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Gender-reflecting media education

And overview at the German discussion

> "Gender is both something we do and something we think with, both a set of social practices and a system of cultural meaning." (Rakow 1986, S. 19)

The category of gender is present in every form of communication and mass communication. It is a critical factor for media product-makers; it makes its appearance in the products themselves; it dwells in the imagination of people using, thinking about and drawing on the media for communication in their daily lives. The category of gender is also a meaning-structuring element for those dealing with reading the media and making meaning in media pedagogical work and those researching these links. It is the task of media education that does not ignore but reflects these links to consider these links, to inquire into the media-educational consequences and connections with practice. This is an easy demand to make, but finding concrete starting points in the inter-disciplinary jungle is far more difficult. In the following I would like to outline a number of possible options.

Exposing media as a stereotype staging of femininity and masculinity

Relevant studies on women's and men's images in television, e.g. by Erich Küchenhoff et al., found back in 1975 that women are considerably under-represented and that they are restricted to outward attractiveness. 18 years later, in a comparable random sample Monika Weiderer's research produced alarmingly similar results. Admittedly, the image created by the way men and women are presented on German television is heterogeneous, but the gender stereotype continues to prevail in almost all the aspects investigated. Regarding women's age and outward appearance extensive approximation to the ideal of uniform youthfulness and attractiveness is required. Men are granted far more leeway in this respect. Whereas television women tend to be depicted as reserved, submissive, friendly and helpless, men more frequently assume active, dynamic and aggressive roles in high-status positions (Weiderer 1993, p. 324 ff.).
Media-makers incline to apply their own personal conceptions of the "woman" in programme planning, directorship, image, sound and media research (cf. Nightingale 1990, p. 28 f.). As decision-making positions continue to be over-proportionally occupied by men, it is usually men's image of women that is reflected in the media programme range. Women are correspondingly "presented" and construed by men as the "other" sex and often portrayed as being inferior and insignificant (cf. Velte 1995, Mühlen Achs 1995, p. 21). This finding has been concluded in unison and differentiated by many international studies (summary in Klaus 1998, p. 222 ff., Signorielli 2001, Witt 2000, for instance).
Even in children's television – an area of special significance from the educational perspective – a clear under-representation of girls in leading roles is evident. Small and large men are the heroes of children's TV! They solve everyday problems, come to grips with dangerous situations and encounter adventures. In supporting roles, in those of extras another aspect of male domination is apparent: figures that are not explicitly gender-specific have male first names. In the case of the "Mainzelmännchen" (ZDF) and the "Smurfs" (various channels) the message is: non-sexual creatures are firstly male, of course. Women figures symbolize the divergence from the male norm, they are, as Simone de Beauvoir put it, "the second sex". Deviations from the "male norm" are outwardly characterized by special features such as bow ribbons and short skirts, which frequently drift into sexualization. The dominance of stereotype portrayals of the relations between the sexes and the distribution of power within

the media production place women and girls at a disadvantage. The "male gaze" dominates. [1] Usually female viewers only see themselves confronted with men's view of women and women's situation in life. Social change is hardly reflected in the media, if we take the example of television here.

Gender-reflecting media education must aim at consistently including these findings, available for some years now, in education and training, for this discrimination is highly significant. Particularly in the eyes of girls who experience themselves not only as subordinate and powerless, most television women differ from their own self-appraisal and are thus hardly suitable as a positive orientation. It is true that a number of strong female figures can be found in television, powerful figures that behave autonomously and competently. The most well-known example in German children's television is doubtless "Pippi Longstocking"; more recent examples from the programme range are "Pepper Ann" (SRTL), "Lolle" (Berlin, Berlin ARD) and "Bella Block" (ZDF). They are refreshingly different to traditional clichés. However, girl figures who combine strength and erotic attraction have the same features as most of the positively cast girl figures in television: they are immaculately beautiful, extraordinarily slim and mostly have long blonde hair. Body proportions that do not correspond to the ideal weight (or a notch lower) and facial features that deviate from the uniform beauty ideal do not appear, unless they are the theme in question, i.e. a problem. The "beauty myth" (Wolf 1991) is repeatedly substantiated.[2] Beauty – that is a very restricted interpretation thereof – and slimness become what seems to be the basic prerequisite for success in adventure, career and partnership. Girls and women are thus completely disproportionately referred to their corporeality. [3] Anglo-American research points out that as a result of the super-slim TV figures women's inner ideal body image is "slimmed down", contributing their part to the high incidence of eating disorders (cf. Bissell, 2001 Botta 1999, Thompson et al. 1999, summarized in Kochhan/Schemer 2001).

The corresponding thematization in media educational practice is extremely difficult. Images are deeply entrenched, and querying social clichés is usually accompanied by a shaking of one's own self-image. It is necessary to create more areas for experiencing and self-determinedly extending the limitations created by narrow stereotypes in the media. This goes not only for girls' but also boys' work. They are similarly confronted with clichés in which life-environmental experiences are not reflected and which are not always beneficial for one's self-image (cf. Cornell 1999, Hollstein 1999, Messner et al. 1999, for example). A successful example of increasing sensibility for the dramatization of gender hierarchies is demonstrated by Gitta Mühlen Achs in seminars for students on "body language, power and gender" (Mühlen Achs 1998). Hierarchization is experienced here in the context of printed advertizing, among others. The explicit goal is to improve individual competences by means of games focused on stereotypes (transmitted by the media).

> The issue is "that, if gender has to be used, we can use it at least in line with our own conceptions and real needs as well as in the full awareness of its social consequences.“ (Mühlen-Achs 1998, p.19)

Communicative competence means here, among other things, creating an awareness for the "dramatization of gender" and overcoming outdated clichés and production forms. On the individual level, it means an active, individually appropriate approach towards stereotypes.

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[1] Laura Mulvey refers to the triple "male gaze" (1975): the director, who directs the figures on stage; the camera man, who organizes them on the screen; the protagonist, who makes women figures the object of his desire.

[2] Naomi Wolf illustrates in her book how culturally dependent beauty ideals are and their respective significance. In western industrialized societies, where women increasingly prove themselves to be autonomous and emancipated, the constant reference to an inaccessible beauty ideal constitutes a "set-back". "The beauty myth fights against women's newly-found freedom by transferring the social confines restricting their lives directly to their faces and bodies. In response, we must now query our attitude towards our body in the same way as the women generations before us queried their status in society.“ (Wolf 1991, p. 384)

[3] Regarding this discussion in gender research cf., for example, Bohnacker et al. 1998.

The fruitful development of such approaches for nurseries, schools and media educational work outside school is a practice that is far too rarely pursued. [4]
Not only those sitting in front of the television need further training but especially those making media products. A promising approach aimed at promoting communicative competence in journalists and editors is the project " Screening Gender". A multimedia training package has been developed for media professionals, founded on the analysis of the gender image in the programme ranges of public service broadcasters in Europe. [5] Admittedly, this can only be a first step, it must be developed further.

Taking gender-specific preferences seriously without resorting to hierarchization or inappropriate stereotyping

The category of gender is not only created in men and women images in the media products; empirically, evidence of this category can also be relatively clearly supplied in use preferences (summary in Klaus 1998, Cornelißen 1998, Moser 1998, for example). In the area of adult television preferences, women on the whole tend more towards emotionally-oriented genres, while men tend to prefer action genres (cf. Röser/Kroll 1995, p. 32 f.). One explanation could be the respective style of communication: the genres women prefer relate to the women-defined concept of "interaction / relationship / community" whereas the programmes preferred by men tend to present a men-defined concept of "action / (promotion of) beining special[6] / victory" (cf. Klaus/Röser 1996, p. 50). Elisabeth Klaus and Jutta Röser start from the assumption that programmes are identified as "male" or "female" (Klaus/Röser 1996, p. 38). The "gendered genres" lead to "gendered audiences" (Angerer/Dorer 1996). A similar phenomenon is reflected in children's most popular TV heroes.
The boys' interest apparently tends to focus on themes such as "strength", "battles" and "superiority" in fantasy, usually fictive TV stories. Girls, on the other hand, tend to focus their interest in TV figures on social relationships and "inner action", which are close to reality (Paus-Haase 1998). A point that must not be overlooked is that quantitative emphases conceal the variety within and deviations from this apparent norm. For media educational research and practice, for example, particularly the boys who love watching daily soaps are interesting (Winter/Neubauer 2002b), or young women enthusiastic about viewing action, horror or wrestling (e.g. Götz 1999).
Priorities in media preferences are easy to comprehend in the context of gender-specific socialization. At an early age girls and women are offered an interest in and responsibility for communication and accomplishing relationships, while boys and men are suggested keeping a distance and standing out from the crowd. These basic tendencies are thus reflected in content preferences. This point is also an attempt to explain the enthusiasm of masses of girls about daily soaps, for instance. In these formats they discover not only a high percentage of women figures but also the special emphasis on relationships as the basis of living together (cf. Götz 2002b). It is the task of gender-reflecting media educational research to investigate these links, to comprehend and pedagogically assess them with regard to their individual significance and social and cultural functions.
Enthusiasm for soap can be seen as a companion through female adolescence. It accompanies one during the "loss of the voice" (Brown/Gilligan 1994), allowing a "time-out" in the storms of puberty (Permin 2000). Chatting with a (girl)friend about the contents gives girls an opportunity to stay with themselves, to raise their voices (Brown 1999). For boys keen on these formats soap is a source of information on the "modernized male" (Winter/Neubauer

[4] A possible approach is found in Eder et al.; who offer theoretical in-depth research on, among other things, the category of gender and how it is created by the media (Eder 1999).

[5] For more detailed information: www.yle.fi/gender

[*6] "The German term "*Besonderung*" ((promotion of) specialness) refers to the accentuation of special individual abilities as opposed to other people's. The term "*Besonderung*" refers to a separation which *the opposite number requires in order to demonstrate his or her superiority*." (Klaus / Röser 1996, p. 50, footnote).

2002). Enthusiasm about soap thus supports individual coping with life, but is also accessory to forming a cliché conception of masculinity and femininity as a result of the predominant media stereotypes in this genre.
Varying preferences and interpretations can provide an important basis for media educational activity. Helga Theunert's research group, for example, investigated gender-divergent preferences as well as the reading of series by older children (Eggert 2000). Girls from a low social environment who are keen daily-soap viewers are identified as a special problem group. They harmonize relationships, and the authors fear they use soaps to create a cliché of life and love where idealizing harmonious living together, happy twosomeness is the main priority (Theunert 2000, p. 177). In another study on daily soaps Ingrid Paus-Haase and Ulrike Wagner also conclude that girls with a formally low education level find their orientation in soaps (Paus-Haase 2001). This group was similarly identified in a previous study on daily talk shows as being the group in which media educational measures should best be applied (Paus-Haase et al. 1999). These gender-specific findings provide useful information on meaningful media educational points of departure. In the interests of girls' support it is politically commendable to provide those having less privileged social resources with additional services.
At the same time media educational studies on gender-specific reading of the media and the ensuing practical consequences conceal not only many opportunities but also the danger of identifying the girls as only a deficit group. Hierarchizations emerge, accompanied by further corroboration of the predominant androcentric perspective. A female test person in an ethnographical study on the significance of soap operas expressed it aptly: "Don't treat us like we're so stupid and naïve" (Seiter et al. 1994). One explanation is the way we react to the media literacy (Medienkompetenz), which we promptly identify in statements characterized by disassociation from or by the adoption of a critical position on the contents of the media. This is certainly appropriate, but it is only one possible form of critical appraisal as well as being one more closely associated with male socialization. When girls establish a personal link between the media and their everyday lives, as indicated by gender-specific socialization, this is promptly interpreted as a lack of media competence. Carol Gilligan (1984)[7] has already alluded to the risk of corresponding androcentric false judgments. She and her colleagues have expressed the necessity to listen to girls in their variety of voices, to take them seriously, although they call into question our own positions in their statements (Brown/Gilligan 1994, Brown 1998). If we classify the girls' statements as problematic, we should always ask ourselves why this is a problem for us and which gender-specific factors are perhaps personally involved here. A gender-reflecting media education starts not only with the media and the viewers, but must never fail to critically review one's own assumptions and positions. Judgements on "the boys" or "the girls" are made too quickly, which are consequently empirically disproportionate. It is more promising to grasp media reading as performing genders, in the process of which girls and boys put themselves on stage and express themselves with the symbolic material available. Hence media preferences and media communication should consistently be understood as the result of a creative process, where the category of gender plays an important role. Once this basis has been understood and appreciated, it can provide good promise of professional pedagogical activity.[8]

The currently (necessary) practice option: gender-specific media education

It is the task of gender-reflecting media education to reveal the intricate structures of discrimination and to develop opportunities for change. The concrete target of gender-reflecting pedagogical practice is, among other things, the extension of individual

[7] With reference to Kohlberg's moral development model.

[8] Ute Bechdolf's theory discussion and study "Puzzling Gender" (1999) offer interesting starting points.

opportunities. First and foremost, this means developing diversity. In concrete pedagogical practice, it does seem, however, that girls and boys tend to restrict their diversity by their positioning and distance from the opposite sex. Continuing on from their gender-specific socialization, reinforced by stereotype gender images, they are quick to resort to traditional norms, thus limiting their own opportunities. One at least temporarily necessary option is that of gender-homogeneous groups, not because girls (or boys) constitute the respective deficit group but because this measure broadens the scope for more freedom.
In activity-oriented projects with a gender-reflecting trainer of the same sex the aim is to create situations that extend individual borders. In existing societal structures it must initially be the aim of media educational practice to create scope for girls and women to experience and express themselves by means of the media. The experience and appreciation of their own specialness and ability is the key target. Proven translation of this aim is found in a whole variety of production-oriented media education projects, where the girls themselves make videos, for example, (summary also in Luca 1998, p. 141 ff.) or use computer programmes for purposes of self-expression. Large-scale projects such as those launched by the Media Centre in Freiburg, Germany, are required which organize media-competence projects for girls on the basis of concrete activities (medi@girls, Ebele/Schuhmacher 2001). Other exemplary projects are offered by the girls' home Mädchenhaus Düsseldorf e.V.. Several projects offer technical media competence, particularly communicative competence in the use and design of media and the conception of media educational girls' and women's project work (cf. Lehmann 2001, Jakop 2001). The list of these really committed projects could be extended by many more. Besides project work on the largest scale possible, public interest and recognition of the girls' projects must also be boosted. At video festivals, for instance, the girls' projects often do badly. The jury's code of judgement is frequently characterized by a thoughtless hierarchization of men-related above women-related genres and emphases. The interesting statements of the girls' groups and their exciting symbol language are not recognized; due to the formal deviation from the productions of technology-enthusiastic groups comprising mainly boys, their productions are pushed out of the competition too soon (cf. Luca 1998). In addition to expanding the jurors' communicative competence, it is imperative to resolutely promote special events such as VIDEOGIRL (cf. Schmitting 1998), for example, and heighten public interest in the girls' committed projects and work.
Gender-specific support is not only required for girls, however. Boys also lack the framework for gender-reflecting examination and the enhancement of their communicative competence. But the underlying motivation cannot consist of urging boys to recognize and express potential blame in order to do something for the girls. Boys' work must also be aimed at supporting boys, at opening up new areas of freedom so that they may develop more diversity. Curiosity, pleasure, and a commitment to assist boys (not to hinder them) are a *sine qua non* for professional pedagogical activity. Refreshingly liberal projects and well-founded starting points are offered by the media projects of the City of Wuppertal. In active boys' work, video films are produced here that provide a surprising insight – for media makers and viewers (readers) - into experiences related to circumcision (video project with immigrants) and tabooed subjects like anal intercourse (video project with young gay men) (v. Hören 2002). It should be emphasized that not every media educational project with boys and a trainer of the same sex is automatically boys' work (Neubauer/Winter 2002). The extent to which discussion in boys' pedagogy can be useful is illustrated by examples such as the radio project with boys, presented by Harald Sickinger (2002) and based on the empirically well-founded balance model of successfully being a boy (Neubauer / Winter 2001).
In view of societal power structures and the androcentric domination of what is on offer, there is (currently) definite discrimination of the girls and equally a pedagogical need. Despite the necessity for well-conceived boys' work, the present balance of power must not be overlooked. In accordance with this strategy gender-reflecting media education therefore has

to pursue a dual strategy in the interests of gender mainstreaming. Gender-related life situations, life plans, problem situations and concurrent discrimination of both sexes are all becoming the subject of discussion. It is important to negate neither the people's active, creative part in their everyday lives nor the differences between people.[9] The issue at stake, founded on the acceptance of individual options, is to promote communicative competence. In this process it is the chance of gender-reflecting media education to unearth dominant power structures in research and practice and to draft and translate concepts for change.
Gender relations are deeply "engrained" in the institutions. In order to bring about lasting changes – over and beyond committed individual initiative – a large batch of further measures have to be launched. One possible course of action is training courses on gender mainstreaming processes. They target not only the colleagues who are committed – and usually gender-reflecting, anyway – but provide training right up the ladder to the top echelons of institutions and organizations generally dominated by men. What is advocated and financed by the state in other European countries is here still in the starting blocks, despite its urgency here, too.

Summary: gender-reflecting media education

As in the discourse on gender research, the first priority is to introduce gender as a (scientific) category and to shed some light on various forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Particularly media analyses are required here, in addition to questions concerning emancipated access to media and their use. Opportunities must be sought to support girls and boys, or women and men, in their respective life-environmental themes on gender-specific lines. What must also be avoided in research is, first, a disproportionate polarization, which supposedly divides into "female" and "male" stereotypes and conceals the diversity that empirically does exist and, second, a disproportionate stigmatization of girls as a deficit group. In practice, working with separate genders is one at least temporarily necessary course of action to achieve diversity and differentiation. This applies not only to girls but also to boys. Current power structures, however, do (at the moment) make girls' support a clear priority. Not only must power deficits be offset to a certain extent in individual projects, but power structures also prevailing in pedagogical institutions or those responsible for pedagogical work, must be examined and altered step by step. Furthermore, gender-reflecting media education has to pursue a dual strategy in the interests of gender mainstreaming. The opportunity offered here by gender-reflecting media education is that of bringing to light and changing dominant power structures.

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[9] The strategy of gender mainstreaming made its first appearances in EU politics back in 1995 in the fourth action programme on equality of opportunity and in the Amsterdam Treaty (1996) (cf. Scherr 2001).

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