



Resource Review

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Name of reviewed item:	Media, Gender and Identity: An Introduction
Author(s) / Editor(s):	David Gauntlett
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Review:

I agreed to review this book because I had the first edition and had made use of it in teaching. I presumed this was a second edition and wanted to see what changes had been made to keep up with constant changes in media, and, perhaps, small changes in the gender order. However, it turns out that this is a reprint, indeed the second reprint this year; which signals the ongoing popularity of the book. Moreover, David Gauntlett is no longer a lecturer at the Institute of Communications Studies at University of Leeds, as the book jacket has it, but is now a Professor at Westminster. It was well received at the time of its publication so here I'm going to try to assess whether this longevity is warranted.

First though a guide to the contents. He quickly introduces us to his conceptions of the main points including an auto-critique of what is wrong with the book: it emphasises individual choice over structural constraints; doesn't spend much time on individual media texts – though makes some wicked little comments *en passant* – and is western and mainstream in its focus.

The background is set with Adorno in one corner and Fiske in the other. He is refreshingly frank in his dismissal of the media effects research (psychological and American) and of early feminist film studies (too Freudian).

Past media turns out to be largely from the 80s with honourable mentions of some 40s and 50s classics. I'd have welcomed some discussion of Lucille Ball for reasons

of relevance and nostalgia. Gendered media representations of today turn out to be *Star Trek*, *Charlie's Angels* (the movie) *What Women Want*, perfume adverts, *Queer as Folk* and *Will and Grace*. Magazines and pop music are mentioned but are given whole chapters to themselves later. New media is bumped into a book of its own (his edited collection *Web.Studies* now on its second edition). Sufficient but always brief discussion is given to each or groups of these media products but many will enjoy (or disagree with) snippets such as: '*Fight Club* (1999) – Masculinity in crisis! Sort of.' (pg 74)

We then move into the theoretical chapters on Giddens, Foucault and Butler. He's clearly a fan of Giddens and reads both Foucault and Butler through that; finding the best in both whilst noting their tangled prose. Moreover, he is less concerned about whether they are right more whether they are interesting and useful. Criticisms of each are rehearsed and dismissed as are unfavoured readings; so that 'strand of literary and film studies [...] which entertains itself by 'queering' texts [...] might be a bit of a waste of time' (pg136). Whilst each of these theoretical chapters touches extensively on gender and identity the occasional mentions of media seem forced. And why no mention of Bourdieu?

After these chapters, follow ones on men's magazines, women's magazines and a portmanteau one on pop and self-help books. The discussions of 'irony' in men's magazines and the effects on women's body image are still relevant – I've a couple of dissertations on these each year to supervise. Most of the magazines discussed still exist but the snappy distillations he gives of each have not survived changes in the magazine market – the rise of weeklies and the incursions of newspapers and internet have forced changes in some.

It is these chapters that I have used in teaching about magazines. They are still relevant and deal breezily with the topics. He is less concerned with the sexism displayed in men's magazines than I am. I see them on a continuum with 'top shelf' magazines, which themselves – and here my teenage reading must serve as evidence – contained articles on steam trains, infantry regiments and cocktail making etc. Similarly with women's magazines he follows the line of thinkers like Hermes who play up the active engagement - but sometimes disengagement – of readers with magazines. He notes the rise of interest in sex and sexuality and the potential for a female gaze. He gives even shorter snippets on the greater numbers of magazines available to women and circulations and facts would need to be checked.

For all chapters, but particularly these on magazines, issues of race and ethnicity are often only mentioned in passing. One might not know Oprah was an African-American woman or that her magazine is likely to feature more women of colour than most. Age is completely ignored so I'm on my own when I introduce my young students to the delights of *Saga Magazine*.

The arguments in respect of Giddens, Foucault and queer theory have retained their freshness but his contemporary allusions show some interesting aspects of media landscapes. Some of the people or media artefacts remain, others have fallen off the cultural radar and others have been re-invented. Thus James Bond, *Dr Who*, *Big Brother*, Britney Spears, the Spice Girls, Dannii Minogue (but strangely not Kylie, and not on page 97 as indexed) are all with us still, sometimes for a second time or in new iterations. Some programmes though only survive in endless re-runs on multi-channel TV; ensuring they are usually watched out of order. A queer reading of *Dr Who* would not be a waste of time now.

The value of Gauntlett's work is his engagement with feminism and issues of masculinity in ways which might appeal to our students; both young men and young

women. Anecdotally and ethnographically from lecture hall, seminar room and on Facebook, young women seem to be very tolerant of – and sometimes collusive in – young men’s bad behaviour. He retains a greater faith in the fluidity of gender identity than might be sustainable in the face of the ongoing structural differences in the pay and prospects of our students.

Gauntlett is well known for his productivity but also for his web-friendliness. This means that throughout the text URLs are given for supplementary material. It also enables him to ‘dump’ additional material onto his [websites](#). I’m all for this but it does mean the book sometimes reads like a website itself rather than a fully formed fully argued and well edited piece of work. There is something of the ‘kitchen sink’ about this; luckily it is entertaining and most of the examples have, so far, been mainstream but proved to be ‘classic’.

Written today we might expect more mentions of video games, online communities and social networking sites but these are allocated to his other publications. It is less considered (and now older) than Rosalind Gill’s *Gender and the Media* (Polity, 2007) but might be used for a few more years. If students could be persuaded to buy more than one book the differing treatment and gap in years between these volumes might make a sound basis for using both to examine popular media culture.