

Freedom and Responsibility

Journalists play a central role in the development of meanings and symbols. They choose the story line, they choose the image to support a particular mind frame that they, too, chose. Writers act as gatekeepers who decide which idea and which language become visible on broadsheets and tabloids, on television, on radio, and on web sites. Media norm and practices and the broader political culture influence the way mass media construct our identities.

The press claim to be the instruments that make democracy possible. But mainstream media, in general and in truth, are instruments of either private business or government, acting in pursuit of either profit or propaganda. Despite all the claims to democracy, media often simply reflect the meanings and symbols of the most powerful actors in society, with little, if at all any, contribution from the rest of that society.

And when it comes to reflecting women's identities, mass media is guided by the meanings and symbols created by men. Today, in Asia, most of the existing media codes uphold objectivity, taste, decency, and morality. Despite all the international documents on violence against women, and on media's role in setting the stage for physical and sexual violence to take place, there is still no specific provision in most of media's codes to guide it in its reportage and coverage of women, specifically violence against women. The only exceptions are China where stringent anti-pornography laws are enforced, and Malaysia where a provision instructs advertisers to highlight a woman's role in society. But even this provision can be interpreted in a patriarchal way where ad agencies reinforce the stereotypical and traditional roles society has assigned to women.

This is not to say that media coverage has not improved. It has; but only a little, especially in the Asia-Pacific. A small survey that we did on women's images in advertisements yielded a number of positive portrayals. But these breakthroughs are either not deliberate or are the results of the efforts of a few enlightened individuals, many of them media activists. And we wonder, is there any way we can institutionalize women's positive images and identities in media?

Because of this, we at Isis International are drawn to a mission: To develop a specific provision

on the coverage and representation of violence against women and to have this provision included in the existing media codes of conduct. We know that various groups concerned with women and media have written guidelines on the portrayal of women. But we feel that these are at the periphery of media policy. What's more, if media's own self regulations about objectivity, taste, and decency are hardly effective because of poor implementation, how then can we expect them to uphold the guidelines of groups whom media probably consider as outsiders.

We do not, however, want to be misinterpreted as proposing press control. We abide by the principle that attempts to improve women's images and identities in media should be "consistent with freedom of expression." Yet, what does consistency with freedom of expression really mean? How can we ensure the balance between the press's freedom and the press's responsibility to present women fairly and objectively?

There are models that strive to achieve this balance. All involve government intervention. More importantly, all involve a public that actively participates in the judging of news, in the shaping of journalistic values. In South Korea, for example, where women's portrayal is comparatively better than other Asian countries, the public is active in monitoring media's conduct. Their comments and complaints go to government, which, in turn, puts media to task. But while this works in South Korea, how will the media in other countries react to such a relationship between the press, the state, and the public?

For in these models, media is accountable to the public through government; although we have to note that with globalization blurring national boundaries, accountability becomes vague and even more difficult to enforce. In these models, mass media is not the turf of a special few. In these models, the "mass" in mass media gains a different meaning. The public becomes not just the target of communication but a participant in its process.

