

Charlotte Jones  
Professor Sewell  
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***Girls* and Public Media 2.0**  
**The Disruption of Levine's Regulated Discourse Model**

The dialogue and controversy surrounding media's depiction of female sexuality and appearance appeared in the late twentieth century and continues to occupy the blogosphere, newsstands and dinner conversations in the twenty-first. Yet the nature of this dialogue has transformed with the introduction of new media technologies and relationships. Professor Elana Levine's analysis of female commodification in *Having a Female Body doesn't make you Feminine* reveals a cycle of conversation between discourse and regulation that is still pertinent today in the discussion of media's depiction of femininity. Levine's analysis is updated through incorporating the analysis of modern media's transformation in Jessica Clark and Patricia Aufderheide's *Public Media 2.0*, thereby synthesizing the two into a well-rounded perspective through which to analyze female's contemporary portrayal. By applying these perspectives to the unique case study of HBO's series, *Girls*, Levine's, Clark's and Aufderheide's analyses reveal how modern media platforms alter the public discourse concerning femininity.

Levine's article, *Having a Female Body doesn't make you Feminine: Feminine Hygiene Advertising and 1970s Television* targets a specific problem within the larger issue of the media's manipulation of feminine portrayal. Levine details the historical emergence of sprays and douches that hit shelves in the 1970s in an attempt to transform sexual experiences into capitalistic opportunities. Previously not a topic of conversation, sex was inevitably linked to these products, causing some to believe it was "a sign of loosening sexual repressiveness" (Levine 38). Yet Levine dives deeper and reveals that the

advertising companies still clung to “the same ideas about sex that had circulated in American culture since at least the Victoria era” (Levine 38). She strongly asserts that these products did not change the discourse, but rather capitalized and propelled the same beliefs that “sex was something dirty” and specifically, the female body, was “smelly, messy and unsightly,” necessary of cleansing. Yet women bought the products. Curious to explore their own sexuality, women followed the ad agencies’ rhetoric, consuming these products in an attempt to fulfill the expectations set by the companies’ discourse. Levine additionally explicates NAB’s role in regulating this discourse, namely, by not doing so. The NAB did not function to serve the consumers or the feminists that raised their voices and complaints. Men were creating the feminine hygiene ads and rich men were supporting the agencies that created those ads. In turn, the discourse set by these agencies affected the regulation and cemented certain standards and expectations for female sexuality. These expectations consequently affected economics by spurring women to shop for a new “need,” channeling profits straight back into the discourse-setting agencies, thereby creating a cycle of conversation that limits the consumers involvement. However this model’s practice is ultimately disrupted due to the changing platforms of media involvement explicated in *Public Media 2.0*.

Directors of the Center for Social Media and the Future of Social Media Project, Patricia Aufderheide and Jessica Clark analyze the transformation and implication of society’s interaction with media. Aufderheide and Clark begin by giving a historical account of Public Media 1.0, otherwise known as traditional media. Taking form through broadcasting, Public Media 1.0 was structured top down and one-to-many. Public educational and government funded channels and programs served an “objective” purpose,

aspiring to be larger than entertainment and a source for bettering society. In addition to these news conglomerates, 1 – 3 channels were set aside for public access in an “attempt to democratize television” following the “Habermasian” necessity of publically mediated space (Sewell). However, despite this romantic notion of public involvement in media, prestige and attention largely tuned into the news espoused by privatized newspapers and networks. As a result, private interests and corporations that prioritized their pockets over their consumers’ welfares largely affected citizens’ decisions and opinions. Yet today people are getting their news from peers’ Twitter accounts, not CNN. The top down, one-to-many model is shattering as a peer network of many-to-many emerges. The true democratization of media arises as consumers hold companies accountable on their social media sites and consumers’ segmented identities find haven in the multitude of publics that transpire through the Internet. If the Public Media 2.0 model had existed forty years ago, it is hard to believe feminists against the feminine hygiene products of the 1970s could not have gained ground. Today consumers dismantle controversial advertisement campaigns and engaged individuals increasingly call out sexist behavior.

So how do Levine’s analysis of discourse and the Public Media 2.0 model relate to HBO’s *Girls*? Because Lena Dunham’s show raises the conversation surrounding female sexuality and the Public Media 2.0 model engages in the regulation of that discourse, ultimately altering the media’s portrayal of women. Due to HBO’s private entry fees and therefore freedom from explicit content restrictions, its shows are known to have more risqué content than cable series. However, the sex scenes and nudity portrayed in HBO shows are often the paragon of perfection, displaying toned bodies and unattainable conquests. *Girls* does not follow that precedent. Instead, bodies other than sizes zero and

two are displayed, sex scenes can be awkward if not painful and the hyperreality of the characters' romantic lives demystifies and disrupts the usual media portrayal of sexuality. Because of this unfamiliarity, a significant swell of discourse has emerged from Dunham's specific (or seemingly not so specific) choice of nudity. Opinions span the gamut from reporter saying,

I don't get the purpose of all the nudity on the show — by [Dunham] in particular. I feel like I'm walking into a trap where you go, 'Nobody complains about all the nudity on *Game of Thrones*,' but I get why they do it. They do it to be salacious and titillate people. And your character is often nude at random times for no reason (Gonzalez).

Producer, Judd Apatow responded by saying that the reporters' comments were "sexist and misogynistic" (Gonzalez) and women across the nation have lauded Dunham's bravery and determination to display a more average body confidently on screen.

Googling "HBO Girls and Nudity" produces over twenty-two million responses and even if an individual does not have an opinionated stance, he or she will certainly have heard of the controversy. *Girls* not only raises the amount of discourse, but alters what that discourse is discussing. Discussions about female self-empowerment, self-image and men's expectations of women are continuously born from Dunham's depiction of women in *Girls*. The rawness of the show raises questions at once unwanted and desired, forcing the audience into a conversation that could not have previously happened without the rise of Public Media 2.0 and the ability to easily and quickly interact with other viewers.

This phenomenon breaks away from the practices of decades past. Consumers are now challenging, participating, appreciating and interacting with the material broadcasted

to them. They are taking an active role in interpreting and engaging the content meant for them to ingest and as a result they are enhancing the discourse surrounding media's depiction of female sexuality on the whole. While Levine critiqued the ability of agencies to turn women's sexuality into a commodity, the tools of Public Media 2.0 diminish corporate influence and instead place greater agency in the hands and minds of the consumer. A disrupted model of discourse emerges, containing similar steps as Levine's original, yet engaging with the individual citizen in an ideological versus economic way. While discourse still affects regulation and economics, the model now incorporates the very demographic it previously manipulated. As seen through *Girls*, the use of the Public Media 2.0 platform reveals the ability of the consumer to choose what they want to see, and make their opinions known to higher powers. Dunham's extensive fan base supports her on-screen nudity and shifts attention away from historically idealized female sexuality thereby altering public discourse and public expectation.

## Works Cited

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