

Chapter IV

Mass Media as Social Institution: The *Wired* Example

OBJECTIVES

This chapter aims to help you understand the following:

- How mass media operates as a social institution to teach the attitudes, values, and beliefs of a dominator society.
- How much power mass media and IT have over defining social norms, and how much of that power is held by just a few individuals and a few companies.
- The common stereotypes that media purvey about women in science and technology.
- The pervasiveness of violent and sexual metaphors in one popular technology magazine.
- How these negative images influence the participation of women in science and technology.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is generally understood as a two-part process consisting of messages that convey content and the interpretation of that content by the receiver. Meanings are conveyed through words, images, and symbols. In the U.S., mass media serve as one of the most significant social institutions shaping communication since media

act as gatekeepers of information using stereotypes as one of the primary tools to communicate the values of the dominant culture (Creedon, 1993; Wood, 1999). As I discussed in Chapter II, stereotypes circumscribe the boundaries around where we “belong” and what is “possible” for us in our lives. We learn both about how to view each other (which teaches us to “discriminate” and rank by category), how to view ourselves (which teaches us to internalize views of being “less than” in relation to gender, race, class, and other systems of ranking), and how to organize our society (which teaches us who belongs where). These representations have a powerful influence on the possibilities that people perceive for themselves and impact the behaviors through which they manifest these possibilities.

Contemporary mass media play a pivotal role in defining the “appropriate” cultural boundaries around such factors as gender, race, and class. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Toni Morrison states: “Eddy is White, and we know he is because nobody says so” (p. 72). It is only necessary to “define” those who are outside of the dominant social center. In the end, every “aspect of our culturally mediated identity . . . is challenged or altered by the hypnotic power of mass media” (Miller, 2004, p. 2). This chapter explores these issues in the following sections: (1) mass media and its power to influence; and (2) and in-depth analysis of *Wired* magazine.

MASS MEDIA AND ITS POWER TO INFLUENCE

In our dominator social system, men still hold the primary “power to define” and in contemporary industrialized societies that power is often exerted via the mass media and information technology. In the U.S., men are still the primary owners of media/communications and technology companies. In a recent *Forbes* report “The 400 Richest Americans,” which ranks people by their net worth, 16 of the top 50 own technology or media companies and only one was a woman (Anne Cox Chambers owns Cox Enterprises which includes 17 newspapers, 15 TV stations, and 80 radio stations). Table 1 highlights the technology and media owners among the top 50 of the *Forbes* 400 richest Americans (Miller, 2007).

The tremendous development of new technologies and electronic communication combined with the 1996 Telecommunications Act (which permitted consolidation of media ownership) has instigated a rapid consolidation of various types of media into single megacorporations. When Ben Bagdikian first published *The Media Monopoly* in 1983, the former dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California at Berkeley cited 50 companies as owners of most media in the U.S. In *The New Media Monopoly* (2004), he explains how the principal media outlets in the U.S. are now owned by five global conglomerates: “Time Warner, by 2003

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