

Reclaiming the media for a progressive feminist future

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In April 2004, at the height of the American presidential horserace, more than one million protesters attended the 'March for Women's Lives' in Washington, D.C. to support a feminist agenda on reproductive rights, health care, violence against women, poverty, global affairs and more.

Their energy and passion were palpable. For once, high school hipsters and Older Women's League grandmothers shared the same fashion sense, decked out in 'This is what a feminist looks like' tee-shirts. Fresh-faced teens in pink 'SuperWomen for Justice' capes skipped behind a college student from the Young People's All Access Contingent who had scrawled the letters 'MINE' over her chest, naked but for strategically placed lefty stickers covering her nipples.

The Black Women's Health Imperative and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health argued that access to contraception, sex education, health care and a financial safety net are crucial to women's survival, while Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice America advocated unqualified support for abortion rights in light of the tenuous make-up of the Supreme Court. Posters proclaiming familiar demands ('Get your rosaries out of our ovaries!') waved alongside emerging progressive feminist concerns ('Cancel third world debt – money for women's health!'), as communities asserting new political clout reminded politicians to take heed ('APAs Vote Pro-Choice,' read signs held by the National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum).

Together, this multi-generational crowd of international human rights lawyers, ob-gyn students, queer activists, anti-war protestors, environmentalists, sexual assault survivors, independent mediamakers and Radical Cheerleading bootyshakers comprised the largest single political demonstration in DC history.

Yet faced with a women's rights demo bigger than any 1960s civil rights or anti-war march, American media responded with a whimper, undercounting the marchers' numbers (citing 'thousands' or 'hundreds of thousands' instead of more than a million) and underestimating the protesters' political significance, keeping the story in the news cycle typically for just one day... if that.

Time magazine, which infamously declared feminism 'dead' in a 1998 cover story, ignored the march entirely. Outlets like Newsday, Fox News and CNN played bait-and-switch, covering the march as an excuse to highlight a few hundred anti-abortion counter-protesters, as if their minute presence was equal in size and newsworthiness.

Amid the largest gathering of female leaders, activists, academics and professionals in the history of the United States, the Baltimore Sun gave the first three quotes of their women's rights protest story to men — the first to a male leader of the ACLU, and the second and third to a right wing football coach-turned-conservative activist.

Even the Washington Post's Hank Stuever, who wrote one of the only pieces addressing the broad range of concerns raised at the march, couldn't help trivializing the women themselves, writing, 'This is what a feminist looks like: Like a Powerpuff Girl went to college and got tattoos and somehow managed to keep great skin.'

Overall, media implied that the demonstration would have little impact on the U.S. presidential race, never acknowledging that dismissive coverage — including march stories buried off the front pages, reports focused primarily on celebrity attendees, and news analysts insisting that war, terrorism and the economy mattered more than feminist concerns — might lead the public to believe that women's rights are irrelevant in an election year.

The case for progressive feminist media reform

How did we get here? After the election, seasoned activists and apolitical liberals alike began asking how George W. Bush could have hoodwinked so many low-income, minority and women voters into casting their ballots for a corporate-welfare supporting, job squandering, sex-ed slashing, racial profiling, archconservative administration antithetical to their interests.

Most of the theories bandied about — Karl Rove out-organized us! Kerry forgot his antiwar roots! — were certainly factors, but they miss the bigger picture. More important than any single botched campaign strategy is the overarching failure of the left to understand the role corporate media plays in shaping public opinion, public policy and, ultimately, political leadership.

As much as anything else, the election was the culmination of the American left's failure to prioritize not just the systematic sidelining of the voices of women, people of color, labor and other public interest representatives in media content, as documented by a long list of studies

from media monitoring groups such as FAIR - Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (Fair.org), Women In Media & News – WIMN (WIMNOnline.org), the Annenberg Public Policy Center (Annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/) and We Interrupt This Message (Interrupt.org), but also structural and institutional biases within the industry, which include deregulation, corporate consolidation, advertising and economic pressures, and access and distribution issues.

To regain political power, U.S. progressives must build a well-funded, media literate, populist movement for media democracy. We need to brace ourselves for an uphill but crucial battle to challenge three decades of right-wing media organizing aimed at shifting and redefining the terms of public debate, break up the censorious media monopolies, and advocate for the public good — not corporate profit—to be the prime motivating factor in news and entertainment production.

Countering sexist media content

Let's start with the terms of public debate. Fourteen years ago, journalist Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* documented how the religious right used the mainstream media to discredit feminism through a 'coup by euphemism,' in which repressive, regressive opposition to women's reproductive rights, sexual freedom and women's mass entry into the workplace was relabelled 'pro-life,' 'pro-motherhood,' and 'pro-family.' Media happily adopted these new Orwellian terms of debate as further ammo in their long-standing effort to portray the women's movement as fringe, radical and un-American.

Backlash exposed the right wing's linguistic blueprints for political success but, like most feminist journalists and theorists, Faludi's conclusions were sidelined even on the left (one glance at the index page of *The Nation*, the country's largest liberal newsweekly, shows a contributors' list that is still a little too male and a little too pale). Had the mainstream media — or even the left press — taken Faludi's intensely researched findings about the war on women seriously and used them to inform our activism, the left would have been better positioned to effectively counter nearly fifteen years of conservative attacks on a range of critical social justice issues such as welfare, affirmative action, global trade and nuclear proliferation.

As Air America radio host Laura Flanders says, women are the canaries in the coal mine of American politics. To win back our country in the years to come we must loudly and consistently challenge the dishonest — yet devastatingly effective — conservative framing of feminist and social justice issues in the corporate media.

There are a number of ways we can reframe the debate on our issues:

- Turn the corporate media monologue into a dialogue: contact local, regional and national media outlets with phone calls, letters to the editor and emails on a regular basis, just as the right does. Our communication efforts should be both defensive (responding to biased coverage every time we notice our issues being ignored or seriously distorted) and offensive (we must train ourselves to package our work in compelling, accessible, persuasive ways, and to invest the time and resources it takes to get our own messages heard).

- Do opposition research; counter misrepresentations and attacks: Anticipate conservative media spin and counter inaccuracy with reasoned arguments and factual information. For example, when news outlets trot out regressive terms like 'cry rape' or report victims' clothing and sexual history, we should have letters and talking points 'in the can' to debunk dangerous myths and call for ethical coverage.

- Correct the record: For example, remind media outlets discussing 'partial birth abortion' that this imprecise and inflammatory term does not refer to an actual medical procedure but is a political concept fabricated by conservative groups to decrease public support for abortion rights.

- Expose biased framing: For example, rather than investigating the wide-ranging implications of the Bush administration's assault on affirmative action, this is how Peter Jennings set up ABC's World News Tonight coverage of Martin Luther King Day in 2003: 'At home, on Martin Luther King Day, President Bush and race: Does he have a strategy to win black support?' When we see news framed like this, we need to remind the networks that responsible journalism would have investigated the economic, academic, and political implications of the president's agenda for African-Americans, rather than the effects of race policy on Bush's approval rating. Similarly, when number-crunching stories on 'the death toll in Iraq' site only U.S. and British fatalities, peace activists should ask outlets they consider Iraqi civilian and military lives less significant than Western lives.

- Challenge double standards: The New York Times has described Condoleezza Rice's dress size and 'girlish laugh' on the front page; would they trivialize Dick Cheney that way? A CNN Larry King Live panel once convened to discuss how Hillary Clinton could win a Senate seat in NY despite being 'fat,' 'bottom heavy' and 'bitchy.' Yet Dick Cheney's inseam measurements have never been considered newsworthy (surprise, surprise). We should be ready to respond whenever media cover female politicians as if they are Hollywood starlets rather than powerful leaders.

- Support groups that debunk media bias and amplify public interest voices: FAIR's activist listserv, Extra! magazine and radio show, CounterSpin!, are invaluable resources. Groups like Youth Media Council (Youthmediacouncil.org) and Grand Rapids Institute for Information Democracy (GRIID.org) conduct media trainings, release reports and provide organizing tools to women, youth, anti-racism groups. Women In Media & News debunks sexism in the media in multimedia presentations on college campuses as well as a women's media monitoring group

blog (see WIMNOnline.org), and conducts media skills-building workshops to give women's and progressive groups the tools they need to get their messages onto the public stage.

- Practice positive reinforcement: Commend outlets when they produce balanced news coverage and creative, culturally diverse entertainment programming. Suggest further information, experts and research they can consult for follow-up.

- Be creative: Take a lesson from the Billionaires for Bush (or Gore), which called national media attention to the corruptive influence of money in politics during the 2000 election cycle through the use of humour, clever messaging, music, and media hi-jinks. During that campaign and for several years after, I helped lead the New York chapter of the Billionaires as 'Mya Cash,' a self-proclaimed media mogul who stormed press conferences and protests to remind reporters and protestors that 'The nightly news is brought to you by Mya cash... not yours.'

Groups such as the Church Ladies for Choice, Guerilla Girls, Code Pink, and the Radical Cheerleaders have had some strong media success using a mix of outrageous tactics including satire and street theatre to challenge biased content and get factual information across in the press.

Responding to problematic media content is just the first step. Right wing foundations have invested structurally and strategically in media over the past three decades in an effort to not only frame the public debate on their own terms, but control the means of production and distribution. To do so, they've trained student journalists, funded conservative student newspapers, funnelled millions into right-wing think tanks that pump out anti-feminist books, press releases, pundits and documentaries, and exerted pressure on media companies and regulatory bodies to exacerbate corporate media consolidation.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996, passed under former Democratic president Bill Clinton, compounded this conservative media war by heralding the biggest wave of media mergers ever seen in the U.S. Today, a tiny handful of multinationals own the vast majority of American newspapers, magazines and network, cable and online news and entertainment outlets, and control not only the reigns of public debate but also record labels, radio stations, theatres, TV and movie production companies, publishing houses, Internet and cable distribution chains, telecom and online companies and advertising billboards... not to mention sports teams, stadiums, theme parks and a myriad of other holdings (see FreePress.net for more ownership info).

This presents serious journalistic conflicts of interest. Is it any surprise that news outlets whose parent companies reap hundreds of millions in government subsidies are quick to attack poor mothers' need for food stamps, but slow to critique corporate welfare? What are the chances

that the military industrial complex will be the subject of sustained and serious critical broadcast news reporting, when two of the Big Three networks have been owned by parent companies that profit in wartime?

In addition to these overarching structural problems, the public debate is further skewed by an institutional bias toward the perspectives of corporate spokespeople and away from the voices of women, people of colour, and other public interest representatives, as documented by a variety of media monitoring reports by groups such as FAIR, WIMN and the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE.org). One such FAIR study showed that of all U.S. sources interviewed on the national nightly news broadcasts on ABC, NBC and CBS in the entire year of 2001, 92% were white, 85% were male, and, where party affiliation was identifiable, 75% were Republican; corporate representatives were regular guests, while public interest voices were absent.

A White House Project study (TheWhiteHouseProject.org) found that women were just 11% of all guests on influential Sunday morning news debate shows. Women fare poorly as print opinion-makers as well: for example, women wrote only 16.9% of op-ed pieces for the New York Times between January and February of 2005, not surprising considering seven of their eight regular columnists are male — yet rather than improving this embarrassing record, a recent editorial reorganization shunted Maureen Dowd's influential Sunday column to low-readership Saturdays.

In this context, the Baltimore Sun's sidelining of women's expertise in coverage of the March for Women's Lives seems sadly typical. Moving away from bylines and sources to the powerbrokers who set the top-down priorities for our media outlets, women are just 15% of top executives and 12% of board members at Fortune 500 media companies, according to a December, 2003 Annenberg report.

Immediately following the 2004 election a plurality of pundits, op-ed writers, news analysts and reporters concurred that the Democrats, in order to ever regain relevance, must adopt a conservative stance on 'moral values,' abandon liberal politics and move to the right... as if the party hadn't already done so to losing effect over the past eight years. If media offered the public free, independent information and a diverse range of perspectives through which to evaluate election year politics, not only might we have heard a different mantra post-election... we might have seen a drastically different result on election night.

Although gender is not always a predictor of political positioning, if drastically more women — in particular, feminists — were writing, reporting, assigning, analyzing and framing the news, both Bush and Kerry would likely have been forced to campaign on (or at least address) issues such as workplace discrimination, pay equity, a range of reproductive rights issues, a functional financial safety net for our country's most vulnerable, guns, education and more. And if the gender composition of newsrooms and power suites approached equity, post-election coverage would likely have focused on the impact of a second Bush term on these and other pressing

social issues, rather than the male echo chamber's mantra that voters who oppose bloody and brutal war or support human rights for all people regardless of sexual orientation are 'immoral.'

Since better, broader, more diverse media have the power to sway public opinion and, by proxy, political leadership, progressives must make structural media reform a top priority.

How to begin

The following are just a few ways to start:

- Demand proportional representation: Women are half the population, and we should pressure media to reflect that in coverage, bylines and in industry leadership. Pressure the Sunday talk shows, network newscasts and national dailies and newsweeklies to interview and equal number of female experts, assign female reporters and correspondents to cover front page news stories as regularly as the 'pink ghetto' of lifestyle, entertainment and fashion features, and promote more women to the executive suites and corporate media boards. Tell newspaper to correct the systemic marginalization of women on the op-ed pages. It should go without saying that people of colour deserve proportional representation in each one of these media arenas, as well.

- Defend the public interest in telecommunications policy: The Federal Communications Commission has all but abdicated its responsibility to regulate the U.S. media industry in the public interest, instead relaxing ownership rules to greenlight some of the most far reaching and dangerous mergers we've seen in years. Urge U.S. Senators and Congress members to fight against media concentration and support legislation for diverse, local, independent and uncensored media.

As Liza Dichter, board member of WIMN and co-founder of the Center for International Media Action (MediaActionCenter.org) notes, corporate broadcasters who get to use the public airwaves for free should be required to provide news and programming that is diverse, informative, educational and produced by a range of independent creative sources. Join CIMA FreePress.net, ReclaimTheMedia.org, Media-Alliance.org and the National Organization for Women (NOW.org) in the fight to break up U.S. media monopolies, demand open access to the means of production and distribution, and hold corporate media accountable to the public interest.

- Support open access to existing and emerging media technologies: Copyright is a new form of corporate censorship; PublicKnowledge.org and DownhillBattle.org support artists, audiences and

diverse culture. PrometheusRadio.org advocates broader access for local and community radio. Eff.org is standing up to internet censorship and control. GrassRootsCable.org, led by MediaTank.org and other Philadelphia groups, is helping consumers press for better service, prices and programming from their local cable companies; ReclaimTheMedia.org has successfully challenged cable license renewals.

- Organize for better media in your community: Find local media advocacy groups at FreePress.net/orgs/search.php. Learn who owns your local media at OpenAirwaves.org. Download organizing manuals at MediaEmpowerment.org and Fair.org/activism/activismkit.html.

- Fight the undue influence of advertising and commercialism: Work with groups like CommercialAlert.org, who have pressured the Federal Communications Commission and Federal Trade Commission to force media companies to disclose product placements that masquerade as media content on everything from reality TV shows to news programming. Support StayFree! (Stayfreemagazine.org), a magazine which exposes and advocates against ad creep in media and culture, and offers media literacy curricula for high school and college teachers.

- Go Global: IsisWomen.org and GenderWsis.org offer information on international efforts to get language about women, media and the public interest into public policy recommendations coming from the World Summit on Information Societies.

Supporting free, independent media

While it is crucial to work for fair, accurate and proportional representation in corporate media content, and to push for democratic reform of the media industry, it is also imperative that we support the independent, non-commercial, local and national media outlets that do appreciate and amplify a diversity of voices, perspectives and approaches in news and entertainment:

- Protect the future of the feminist press: Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture (Bitchmagazine.com) should be required reading for the feminist-minded... but it shouldn't be the only game in town. Groundbreaking feminist outlets like Sojourner: The Women's Forum and the Women's Review of Books (Wellesley.edu/WomensReview/) have been pushed out of the market in recent years by rising costs and a lack of sufficient support from left foundations; even Ms. (MsMagazine.com) now publishes only four times per year. Subscribe, donate to and give Bitch, Ms., World Pulse (WorldPulseMagazine.com), New Moon (NewMoon.org) and Teen Voices (TeenVoices.com) as gifts to your friends. Support nonprofit advocacy groups like WIMN (WIMNOnline.org) and the Center for New Words (CenterForNewWords.org), which are working to propel women's voices onto the media mainstage.

- Support independent media: Subscribe to The Nation, the Progressive, In These Times, Extra!, Z!, StayFree!, Clamour and other Indy Magazines at web.memberclicks.com/mc/directory/viewadvancedsearch.do. Listen to Air America's Laura Flanders Show (AirAmericaRadio.com), Pacifica Radio's Democracy Now! with Amy Goodman (DemocracyNow.org), and find other community radio options at dmoz.org/Arts/Radio/Formats/Community_Radio/. Read WomensEnews.org, CommonDreams.org, AlterNet.org, LipMagazine.org and other online independents. Watch Free Speech TV (FreeSpeech.org), and documentaries from Women Make Movies (WMM.com) and the Media Education Foundation (MediaEd.org).

- Don't like the media? Be the media. Do your own reporting on Indymedia.org web sites, make your own films with www.PaperTiger.org or DykeTV.org, and host your own college, community or cable access TV or radio show. Buy music from independent music labels. Volunteer with groups supporting these efforts, such as the Independent Press Association (IndyPress.org), which works to foster a more open, just and democratic society by amplifying the power of the indy press.

The lesson of the 2004 election is the same one we should have learned from Faludi's Backlash: we ignore media at our peril. Had the left prioritized and effectively defended women's rights against conservative media attacks over the last thirty years – and had more of our organizations and foundations prioritized institutional sexism and structural media reform as top progressive issues — we could have prevented the slow erosion of an authentic progressive voice in public debate.

We have no more time to waste. Now, if we are to reverse the right's rhetorical and legislative victories, we must join together to build an urgent, strategic, progressive, feminist media movement to reclaim our media... so that we can take back our country.

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