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In collaboration with CSU Northridge professor Bobbie Eisenstock and her students, the National Eating Disorders Association has released a new Get REAL! Digital Media Literacy Toolkit. In this issue, we offer a wide-ranging update on advocacy, scholarship and resources on media and body image issues.

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Theme: Body Image and Media Literacy

The Spiral of Disempowerment

Sometimes evidence of media influence can be stark. Before the introduction of television in 1995, girls in Fiji believed that "going thin" was a bad thing, and that gaining weight was healthy. Three years after their exposure to American television, as many as 74 percent of the girls reported feeling 'too big,' 62 percent were dieting, and 15 percent were purging. The most avid viewers showed the highest risk for eating disorders. What were their favorite shows? *Melrose Place* and *Beverly Hills 90210*--both of them shows that showcased pencil-thin actresses playing hyper-sexualized roles (Becker et al., 2002).

In *Body Shots: Hollywood and the Culture of Eating Disorders*, Emily Fox-Kales, a clinical psychologist specializing in the treatment of eating disorders, and university professor of cultural studies, deftly weaves together clinical research studies, cultural analysis, and testimony from patients and students to demonstrate how thoroughly our media culture is implicated in the obsessive--and pathological--drive of girls, boys, women and men to attain an ideal body size and shape. In a poignant vignette, Fox-Kales illustrates the impact of celebrity culture on a 15-year-old girl at a hospital eating disorder unit: "She had recently lost thirty pounds during weeks on a semi-starvation diet. Her hair thinning and falling out, anemic and shivering on a hot summer day, she was nonetheless exultant: 'You don't know how hard I've worked to finally get thin. I'm not *ordinary* anymore; everyone says I look just like some hot Hollywood starlet!'" (4).

In her second chapter, Fox-Kales argues that our celebrity culture is almost entirely focused on celebrity *bodies*. Television coverage of red carpet events routinely dissect and appraise individual body parts. Accusations of body 'transgressions' fly back and forth in the popular and tabloid press, while the stars' publicists defend or deny them. And a vicious cycle begins to take place. As celebrities respond to relentless scrutiny of their bodies with revelations of their own insecurity and dissatisfaction, their stories inspire fans to monitor their own bodies with equal vigilance. All the self-surveillance normalizes what would otherwise be considered aberrant: "While celebrity diet and fitness routines are offered up to fans as instructive beauty tips and secrets, a closer study of such features in the tabloid press reveals practices and beliefs about food and weight that are listed as clinical symptoms on the Eating Attitudes Test, a standard diagnostic scale for the assessment of eating disorders" (42-43). These include excessive dietary restriction, renunciation of calorie-dense foods, and only allowing 'safe' low-calorie choices.

One might call this cycle a 'spiral of disempowerment,' as men and women internalize media messages destructive to their health and self-image, and heighten body dissatisfaction with nearly endless comparison of themselves with others. Fortunately, the spiral of empowerment is also active in many schools and college campuses across the country. At California State

University, Northridge, Bobbie Eisenstock, journalism professor and passionate body satisfaction advocate, helps students gain self-confidence with courses that combine service learning and media literacy education. In a Q&A article for this issue, Eisenstock writes, "The media advocacy and civic engagement component of my teaching. . . can be a transformational experience for students. The focus on media and body image can be particularly personal and life changing. . . Many openly share their personal issues with body image -- some reveal their own struggles with eating disorders, while others talk about their experiences with yo-yo dieting or over-exercising. . . Over the course of the semester, the change in students participating in the service-learning project is tangible. They literally begin to adjust their media view about body image and even question photos and comments they post and share on their social media."

In this issue of *Connections*, we provide a wide variety of resources on body image, eating disorders and media representations of women. In our research section, we take a look at the multidimensional aspects of these issues, and argue for feminist media advocacy which devotes attention to social analysis. In our second article, we demonstrate how 'post-feminist' beliefs and attitudes embedded in mainstream American films can drain the vitality of lead female characters. In our resources section, national media literacy expert Bobbie Eisenstock discusses how she became involved in media and body image advocacy on her home campus of California State University, Northridge, and how her work eventually led to a campus partnership with the National Eating Disorders Association. In our second resources article, we focus on the work of an author who makes an interesting claim--that news and information sources on the obesity 'epidemic' wage a war against "fat" that has little to do with the lives of real people, and massage the facts to meet the narrative of crisis. And, finally, in our MediaLit Moment, your high school students will have the chance to reflect on their willingness to accept stereotypes of plus-sized actresses, and to imagine the kinds of positive and/or realistic roles they might play.

Research Highlights

The Importance of Social Analysis to Feminist Media Advocacy

The sexualization of women and girls. The thin ideal. The consumer culture. These are phrases deployed in a pitched rhetorical battle against the pernicious influence of contemporary media representations of women. On the Spark Movement home page (www.sparksummit.com) a short video covers all these topics. Ileana Jimenez, a feminist educator at the progressive independent school Little Red School House in New York City, sounds the alarm: "Students are saying, 'Absolutely, no, that's unacceptable. What we're being given every day is really trash.' They know that what they're looking at is trash. And they feel a certain responsibility to combat it. They just don't know how."

In American society, many believe that the second wave feminists of the 1960 and 1970s achieved all the gains that they sought for women, and that there's little to discuss today. In a "post-feminist" society, it is indeed important to point out the political dimensions of media representations of women that most producers and many audiences would like to gloss over. There is a campaign to be waged, even a battle to be won.

However, that campaign might not be won on a simplistic, repetitive critique of media texts that takes on the character of media bashing. And it might not be won by simply telling women that they're beautiful as they are. A deeper social analysis can be valuable, too. For example, what if advocates can help their audiences understand that there's nothing natural or 'given' about the ideals of beauty that have been handed down to them through the media? Here's how Naomi Wolf characterizes this idea in *The Beauty Myth* (1992): "Strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful. Women's beauty must correlate to their fertility, and since this system is based on natural selection, it is inevitable and changeless. But none of this is true. 'Beauty' is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact" (quoted in Gunter and Wykes, *The Media and Body Image*, 61).

The 'thin ideal' presented in the media is also enmeshed in a complex web of associations and institutions. In his classic 1982 essay, "The Body in Consumer Culture," Mike Featherstone argues that consumer culture promotes a 'calculating hedonism' in which consumers adopt instrumental strategies to combat deterioration and decay of their bodies. At the same time, these bodies are vehicles of pleasure and self-expression--"images of the body beautiful, openly sexual and associated with hedonism, leisure and display"(80). Diet, exercise, makeovers, plastic surgery--all of these rigorous measures are undertaken to preserve the body. Consumers then take pleasure in showing off this body.

In its early years, the cosmetics industry helped to cement the conceptual bond between beauty and the health of the body. In the 1930s, cosmetics magnate Helena Rubenstein

reassured women that there was nothing wrong with wanting to hold onto youth, and formulated the consumer culture equation of youth = beauty = health (85). As Rubinstein once declared, "To preserve one's beauty is to preserve health and prolong life" (ibid). Of course, Rubinstein's equation of health, beauty and youth was also calculated to yield a profit. Featherstone writes of the beautiful body: "it is desirable and desiring, and the closer the actual body approximates the idealized images of youth, health, fitness and beauty, the higher its exchange value" (83).

What may not be immediately apparent is that our contemporary consumer culture doesn't award prizes for beautiful bodies so much as keep them on a treadmill (both figuratively and literally) in a regime of 'body maintenance.' According to Featherstone: "Like cars and other consumer goods, bodies require servicing, regular care, and attention to preserve maximum efficiency. As the consumption of goods increases, the time required for care and maintenance increases, and the same instrumental, rational orientation adopted towards goods is turned inwards onto the body. The tendency to transform free time into maintenance work imposes even greater demands on the individual and makes the monitoring of the current state of bodily performance essential if individuals are to get the most out of life: the hectic life increases the need for 'human servicing' " (88).

As Ileana Jimenez observes in her opening comment for the Spark Movement video, "Girls everyday are expending so much energy--mental energy, emotional energy--on how they look, how they dress, for approval." As Featherstone demonstrates, the energy that these girls expend on individual goals or attention to mainstream representations of women has wider implications and consequences. It's not much of an exaggeration to say that their output of energy supports the entire structure of our consumer economy. And, to return to our argument about advocacy, Featherstone's observations demonstrate the importance of grounding criticism of 'thin media' in a social analysis which can help audiences understand what's at stake when they accept mainstream representations of feminine beauty.

One other method stands out as a means for advancing advocacy on the issue of body image and media representations of women--the 'storytelling booths' that have sprung up in many organizations, like Spark, and NEDA, which have been created to record and share the personal stories of individual women and girls. The power of those stories lies in the openness and authenticity they convey--a power which dispels the narratives of femininity which have been so carefully constructed in the mainstream media. For more on this topic, see our Q & A with feminist media literacy advocate Bobbie Eisenstock in our resources section.

The Equivocal Voice of Post-Feminist Film

In the post-Civil War era, the "Negro Question" took on wide currency. What it meant was, "What are we going to do with Negroes?" In the 1980s, in the wake of the second wave of feminism, the Woman Question took center stage: What are we going to do with women in the workplace? What problems will that create? Are they really trying too hard if they take on the roles of both breadwinner and mother? Of course, there have been some difficulties along the way, but the great social problems anticipated by this 'woman question' never really materialized. Arguably, anxieties about these issues have persisted through the last three decades, and have been translated from the political to the realm of advertising, marketing and popular media.

Throughout its history, advertising has consistently delivered the message that the femininity of women is suspect or lacking unless they buy the right products. But in addition to this, the images of femininity offered up in advertisements have been as various as the products themselves. Wykes and Gunter write, "The self offered back to women is always partial, and each part she buys may soon be contradicted by another representation. Just as she buys the product that promises domestic perfection she is told she must instead be a *femme fatale*"(43).

Similarly, in a "post-feminist" era, many, if not most contemporary popular films with prominent female characters deliver deeply ambivalent messages about their status as women. For example, in summer 2014, Luc Besson's *Lucy* hit the big screen, with Scarlett Johansson playing a drug mule turned superwoman after the drug is accidentally released into her bloodstream. The drug allows Lucy to use more and more of her brain capacity, which in turn allows her to perform feats that bend the laws of space, matter and time. Viewers discover a few more things about Lucy. The ingredients in the drug are nutrients which pregnant mothers deliver to their developing children--nutrients which Lucy is now consuming herself. To reinforce this theme, Lucy doesn't just break out of her captivity, she kills the drug lord's henchmen and consumes the entirety of the meal they had been eating before she took their lives.

While the film affirms the empowerment of a woman who has been physically assaulted, it stops short of fully endorsing her newfound powers, and her relationships with men play a key role in that message. Lucy consults with a scientist who is an expert on the subject of brain capacity, and she enlists the help of a police captain to bring her fellow drug mules to safety. But Lucy has no male romantic partner to anchor her on her personal odyssey. In Lucy's final meeting with the scientist, the drug lord she foiled is in hot pursuit. She erases all the matter around the scientist, his colleagues and herself, leaving only white space. The moral cost of not having a male partner? She begins to appear as a monstrous presence that could possibly devour the universe.

Where *Lucy* comments on the danger of transgressing traditional notions of gender, *Miss Congeniality* (2000) provides a classic example of empowered femininity deflected to meet the

needs of a patriarchal society. FBI agent Gracie Hart, played by Sandra Bullock, possesses speed and agility in combat, sharp investigative skills, and a gritty, rapier wit. To this point, she could be cast as an updated version of Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe. But Hart is also endowed with masculine characteristics that mark her as a particularly unattractive woman. Her apartment appears to be a cluttered bachelor 'pad,' she snorts when she laughs, she picks her ear, she chews with her mouth open, and when she has a bad day at work, she asks a bartender for a pint of Ben and Jerry's and spoons through it with unfeminine gusto.

Hart is re-molded to fit traditional gender norms when she is given an undercover assignment to pose as a contestant at the "Miss United States" beauty pageant. In a clear inter-textual reference to popular television makeover shows of the time, Hart undergoes a grueling process of transformation carried out by beauty experts in white lab coats--including the imposition of draconian diet restrictions-- while 'charm consultant' Victor Melling (Michael Caine) effects a transformation in Hart's manners and behavior which largely effaces her previous, uncouth self. In addition, Hart surrenders her earlier judgment of fellow contestants as vapid and superficial, and forms a bond of sisterhood with them. And the senior agent (Ben Bratt) supervising the case discovers a newfound attraction for Hart, setting in motion the romantic relationship which will finally bring Hart fully into the hetero-normative fold.

A few other things are worth mentioning about *Miss Congeniality*. One might expect a gritty, realistic back story to explain Hart's rise to prominence in a field dominated by men, but no such story is offered. Instead, the film shapes Hart into a character with a modicum of believability as an FBI agent, only to undercut her credibility by suggesting that both her life and career have stalled because she is unsuccessful at being a woman. This is the post-feminist 'argument' of the film. At the same time, the 'ugly duckling' conceit of *Miss Congeniality* is paper-thin, as any viewer will recognize Sandra Bullock as a Hollywood star who represents the traditional feminine ideal. Bullock sheds the character of Hart quickly and easily. It's Bullock as Miss Congeniality who is the star of the show.

In short, many, if not most popular contemporary films empower, then hobble their female leads. This is not to say that it's difficult to find films which avoid such choices. *Winter's Bone* (2010), which features a young Jennifer Lawrence in the starring role, is a fine example. A few, like *Erin Brockovich* (2000), have met with box office success. But if you ever wonder why a contemporary mainstream film with a strong female lead feels. . .hollow, this may be a leading cause.



CML Attends International Media Education Summit in Prague

The International Media Education Summit was held on November 20-21, 2014 at the Goethe Institut in Prague. Keynote addresses and plenary panels featured leading media literacy academics and practitioners, including Renee Hobbs, Divina Frau-Meigs, Lutz Hachmeister, Andrew Burn and Paul Milhailidis; Tessa Jolls presented on the topic "The New Curricula: How Media Literacy Education Transforms Teaching and Learning." The summit, convened annually by the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice and hosted this year by Metropolitan University Prague, brings together a global network of media educators, scholars and researchers to share research, pedagogy and innovation on all aspects of media education and media in education.



Baker Leads Visual Literacy Workshop

Frank Baker (center, standing) visited Los Angeles on Jan. 9 to conduct a Visual Literacy Workshop for teachers, sponsored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He was joined (left to right) for a dinner meeting by his wife Melanie Baker, Steve Werblun, a Los Angeles-based storyboard and courtroom artist, and CML's Tessa Jolls.

CONSORTIUM
for **MEDIA LITERACY**

Uniting for Development

About Us...

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communications that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth. <http://consortiumformedia literacy.org>

Resources for Media Literacy

Q&A with Bobbie Eisenstock, California State University, Northridge

Bobbie Eisenstock, Ph.D. writes, teaches, and consults about the social-psychological effects of the emergent digital media culture on children, teens, and families. Dr. Eisenstock is on the faculty at California State University, Northridge.

How did you become interested in issues of media and body image? How did your interest progress into advocacy?

I have been an activist and advocate all my life. My advocacy has always focused on media's connection to public health and social issues. When I was a teenager, I had an experience that left an indelible imprint on me. I was traveling through a developing country where for miles you could see rows of TV antennas on the rooftops of make-shift huts that had no indoor plumbing. The power of this image became embedded in my mind and one of the driving forces behind my media advocacy.

My interest in media and body image stems from a deep concern about the effects of media on children and adolescents. Research clearly demonstrates that media can affect body satisfaction and self-esteem, which can ultimately lead to a drive for thinness and disordered eating. At the same time, there is evidence that media literacy interventions can be effective in lessening these effects: individuals who are media literate are less likely to express body dissatisfaction and compare themselves to others. Tweens and teens are especially vulnerable to body image messages at this stage of their development because their bodies are maturing and they don't have the self-confidence or media literacy skills to counteract the potential effects of these messages. Given what we know, how can we not become advocates not only for media literacy but for media messages about body image that lead to psychological, emotional, and physical health and well-being?

How have social media affected body image?

With the proliferation of social media, our media culture is more body-image driven than ever. It is virtually impossible to escape the onslaught of picture-perfect retouched body ideals and not be affected by messages that pressure us to reshape our bodies to fit this unrealistic body standard that has become a cultural norm. Recently published studies indicate that hanging out on social media sites may affect body image concerns even more than overall Internet exposure. Perhaps it is because there are more opportunities to create, share, and interact with others about personal body image messages. A particularly troubling trend is tween and teen girls who post videos asking "am I pretty or ugly?" and invite strangers to rate their appearance. At its worst, the digital media culture has spawned a cyber-underground of pro-ana (anorexia) and pro-mia (bulimia) social networks that glorify the drive for thinness on "thinspiration" blogs and hashtags and serve as support systems for eating disorders. At its best, social media have become tools for social action to advocate for a new "normal" that celebrates real and authentic body shapes and sizes.

Was there something that prompted your focus on media advocacy and body image in your university teaching?

It actually started with a life-size cardboard cutout of Barbie. Several years ago two students used this Barbie as a prop in a class presentation about media, body image, and eating disorders. The Barbie doll had facts about eating disorders scrawled on her arms, legs, and other body parts, and the students were peer educators from a campus program called Joint Advocates on Disordered Eating or JADE at the University Counseling Center. JADE's mission is to raise awareness and educate students about eating disorders.

Barbie is an ideal entry point to talk about body image. Barbie is a cultural icon – the Barbie doll “embodies” the ideal body, perfect hair, fashionable clothes and must-have accessories. Girls own an average of 10 Barbies, Barbie dolls have become collectibles, and some women even undergo plastic surgery to look like her. We also know from the research that there is a potential “Barbie effect” on young girls’ early socialization when it comes to body image and self-esteem. Girls who play with Barbie report lower body esteem and greater desire for a thinner body shape, both of which can contribute to increased risk for disordered eating and weight cycling.

That life-size Barbie was a great ice-breaker, but the presentation lacked a media literacy component. I felt that this was a missed opportunity to educate the campus community about a health problem that increasingly affects college students, many of whom enter the university with preexisting conditions. So I contacted the director of JADE about partnering on an interdisciplinary service-learning community engagement project in which the peer educators would collaborate with my journalism students to update and expand their materials and feature media literacy skills to help educate, engage and empower students. We accomplished all this and much more. Over the next few years, the students created a webzine and videos, launched an essay contest, and facilitated activities to raise awareness about the good, the bad, and the ugly side of media's influence on body image.

What exactly is service learning?

Service-learning pedagogy emphasizes “learning by doing” – students apply what they learn beyond the classroom to help an organization meet its needs while developing students’ civic responsibility and active participation in the world. The pedagogy is a particularly good fit for teaching and learning media literacy because it emphasizes critical inquiry and reflection. Students examine what they learned and how they learned it, and reflect on new meanings, knowledge, and insight they gained from the experience. This learning process deepens their understanding and may even inspire them to take action in the future.

How does civic engagement affect student learning about media and body image?

The media advocacy and civic engagement component of my teaching is extremely important to me because it can be a transformational experience for students. The focus on body image can be particularly personal and life-changing when students start analyzing these flawless images that flaunt thin and toned body parts and 6-pack abs on muscular body frames. Just

like other teens and twenty-somethings, my students – both male and female – admit that they compare themselves to models and celebrities and it affects how they feel about their own bodies. Many of them openly share their personal issues with body image – some reveal their own struggles with eating disorders, while others talk about their experiences with yo-yo dieting or over-exercising to try to achieve a certain body shape. Over the course of the semester, the change in students participating in the service-learning project is tangible. They literally begin to adjust their media view about body image and even question photos and comments they post and share on their social media.

Can you tell us more about how NEDA decided to partner with you and with CSUN?

I approached NEDA to partner with my students on a community service-learning project through CSUN's Office of Community Engagement. I had just facilitated a media literacy "boot camp" workshop about body image and the digital culture at NEDA's annual conference. NEDA had never been a community partner before and was very interested in the opportunity. I wanted to work with NEDA because they understand the role media literacy can play in helping to reduce media-related risk factors that can contribute to self-esteem, body satisfaction, and disordered eating. We talked about the collaboration as a way for college students to develop strategies and authentic content that would engage their peers.

What was the process for developing the *Get REAL! Toolkit*?

One of the ways that NEDA advances their mission is by encouraging individuals and families to get involved in their media watchdog program. The goal of the program is to educate media industry leaders about the potential effect of their message on self-esteem, body dissatisfaction and eating disorders, and to help consumers become critical media users and advocate for messages that promote a healthy body image and lifestyle choice. These goals fit perfectly with my approach to media literacy. Our community action plan was to update their media literacy resources for the digital age.

Once we agreed upon a toolkit approach, my students started to brainstorm and develop activities based on research they studied about media and body image and the effectiveness of media literacy interventions to counteract and decrease certain risk factors for eating disorders. The students applied their digital and media literacy skills and reflected on their own personal experience with media's influence on self-image to develop authentic social media-driven activities. The next step was to pilot the activities on their classmates and use their feedback before sending the toolkit to NEDA for approval from their Advisory Board.

How might parents and educators use the *Get REAL! Toolkit*?

One of NEDA's priorities is to help parents, educators, and health practitioners understand the emergent media landscape and the significant role digital technology can have in the prevention and treatment of eating disorders. In the recent issue of *Making Connections*, NEDA's publication for parents, family and friends, I outlined specific strategies to effectively use the *Get REAL! Toolkit*. The article, entitled "Virtually You: 5 Steps to Get REAL! about Digital ED Risks," also explains how digital footprints can serve as indicators of body image

and susceptibility to risk factors.

What are some of the strategies for parents?

First and foremost, parents need to familiarize themselves with social media – what I call “walk the walk and talk the talk.” Then they will better understand how to use media literacy skills to decipher ED messaging. The best way is for parents to go online with kids and talk about what they see, hear and read, and carefully listen to how children and teens describe the way people look and are treated based on their appearance. When parents do this, they will find a wealth of teachable moments to help kids question and challenge messages that don’t support healthy choices and talk about the values they want their children to learn.

What is your current collaboration with NEDA?

My students are developing content for NEDA’s new national outreach initiative called Proud2Bme On Campus. It is a collegiate version of their online youth outreach program Proud2Bme. Last year NEDA conducted a survey of eating disorder and body image-related programs and resources on college and university campuses. The survey found a critical lack of resources that effectively educate, screen, and treat college students at a time when eating disorders are increasing among this age group – from 10 to 20 percent of female and 4 to 10 percent of male students experience eating disorders, with student athletes among the most underserved.

To address these needs, NEDA launched Proud2Bme On Campus and partnered with two universities – CSUN and NYU – to collaborate with student advocates on projects that will help raise awareness about eating disorders and early intervention. My CSUN students are developing social media-driven activities to help their peers develop media literacy skills around body image messaging. The activities are designed to help students express themselves by telling personal stories and advocate for more diverse and natural body shapes and sizes – a storytelling booth, video blogs, creative writing and art spaces, interactive quizzes, selfie wall of positive affirmations, and social media shoutouts to celebrities, retail outlets and companies when they promote healthy body images or no retouching policies.

What advice do you have for others who want to advocate for positive body images in the media?

Start with making media literacy education a priority – in school curriculum, parent education, teacher in-services, after-school programs, clubs and organizations, wherever you can. Media literacy is a prerequisite for media advocacy. Once you understand how a message is constructed, its purpose and meaning for different people, and the potential impact, you can better develop a media strategy to target your concern. Think critically about body image whenever you use media and advocate with your consumer power to make a difference wherever you can.

What are some specific actions to take?

Remember that media are businesses and the goal of any business is to make money. Here

are three actions to exercise your consumer power:

- Don't buy products from companies that use deceptive body image advertising and let them know why, and support companies that practice socially responsible advertising practices and let them know why as well.
- Use social media to shoutout to celebrities who speak out against digitally retouched images of themselves and callout ones who don't.
- Join social action campaigns and support legislators in their efforts to counter digitally-altering bodies in advertising. Encourage your representative in Congress to support the bipartisan proposed Truth in Advertising Act (HR 4341) requesting the Federal Trade Commission to study the health consequences of digitally-retouched human images and make recommendations to protect consumers.

The Medicalization of Fat

When most of us hear the phrase "media and body image," we think of advertising and entertainment media as the cultural forces which drive women (and men) to obsess over their body shape and weight. But news media and even state-sanctioned sources of information can stimulate unhealthy anxiety over weight and body image issues as well. In one of the opening chapters of *The Weight of Images: Affect, Body Image and Fat in the Media* (2014), Finnish cultural scholar Katariina Kyrölä conducts a thorough and closely reasoned analysis of national and international news sources on obesity in Finland, and the European Union.

Kyrölä comments on the moral panic that characterizes much of contemporary news discourse on obesity, beginning with an article from the *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest daily in Finland (hereafter cited as *HS*). The headline reads, "Obesity threatens health and economy!" (11 January 2004). In the first lines: "Obesity has become the biggest health problem for humankind. Even rich countries will soon be unable to afford the expenses overweight causes." The *HS* also published a series of articles on the topic that year, and Kyrölä observes a pattern in which "protective actions are repeatedly justified by declaring that our safety or health has come to a crisis, and now is the time to fight, even begin a war"(43). As Kyrölä demonstrates, the thematic associations between obesity and war are not at all isolated. In World War I, fat people were blamed for hoarding rationed foods such as fats and sugars, which led to a demand for good citizens to be slim. In the U.S., the "war on obesity" was launched by the Surgeon General in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in late 2001(44).

Kyrölä further demonstrates that, in this series of articles, the information and evidence presented are made to fit the crisis 'frame.' Where health problems might be related to obesity, obesity is indicated as the likely cause, even when alternative causes are mentioned. In an article on childhood obesity, an expert states that no research has established when

obesity in children poses a health risk, yet the article still discusses the "worrying increase in childhood obesity"(50). Kyrölä also calls the credibility of all these news sources into question. They often rely on WHO and the International Obesity Task Force as news and information sources. Yet these same governmental bodies have strong ties with international pharmaceutical companies that could stand to make a profit from the obesity 'epidemic.'

In a bold move, Kyrölä makes a direct attack on the biomedical discourse about obesity contained in news stories and public policy documents gathered for her research: ". . .the avalanche of numbers and statistics becomes an important factor, turning fat into a fetish object. . . Fatness is reduced to a two-dimensional characteristic which can be attached to nearly anyone, and when it is attached it suddenly flattens the person's multifaceted corporeal existence into just one central quality" (45-46). Nor does Kyrölä's critique stop there: "National and cultural variations in what groups are the targets of the most intense concerns demonstrate again, how the distinction between the threat and the threatened is arbitrary, anything but neutral or causal..."(48).

In addition, Kyrölä brilliantly analyzes the point of view delivered by news media on obesity: "Threatening images of fatness produce an ideal reader who should fear and reject the actual or potential part of her/his body named 'fat,' whether that part exists in the concrete now or in the imagined future. The reader is pushed into observing his/her own body as if through the eyes of an outside expert, making it easy to forget that the body is not only a measurable object of scrutiny and control, but something alive and lived at every moment, a source of pleasure as well as potential pain" (56).

Armed with statistics, health care professionals are likely to have the first word about the costs of obesity to society. But many scholars, including several cited elsewhere in this issue of *Connections*, point out the social costs of attempting to attain an ideal body shape and weight. So why is it that most lay readers would assign greater credibility to health information specialists? Kyrölä writes, "The disadvantages connected to fear of fatness or dieting, like eating disorders and self-esteem issues, appear much less serious and less harmful future problems than fatness itself. They are not as readily measurable and often not immediately visible. No tools have been developed to measure the public health costs of feeling constantly threatened by one's own body"(52).

Kyrölä, who herself suffered from an eating disorder for several years, appears to know something about those costs: "My experiences of living with an eating disorder could be described as living with a phantom of fat as a part of my body image." The phantom "never actualized visibly"; instead, the constantly threatening possibility of gaining weight and becoming fat became the driving force in her life. "I may have seemed like a health educator's dream come true, since I mostly maintained a 'normal' weight, exercised extensively, and knew the nutrition information and calorie counts for many foods by heart." Kyrölä reflects, "Fear of fat most certainly did not keep me safe, and slimness did not keep me healthy" (58). *The Weight of Images* is available from Ashgate Publishers, Surrey, UK. (www.ashgate.com).

Sources Cited

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Recommended Resources

NEDA Get REAL! Digital Media Literacy Toolkit

www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/sites/default/files/Toolkits/getrealmedialliteracytoolkit/index.html

Developed by Bobbie Eisenstock in collaboration with students at CSUN, this updated NEDA toolkit provides research-based activities designed to heighten critical inquiry about media and body image issues, with a focus on digital media (e.g., a Digital Body Image Quiz). Plenty of support is given for parents and students who wish to send messages to media, marketing and clothing companies that foster negative body image.

NEDA *Making Connections* magazine, v.7, n.3

http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/sites/default/files/MakingConnections/MakingConnections_v7.3.pdf

The theme of this issue is "Technology, Social Media and Eating Disorders," and includes a contribution by Bobbie Eisenstock titled "Virtually You: 5 Steps to Get REAL! about Digital ED Risks." It also includes inspiring contributions by two young media producers on the topic of media, body image and eating disorders.

Proud2BeMe <http://www.proud2bme.org>

Sponsored, by NEDA, this is a blog site promoting body satisfaction, and much more. A large collection of well-written posts on a wide variety of topics makes this more of a revolving news magazine for people seeking support (and inspiration) on health, media and body image issues.

NEDA Collegiate Survey Project

<http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/CollegiateSurveyProject>

The final product of this project, *Eating Disorders on the College Campus*, provides an overview of eating disorder services provided on college campuses, and makes recommendations for providing a more comprehensive array of services.

Miss Representation (dir. Jennifer Siebel Newsom, 2011)

<http://therepresentationproject.org/films/miss-representation/>

The Representation Project's mission is to "expose injustices created by gender stereotypes and to shift people's consciousness towards change." *Miss Representation* draws on a wealth of interviews, from Condoleeza Rice to Rachel Maddow, to discuss the problems created by an unequal, undemocratic political and media system, and offers possible solutions. Well-documented, informative, highly recommended.

NYC Girls Project <http://www.nyc.gov/html/girls/html/home/home.shtml>

Last fall, New York launched an ambitious, city-wide self-esteem initiative for girls. Project directors claim that their curriculum, "Full of Ourselves: A Wellness Program to Advance Girl Power, Health and Leadership" is the first of its kind to show sustained positive changes in girls' body image, body satisfaction and body esteem. The initiative includes a series of "I'M A GIRL" PSA's. Some additional information can be found in a September 30, 2013 *New York Times* story by Anemona Hartocollis, "City Unveils Campaign to Improve Girls' Self-Esteem."

Girl Culture (Chronicle Books, 2002).

This book, by author and photographer Lauren Greenfield, includes nearly a hundred full-page photographs of women and girls in all sorts of situations and settings, from show girl auditions in Vegas to summer weight loss camp. The composition and subject of these photos are a great starting point for conversations about body image and media representations of women.

Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (University of California Press, 1993).

Pathbreaking cultural and theoretical treatment of issues relevant to the topic of this newsletter. Densely written in places, this book can also be rewarding for readers interested in this field of study.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (Random House, 1997).

While this book is not about media representations per se, it deals with prevalent American values, beliefs, assumptions and images of girls from the Victorian age to the present, and provides a rich context for inquiry about representations of girls and women today.

Med!aLit Moments

Real Women Without Stereotypes?

In more than one research survey conducted for the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, female characters in television and film frequently appeared as "eye candy" for the audience and for the lead male. What about female characters played by plus-sized actresses? How are they portrayed? They seem to run the gamut, from the Gabourey Sibideh's entirely serious portrayal of a young single mother in *Precious*, to Kirstie Alley's role in the pseudo-reality show *Fat Actress*, which practically makes Alley an object of audience ridicule.

In this MediaLit Moment, your high school students will have the chance to identify stereotypes of plus-sized actresses that they might have taken for granted, and a chance to develop their own criteria for roles which cast larger women in a realistic or positive light.

Ask students to identify stereotypical roles for plus-sized actresses

The entertainment industry has its own definition of *plus-size*. See example of how the term can vary: <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/celebs/news/a18375/plus-sized-models/>

AHA! Plus-sized actresses are typecast most of the time!

Grade Level: 9-12

Key Question #4: What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

Core Concept #4: Media have embedded values and points of view

Materials: DVD player and/or computer with high-speed Internet connection

Activity: You may want to ask if any students have seen *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. If they have seen it, what impression did they have of Ms. Suggs (Jennifer Coolidge), the driving instructor? Did her weight or body size seem to have anything to do with her character?

Next, play clips of two or more television or film characters played by plus-sized actresses, and offer students a glimpse of a variety of roles. Here's a sample list: America Ferrara as Ana in *Real Women Have Curves*; Melissa McCarthy as Mullins in *The Heat*; Ricki Lake as Tracy Turnblad in *Hairspray*; Queen Latifah as Mama Morton in *Chicago*. You will need to be judicious with your choice of excerpts, as plus-sized actresses are cast in R-rated films with some frequency. What kinds of characters do they play? Make sure to ask, can they imagine this actress playing any other kind of character? If not, why not? Introduce students to the concept of typecasting/stereotyping. Draw students' attention to KQ#4 and keep asking questions to help them unravel the social assumptions embedded in these stereotypes.

If time permits, hold a discussion on the kinds of roles these actresses might play that are not based on stereotypes. What might be a serious, realistic or positive role for them?

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of media literacy were developed as part of the Center for Media Literacy's MediaLit Kit™ and Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)™ framework. Used with permission, ©2002-2014.