scant clothing and/or sexualized parts of the body. Photos of female athletes seldom depict physical exertion, strength, and determination. In fact, many photographs of female athletes depict them outside the realm of sport altogether. Whereas male athletes are most likely to be pictured in a moment of athletic triumph or struggle, female athletes are most often shown with street clothing and make-up, or in physically appealing or sexualized moments of physical action. Explanations for women's sporting triumphs and successes are more often attributed to sources outside themselves, whereas peak performance is usually attributed to male athletes. In Olympic coverage, women are depicted more often in unsuccessful performances or contests than are male athletes. Male athletes are more often treated as national symbols of success and valor than are women. The female athletes with the highest income from endorsements are often those who are most traditionally beautiful rather than those who with the highest athletic achievement. All of these gendered differences in the coverage contribute to the general idea that sports are more suitable for men than women, and that women's athletic achievements are not as significant as those of men.

### *3.2. Television*

Apart from television news, which exhibits the biases described in the previous section, other genres of television programming have been characterized by significant gender biases as well. As Gaye Tuchman noted as early as 1978, television was characterized by "symbolic annihilation of women," meaning that women were vastly under-represented. Through the 1970s, women and girls accounted for only about 25% of characters on US prime-time television. This percentage has improved over time as writers and producers have come to understand gender bias and correct for it. Historically, female characters have been most likely to be depicted as victims of violence or as housewives. Female characters with successful paid work have been extremely unlikely to enjoy satisfying personal lives, and women with power have often been evil characters and/or wielded their power through sexuality. On detective and police genre programs, female police officers have been somewhat rare, and depictions that resist using the female agent as bait for sexual offenders have been even more rare (Mizejewski, 2004). Rescuers are more likely to be male, while those being rescued are more likely to be female. Males are more often perpetrators of violence and females are more often victims (Cuklanz, 1996). Certain genres of television programming have been understood as gendered, with detective programs, for example, representing the action, task orientation, plot resolution, and use of violence to solve problems that characterize masculine genres (Fiske,

1987). Good masculinity is understood as protective of women and society generally, while bad men harm women and are not productive members of society. Soap operas, the most commonly studied feminine genre, are characterized by multiple plots, a process orientation, lack of plot resolution, and excessive iterations of emotionally charged events (Fiske, 1987; Brown, 1994; Modelski, 1984). Good women suffer in spite of their nurturing and care of others, while bad women manipulate others for their own pleasure and power.

Other genres of television have tended to exhibit gender bias in other ways. Situation comedies, a place where many television “firsts,” such as the first program centering on a single working woman, have tended to depict scenarios in which patriarchal power can be questioned by in the end is proven benign and unproblematic. Reality programming related to physical beauty and heterosexual romance has proliferated. In many ways these programs have brought increased stereotyping of women as vain, emotional, and competitive with other women over the attention of men. Male contestants are often placed into physical competition with each other, are able to select from among women, and are often depicted as needing help with interpersonal relationships and romance. In this and other media, women have superior knowledge and ability in interpersonal relationships and bear the responsibility for making relationships work.

Examination of the representation of gender in mass media is essential for the education of future practitioners. Without it, current biases and shortcomings will likely be perpetuated, and ethical treatment of important subjects such as violent victimization and political campaigns will be compromised. As long as our media continue to treat women differently from men, our understanding of their potentials will diverge, impinging on the development of a just society where each individual is able to pursue and develop their own strengths free of the limiting framework of stereotyping and inaccurate knowledge. Communication and media majors who are not destined to work in communications industries will gain essential skills in critical thinking and media literacy, and will become more intelligent and exacting consumers of media themselves. Perhaps most significantly, our own understanding of the society in which we live, and the individuals who make up our society, will become more complete and less constrained by the limitations of gender stereotypes and gender bias.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Through the discussion above, it can be seen that if these concepts are introduced and the learning outcomes achieved, a significant improvement in the quality of students’ education will be achieved. Another fact that cannot be dismissed is the potential of such students to become future researchers and to incorporate the gender dimension in Communication scholarship of all kinds. As will be seen in the following section, there is a strong deficit of

such incorporation of the gender dimension in Communication and Media Studies in most Spanish universities; as an example of the equivalent lack of such relevance in research, the recently published volume titled *Investigar la comunicación en España* (To Research Investigation in Spain) is a 900 page book in which the most prominent specialists in the field of Communication explore every possible aspect connected to Communication Studies. Although an excellent and most complete work, it must be noted that there is not one single article devoted to gender analysis or Gender Studies. Future efforts can't follow along these lines and the inclusion of the younger generations in research will be more effective in they have profited from the benefit of the exploration of gender.

The intersections of Gender Studies and Communication Studies have been elaborated in a range of contexts across media and geographical regions. The above discussion of US scholarship on the relevance of gender to mainstream news coverage and television programming is intended as a sample illustrating the broad range of insights that have been provided by such scholarship. It is important that students in Spain are introduced to this knowledge, and that they are encouraged to contribute to the production of similar analyses of their own media environment. Without these developments, they will be missing important educational elements that are widely available to students across the globe. With the additional of access to these important subjects at the intersection of Gender Studies and Communication Studies, students will be better able to understand and contribute to their own media environment to produce media texts that are more equitable, accurate, fair, and ethically balanced. These improvements should not be considered optional, but rather absolutely essential to university education in the coming years.

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