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Women And The Mass Media

By

Park Yong-Sang
INTRODUCTION

The increasing interest in the mass media as a field of women's studies reflects the recognition by women of the anachronistic fixed view of sex as disseminated by the mass media. Women's liberation leaders are afraid that the mass media tend to impede the social changes of their advocacy through serving to strengthen the established order of a sexist society. This fear is not without reason, given the importance of the mass media in modern life and their influence on individual's consciousness and mode of life. This problem is beginning to take up such a sizable portion in the strategy for women's development as to necessitate a systematic study in its own right. In Korea, it is a theme raised only recently and yet is to be systematized as a research subject. By the mass media, we mean the whole gamut beginning with the printed media like newspapers, magazines and books, and the broadcasting media radio and television and finally including films. Thus, the broad meaning of this problem leaves us somewhat in the dark about what approach to take. This is exactly why today I'd like to formulate a provisional system on how to approach the study of the mass media as a task of woman studies.

Research on the mass media can be approached from two different angles. One is to heed the sexist medium phenomena taking place outside the system of the mass media and the other, in the system itself.

The first approach deals with how the messages produced in the media are accepted in society. This often means the attempt to analyze what the mass media produce and to evaluate their effects from a consumer's standpoint. The second approach, after regarding the mass media as a system, delves into the sexist traditions and attitudes in production or editing within the
system itself; and into the socialization and specialization of those who staff
the mass media. In my belief, both approaches are equally important. Neither
approach alone allows a wholesome understanding of the situation. In Korea,
neither approach has been tested within systematic approach. Thus my
purpose here will be mainly to set up some directions of research to be
followed in each approach.

A research theme is presented on the basis of theoretical background and
the results of antecedent research is directly connected with a practical
strategy. So in the last part of this paper, an attempt is made to help
women's movement take up a practical strategy by dealing with a more general
and behavioral theme.

THE OUTSIDE APPROACH TO THE MASS MEDIA

The mass media, as a social system, carry out a few important social functions
such as watching the surroundings to see how the society is operating, connecting
and integrating the constituent elements of society and disseminating social
norms or values among the society's members. Among these, the function of
socialization to instill social norms or values has recently come into the
limelight. The reason is that television has not simply joined the ranks of
more traditional organs of socialization but has come so far as to exercise
a considerable influence on the socialization system itself. For example,
the presence of television in a family has brought about new aspects in
mutual responses and activities among family members, thus never failing to
produce through vicarious socialization, many changes in the raising of
children and thus in family life itself. It is because of a ready availability
of television from early childhood and its simultaneous verbal and nonverbal
character of message-sending, that this medium looms important in the process
of socialization. In fact, socialization can be regarded as carried on throughout one's life, and the influential organs of socialization vary according to the life-cycle one finds oneself in. Likewise, as the utilization and influence of each mass medium varies with one's life-cycle, it is not so simple to discuss socialization effects. The study of sex-role socialization has usually put emphasis on the socialization of children. But I believe that in a country like Korea which retains strong traditions from the past, the consciousness of adults in the established society also has to occupy an important theme. So our attention must focus not only on television but also on other sources of socialization for adults such as newspapers, magazines and films.

The first prerequisite to the discussion of socialization effects of media is to know the contents of the media which people are exposed to. This means finding the extent to which the contents of mass media tend toward sexual discrimination. The next step is to understand how those contents are accepted by the audience. In other words, it involves an understanding of their perception of the sexist contents, especially in connection with their own sex identity. That is another prerequisite to our discussion of socialization effects of the mass media. The last step is to decide what the recipients absorb from the contents, thus changing or strengthening their attitude or behavior.

Therefore, the first consideration must be given to the analysis of the contents of the mass media. Here we have to be careful as to whether the media show sex differences as they are in reality or rather maximize the present sex differences by exaggerating and distorting reality. The masses are inclined to accept the contents of the media as reality. Scholars, however,
are of the opinion that the reality conveyed through the media is merely a pseudo-reality aloof from the real world. Coupled with the unreality of ideas behind the contents of the media, such manipulation as in photography, lighting and other tactics combine to make the recipients experience vicariously an unreality beyond the boundaries of our usual senses of what constitutes reality. An example is an eye-catching advertisement where the experts create a pseudo-reality far exceeding reality, with aid of meticulous stage effects, models, and skillful photography. The recent analyses in America of the contents of the US media for the past 20 years, show that the media served to exaggerate and distort sex differences in demographic distribution, human character, mode of life, and social remuneration.

Men are portrayed as surpassing women; above all, men come into the picture far more than women; and the men are usually described with priority in position, authority, fortune or other general capabilities. Namely, the figure of a man reflected in the mass media is one of receiving more remuneration than female counterpart in societal economy or hierarchy. In human character, too, a man is portrayed as reasonable, effective, independent, pioneering, ambitious, positive, wise, intelligent and strong; while a woman is portrayed as emotional, unreasonable, dependent, passive, weak and timid. In addition, a woman often appears as a sexual object with emphasis on her fair figure and beautiful clothes, and as a victim rather than as an assailant in violence. By limiting a woman's main stage of activity to a household, the media emphasize the traditional female roles such as raising children and housekeeping. An analysis of the American television programs for children shows quite a similar pattern of sex-role differentiation. This kind of typification occurs everywhere in the mass media.
As for Korea, I can't say for sure due to the lack of systematic research, but I believe the situation is quite similar to that of America. As there are not many reliable social indicators in Korea as in America, the criteria for evaluating exaggerations or distortions are not certain either. The following research, however, somewhat indicates the stereotyped sex-roles the Korean mass media present in defiance of the changing times.

A dissertation by Lee Hae-ok, "An Analytic Study into the Sex-role division as Reflected in Korean TV Soap Operas," points out that exaggerations and distortions similar to those of America also take place in Korea. Women appear in a far smaller number than men and their roles are unimportant compared to those of men. Their matrimonial situation is more categorically delineated than that of men. The occupation of a woman is described as not so high in authority and doesn't constitute an important factor in the story development. Naturally, women's main sphere of activity on TV is limited to the house. Men usually talk about non-personal professional subjects like business or social affairs, while women are shown as chattering about personal matters such as family affairs. As for human character traits, women are characterized by TV as romantic, passive and persevering with men as realistic, active and independent.

The results of this research and other similar studies lead us to the conclusion that sex differences are exaggerated and distorted. This is sufficient evidence of the misleading presentation on the part of the mass media of the social reality from a fixed view of sex-roles. Even given the exaggerations and distortions by the mass media, their effects are not simple to decipher. As mentioned earlier, the next step is how those contents are accepted by the audience. This research is; of course, based on the theoretical background that the audience can learn a sex-role from the
mass media. Socialization through the mass media has a peculiarity of being indirect or vicarious. Such phenomena as vicarious socialization can't be explained with the traditional theories of sex-role socialization, like psychoanalytic theories or reinforcement theories.

This is because learning through the mass media lacks the direct mutual response between the learner and the model; the very core in both traditional theories.

As new attempts to explain the phenomena of socialization from a wholly different aspect, social learning theory or observational learning theory and cognitive development theory are considered significant, in that these can explain the process of learning through vicarious experience.

Bandura's social learning theory, departing from traditional learning theories, has inserted the cognitive process between stimulus and response. Namely, this theory provides the intermediary process where the learner can place, even if not imitate at once, the model's behavior into his cognitive framework so as to be retrieved when necessary. Thus, Bandura argues that direct reward from the model is not always necessary in the learning process. This social learning theory can explain the process in which the audience learn varied behavior through symbolic, not real models appearing in films or TV and we can easily infer that the audience also learn sex-typed behavior in that process.

Whereas social learning theory regards a rather simple cognitive process as the intermediary variable, cognitive developmental theory put an emphasis on the gradual development of an individual's capability for cognitive analysis according to their own cognitive development; and tries to explain sex-role socialization by the development of sex-role concepts in an individual. For example, in sex-typing, a concept of one's own sex identity
and its unchangeability develops first. A child's cognitive development between the age of 3 and 7 gives rise to his or her concept of the immutability or stability in sex identity, on the basis of which is formed the child's sex-role concept.

Both theories suggest that sex-role learning can be achieved vicariously through information of behavior pertinent to the individual's sex, not through direct reward or punishment. Naturally, these theories can well explain the process of socialization through the mass media, and can serve as a good source of such information.

While cognitive developmental theory is focused on the development up to adolescent age, in consideration of cognitive development with age, social learning theory can be applied to socialization of adults as well as that of children. These two theories have such complementary characteristics that they are often combined in research work.

The study of sex-role socialization has mainly centered around children. However, the adults are also known to be more or less oriented in the direction of media contents, when put into long enough contact with a certain fixed idea of sex differences.

We have seen above that the mass media show obvious sex differences and that these differences are evidently perceived by the audience. There remain yet the last step; a probe into how the audience combine the fixed sex-role concepts imposed by the media with their earned values and behaviors, i.e., the real effects of media content on the audience.

Presentation of three strict proofs must accompany establishment of cause and effect in social sciences. The first proof must be that the causal phenomenon precedes the effect phenomenon. Next, it must be proved
that those two phenomena change in connection with each other. Lastly, it should
be shown that all other possible causes of the effect phenomenon have been
excluded. Of course, it is really a rarity in social sciences to be able to
establish a causality exactly befitting all three tests, especially when it
concerns not laboratory research but research carried out in the natural
surroundings of society. With the competition among various organs in the
function of socialization and with the near impracticability of telling
the effect of one organ of socialization from that of another, it is rendered
even more difficult to define exactly the socialization effects of the mass
media.

In this connection, despite some theoretical defects such as lack of
time and incomplete exclusion of extraneous variables, the recent research
results correlating one's consumed quality of media content to the intensity
of one's fixed traditional sex-role concept, might contribute to confidence
in the effects of the mass media on socialization if similar results continue
to be accumulated. So far there have been only a few research studies showing
the correlation between the amount of time spent watching TV and traditional
sex-role development in the audience. This kind of study is worth establishing
as an important research task.

In sum, I'd like to emphasize the necessity of many research studies devoted
to an increased understanding of those intermediary variables in studies of
sex-role socialization. This kind of research also needs to take up the
mass media side by side with the traditional organs of socialization like
parents or schools.

THE INSIDE APPROACH TO THE MASS MEDIA

The present character of the mass media content in a certain society
must be understood in light of the organization and the social function of the media. Therefore, the social function and institutional character of the present mass media in Korea can be held responsible for the sexist content they produce. The mass media in modern society function as a social system serving as measurement of only short-term effects, the past few research results of this kind suggest that the media's presentation of a progressive sex-role model can bring about change in the audience's fixed concept. For instance, one encouraging research result shows that a child with the experience of seeing a woman on TV play the role of a police office is likely to have a more progressive view of women's roles than other children with no such experience.

It is hoped that this experimental method of study will be useful in conjunction with the already mentioned correlative study carried out under real conditions.

As discussed so far, many intermediary variables are included in the study on the reception of media content. Important among them are the cognitive developmental stage of the recipients, their sense of reality about TV content, their old views of sex-roles, their purpose in utilizing the media, and the mutual interaction of the mass media with other organs of socialization. That's to say, we should not jump from a look at media content to its effects and neither should we presuppose the indiscriminate application of its effects on all people.

Many mass communication research studies have also revealed that the recipients are not so blind in utilizing the mass media as to be influenced in the same way as intended by the information sources. The recipients know and actively a protector and transmitter of social tradition and inheritance like any other social system. With the changing times, however, a social system forming a social organism alters its structure and function so as to adapt itself
to new surroundings. True, the organizations of mass communication are being operated under the influence of their political, economic and social conditions, but in an economic system that allows private ownership of the mass media, the management and staffing within the organizations are subject to alteration according to their owners or managers.

Drawing our attention are the institutional characteristics of the mass media that restrict the activities of women within the media. Even the American mass media, regulated by law to prohibit sex discrimination in employment, treatment and job distribution, staff some 80% of important decisionmaking position with men; while women are said to be discriminated against by their male counterparts in employment, job allotment, promotion, remuneration, etc.

Then what about the Korean mass media, which operate in a far more traditional social environment without being regulated by such antidiscrimination law as in America. In the absence of any serious probe into this problem, nothing much is known about the personnel management of the mass media. So this problem remains an important subject waiting for our research. According to the Korean Institute for Mass Communication Research, as of Jan. 31, 1984, the percentage of men among all employees of the Korean mass media is 89.6% or 17,260, while that of women is only 10.4% or 1996.

Moreover, if we restrict the statistics to the realms of reporting and editing within the mass media, this ratio of men to women will be 9 to 1. This phenomenon is shown without much difference among newspaper companies, broadcasting stations and a newsagency.
The same survey doesn't present detailed data on promotion, renumeration or job allotment. But it shows that 6 of the total 15 women reporters were attached to somewhat vague sections such as reporting management or reporting technology and that not a single woman was attached to the politics or economic sections.

Some observers try to approach sex discrimination within the media from the viewpoint of the employers' socialization, specialization, satisfaction and value system. This kind of research shows how employers within the media evaluate their institution, thus helping understand institutional problems. At this point, I'd like to introduce a similar type of study conducted by Kim Young-jeong and Song Yu-jae. This research cover a total of 127 women mass media employees nationwide; among them, 56 from daily newspapers and 71 from the broadcasting stations.

According to the research, their age is heavily concentrated between 21 and 30, meaning that the professional stability of the mass media for women is very low. Other problems they point out are the lack of professional consciousness on their own part, and their dual roles as professional and housekeepers. Most of their satisfaction lies in the warm human relationships among colleagues.

Newspaper women complain of the lack of in-service training as the most serious problem, while women in broadcasting think sex discrimination overwholes other problems. That is, their complaints can be said to stem from the institutional defects of the mass media. Regrettably, this research doesn't show any comparison between men and women, limiting its sphere of research to women. Research in the future, will have to be so designed as to show sex differences in socialization, professionalism, satisfaction, and values among workers of the mass media, covering both men and women. Also necessary
is an attempt to examine the structure and process of decision-making in the course of editing or producing. In other words, we should probe thoroughly into the process of gatekeeping to understand how media content is selected, sifted and strengthened.