‘Mission Possible’: A Gender and Media Advocacy Toolkit

Module 1: A new agenda for *Who Makes the News*: why focus on the media?

This module introduces the toolkit and outlines the structure of the modules. It also highlights some of the reasons why the media need to be a focus of gender activism. Understanding the media’s various roles, its power and sphere of influence and the role it can play in bringing about change are essential for any type of advocacy that aims to change the media.
Module 1 - A New Agenda for Who Makes the News

“We were in uncharted territory. And taking on the Jamaican media was close to being a “Mission: Impossible”. But what needed to be done was clear every time Jamaican women switched on their television sets, read newspapers or listened to the radio.”

Women’s Media Watch Jamaica began in 1987 with only six volunteers. Its mission: to improve the representation of women in the media as one way of reducing violence against women. Improving how women are seen, heard and listened to in the media continues to shape the organization’s work more than 15 years later. Its activities include public education workshops, media monitoring and lobbying campaigns, research, as well as the production of audio-visual materials and teaching aids.

Taking on the media has become a mission not only for Women’s Media Watch Jamaica. Women (and men are joining in) engaged in various forms of political, social, cultural, economic and gender activism worldwide soon came to see the media as a key institution in the fight to achieve women’s equality and human rights.

The United Nations first International Decade for Women (1975-1985) was a catalyst for women’s activism and research on the media which, since the 1970s, has revolved around:

- A critique of the ways in which media content projects women as objects, rather than as active subjects or participants in many diverse roles
- An analysis of the institutional and social structures of power through which women are systematically marginalized within media organizations

Women working at the country and regional levels in the 1970s and 1980s developed their own tools to gauge the media’s discrimination against women in content and in the workplace. Their ongoing work received a significant boost in 1995 with the first Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), which has become a global tool of analysis of gender representation in the media.

GMMP was one of the key resolutions of a 1994 conference on Women Empowering Communication, held in Bangkok, organized by the Women’s Program of the World

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3 Gender Setting, New Agendas for Media Monitoring and Advocacy, Margaret Gallagher, ZED Books and WACC London, publishers, 2001
Association for Christian Communication (WACC) in cooperation with Isis International and the International Women’s Tribune Center (IWTC).

GMMP 1995 (which took place in 71 countries on January 18, 1995) GMMP 2000 (which took place in 70 countries on February 1, 2000) and GMMP 2005 (which took place in 76 countries on 16th February 2005), have become important tools for gender media activists. The findings of each have been used to show the media the problems with the representations and portrayals of women and men in the news and to stimulate discussions on how these might be addressed.

GMMP 2005 provides a unique opportunity to bring together the experiences of gender activism targeted at the media into a toolkit that seeks to build on these successes, among others.

**Why focus on the media?**

“The media do not merely represent; they also recreate themselves and their vision of the world as desirable, salable. What they reproduce is chosen, not random, not neutral, not without consequence.”

Media are in the business of providing information. Women and men read watch and listen to this information daily which is in the shape of what we know as news.

The media’s focus on the current issues and events of the day and the collection, editing and dissemination of this information through the news media – newspapers, television and radio – is the practice of journalism.

Likewise, the events and issues that become news each day, also go through a selection process which is not without its own imperfections. News is a choice, an extraction process, saying that one event is more meaningful than another event. The very act of saying that means making judgments that are based on values and based on frames (mental structures that shape the way we see the world).

In simple terms, the media, when asked, define their role as:

- To inform
- To educate
- To entertain

The radio, TV and newspapers give us information through news, current affairs programs, and talk shows. The media do this by providing information that is collected and edited based on the guiding principles of **accuracy**, **fairness** and **balanced** representation. They also entertain through TV soaps, films, game shows, music and

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sitcoms. It is through advertisements on radio, TV and in the newspapers that we know about goods and services for sale.\(^6\)

The media also see their key role in any society as a ‘watchdog’ of the government and all entities to ensure accountability in a society in the public’s interest.

The media’s ability to carry out this role depends greatly on whether the media operate within political and legal environments which enable free speech, reasonably unfettered access to information, free media, and economic and political environments which encourage and promote the development of a diversity of media.

Media and communications researchers and analysts have identified several other key roles the media play in any society:

- Shape public opinion and attitudes
- Determine the public discourse and thereby shape our political, cultural and economic priorities
- Influence public policy through the news agenda
- Reinforce or challenge gender, racial and other stereotypes and norms
- Serve as the channel through which the public communicates to policy makers and through which policy makers communicate to the public
- Media can act as catalysts for social change through coverage of injustices and the inclusion of the voice of those who often find their voices marginalized

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<th>Box One: Types of media</th>
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The form of media that reaches large audiences daily is what is known as mainstream or mass media. Newspapers, magazines and the broadcast mediums of television and radio fall into this category. There also are trade and specialist magazines – fashion and beauty, home design and interior, sports, computer, science, foreign affairs and policy analysis, among others – that are produced for mass consumption, but which may be more targeted at specific audiences within the larger population. Mass media view audiences as both consumers of information and of goods and services. Revenue from advertising is essential to the sustainability of the mass media. Mass media can be owned and operated by the state (often in developing countries worldwide), public or private interests.

Community media are limited to certain geographical areas and targeted at smaller groups of people. They cater for people in towns, rural areas, close-knit communities which seek to keep themselves informed on issues of interest. Unlike in the mainstream media where the control of information and messages is vested in the hands of the media practitioners, there is more room for people within a local community to participate in the governance and editorial operations of this form of media.

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**New media** is the term used to refer to the New Information and Communications Technologies (NICTs) which include web sites, web portals, e-mail, e-mail news alerts, listservs, and blogs. The new technology is used by mainstream media in that many of these media have web-based editions of their products. But the information technology revolution also has opened the space for civil society, special interest groups, as well as individuals to create their own sites for disseminating information and viewpoints. Outside of the mainstream media sites, one of the major concerns surrounding the use of new media is the accuracy and credibility of the information provided.

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**Box Two: Public Service Broadcasting**

The dominant form of broadcasting worldwide is **public broadcasting** (same as **public service broadcasting**). This form of broadcasting is defined as ‘public’ when radio, television and other electronic media outlets receive funding from the public – either through individual donations, fees, or indirectly as state subsidies that originated in taxes or other national funding sources.

Some public broadcasters supplement this with contributions from corporations which may be granted a limited amount of advertising time in return.

There is no standard definition of what public broadcasting is, but there are defining characteristics:

- Public service broadcasters generally transmit programming that aims to improve society by informing viewers
- The stations’ broadcasts are available nationwide and generally aim to cater for all interests and tastes including minorities
- They have a concern for national identity and community which leads to the commissioning of programs from within the country, rather than from abroad
- They tend to be more detached from vested interests and government-impartial programming that does not cater to the desires of advertisers or government
- Quality of programming rather than number ratings is the basis for competition
- Guided by guidelines that do not restrict program makers - these guidelines can be backed by hefty penalties

Understanding the media’s various roles, its power and sphere of influence and the role it can play in bringing about change are essential for any type of advocacy that aims to change the media.

**Activity – Discussion points!**

1. Make a list of the major media in your country. Divide them into print and broadcast media, mainstream and community (where appropriate). Find out from each media’s marketing and circulation department, the numbers of readers, listeners and viewers so that you have an idea of the media’s reach and influence in your community.
2. Find out who owns the various media?
3. Find out if there is a public broadcaster and how it is funded?
4. Find out how many community media exists? Who owns these media and how do they operate?

**Activity – Discussion Points!**

1. What are some of the key messages transmitted through your media about women’s roles in society? What are some of your media’s messages on men’s roles in society?
2. What are your media’s messages on the struggle for gender equality?
3. Look for specific examples of newspaper articles, radio or television programs to illustrate the messages you have identified.