Women, Pop Music, and Pornography

Abstract

Musician and feminist Meredith LeVande noticed a dramatic shift in the appearance of female pop stars in the late 1990s. This essay shows how the connection between media ownership deregulation and the mega-media companies that profit from adult entertainment have pushed pornographic imagery into the mainstream. Nowhere is this situation more evident than with women in popular music whose images have become increasingly hyper-sexualized. Through various narratives circling women in music, this essay explores how the 1996 Telecommunications Act has made pornographic images omnipresent.

As a singer/songwriter on the college circuit, I am unsettled by the increasing presence of pornography in the music industry. Having a degree in women's studies that continuously shapes my work, I often feel torn because everything I stand for creatively directly conflicts with “success.” I started my career at age 23, around 1995, when the industry felt possible. On a major-label level, women were alive and well, and if this route wasn't your thing, then Ani DiFranco proved an independent career was possible.

But amid all the promise of do-it-yourself digital recordings, Lilith Fair paraphernalia, and buzz that women were revolutionizing music, a larger counter-force eventually prevailed: as women moved to the forefront during the mid to late 1990s, the landscape of female musicians drastically changed from Sarah McLachlan to Sporty Spice to Britney Spears. While

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there are always “trends” in music, these trends seemed to move in only one direction.

Broadcasts on independent radio stations are integral to the success of independent musicians. When local radio was gulped by Clear Channel, I tuned into conversations that discussed how media conglomerates affected not only musicians, but the public in general. Enlightened by these conversations, I became equally disturbed by what I saw as an increasingly hypersexualized landscape of women musicians. I began to notice how pornographic images dominated the mainstream part of our visual world, particularly images of women in popular music.

The link between pornography and pop music may or may not be strategically placed, but it is there nonetheless. This essay examines less explored aspects of the phenomenon that have coincided with the ever-increasing pornographic imagery attached to female pop stars. First, I discuss the companies that benefit from pornography and how the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which deregulated media ownership limits, are linked to “the mainstreaming” of pornography. I briefly discuss the law as it pertains to pornography, its inherent conflict with media deregulation, and how these systems have shaped an atmosphere that helped unite pop culture with porn culture. Next, I discuss why women in popular music play such an integral role in the mainstreaming of pornography. I then deconstruct commercials and videos that equate power and feminist principles with pornographic practices. In addition, I look at the careers of some female pop stars whose images were drastically assimilated into the pornographic standard, and I further establish a connection between the ever-increasing presence of young pop stars and rising social acceptance of subliminal child pornography. Finally, I examine how the “indecency” issue—particularly with regard to the Janet Jackson Super Bowl incident—is steered toward discussions of content regulation rather than media deregulation.

The Beneficiaries of Pornography

The pornography industry in the United States generates annual revenues of $10 billion to $14 billion (Rich 2001, 1). A healthy percentage of this figure comes from pay-per-view movies on cable and satellite, websites, and in-room hotel services. The companies that profit from pornography, either currently or in the past, include: AT&T, Yahoo!, Marriott, Westin and Hilton...
Motors, LodgeNet, provides company, income fact, They programming, findings DirecTV of all estimated solutions, boasts have owned its use leaders strip industry 2006). technology School internet. 2006, ment internet. Although printing of 1), Pornographic giant, experimenting the most internet pornography, actually the role home video markets and on the internet. And while the internet may have escalated its use, adult entertainment is exploring new frontiers once again. Vivid Entertainment, the adult movie giant, is experimenting with a technology that will enable the

MEREDITH LEVANDE • WOMEN, POP MUSIC, AND PORNOGRAPHY 295
consumer to download an adult film and burn it to a DVD (Gentile 2006; Associated Press 2006a). Even before Play Station portable game handhelds were officially released, there were porn videos already on the market specifically developed for this technology (Alexander 2006).

From the industry viewpoint, barriers between consumer and product, such as the consumer’s shame at being seen viewing porn in public, kept the porn industry relatively confined in the 1970s and 1980s (Egan 2000, 4). The advent of the VCR broadened the market from adult bookstores, which were frequently raided by law enforcement, into the home. But even the VCR required a trip to the video store where those who rented adult videos might face embarrassment. Thus, pay-per-view television and the internet removed the final barriers between consumer and product. Once these barriers were removed, images of women in popular media not only grew increasingly suggestive, but they began to mirror attitudes, body language, and behaviors seen in actual pornographic fare.

Ironically, it is the broadcasting of obscene material that is the current taboo; yet web, satellite, and cable television have made obscene material ubiquitous. Ruth Marcus speculates that the Federal Communications Commission, which has the power to regulate “obscene,” “indecent,” or “profane” material on broadcast airwaves, has no oversight over content traveling through cable or satellite (Marcus 2006). While this area of the law may be nebulous, what is abundantly clear is the FCC’s duty to ensure diversity of ownership of television networks, radio stations, and other media outlets. One reason for the FCC’s ownership limits is to preserve and reflect the tone of local communities (Free Expression Policy Project 2006), local being the operative word. The changes to the rules after the 1996 Telecommunications Act and a subsequent revisit to the laws in 2003 are extensive. Before 2003, “cross-ownership” laws prohibited one company from owning several TV stations, radio stations, a daily newspaper, and a company holding a cable franchise in the same local market (Free Expression Policy Project 2006). In contrast, after the 2003 revisions, the sky was the limit. Now companies with as many as eight TV stations have virtually no restrictions on cross-ownership of newspapers, TV stations, and radio stations.

Coincidentally, the concept of locality has tremendous significance in both FCC regulatory law and in definitions of obscenity. While the FCC was given the power to regulate the broadcast industry in order to foster
localism, concurrently, obscenity laws are governed and interpreted largely by local “community standards” (Egan 2000). The Supreme Court case, Miller v. California deemed “contemporary community standards” the guide to determining obscenity. It also held that hard-core pornography is determined by reference to local or state community standards and not to national standards (Carter et al. 1994, 60). To this day, something is “obscene” given the context of the local community, yet broadcast television, radio, and newspapers are held mostly by large multinational media conglomerates, some of which distribute pornography.

Since the 1996 Telecommunications Act, and since its subsequent revisions were passed in 2003, only a few media companies survive. Of those still in existence, three have directly profited from pornography sales:

- AT&T’s cable division and AT&T Broadband distributed The Hot Network, an explicit porn channel, to its subscribers. Comcast now owns AT&T’s cable company, and thus now benefits from AT&T’s connection to pornography (Taylor 2002).
- Time Warner, in addition to its pay-per-view services, bought Adelphia Communications, which before going bankrupt offered pornographic programming (Hofmeister 2005).
- Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. owns DirecTV, a national satellite distribution service that pipes pornography into millions of American homes (Taylor 2002).

Miller was decided in 1973 when the pornography industry was not in the hands of the mass media. Miller, however, is not outdated; rather, other regulatory branches of law, specifically the FCC, have failed to maintain its checks and balances. Although the Telecom Act globalized media, the “cross-ownership” laws were chipped away even earlier when the FCC bent the rules for News Corp. in 1988. Murdoch was then forced to sell the New York Post because of FCC ownership restrictions. At the time, News Corp. had too many properties. However, Murdoch was able to reacquire the paper in 1993, after the commission waived the “cross-ownership rules” (Hickey 2004).

While there are various narratives suggesting that technology is the pivotal factor that catapulted porn into the mainstream, not enough credit has been given to the 1996 Telecommunications Act’s deregulation of
media ownership and its broad, sweeping effects. In the years that followed the Telecommunications Act and into the present, a very particular, homogenized brand of women has painted our airwaves. Though the “appearance of porn symbols in music videos is consistent with a larger movement that began in the late ‘90s” (Perry 2003, 137), we have underestimated the ways in which this movement occurred after media companies were permitted to own more and more media outlets. AT&T, Comcast, Time Warner, News Corp., and other media conglomerates that sell pornography through satellite or cable repetitively promulgate images of women that are remarkably consonant with pornography’s practice. Nowhere is this storyline more prevalent than with women in popular music, whose images are plastered across cable channels all held by Viacom, another media giant.

In 2003, Viacom became, as John Ridley notes, “one of the big fat media companies that chairman Powell and his cronies at the FCC worked so very, very hard to make bigger and fatter . . . through the relaxation of media ownership rules” (Ridley 2004). Viacom, owner of cable networks such as VH1, MTV, and BET, merged with CBS in 1999 after the FCC approved “duopolies.” At the time, Viacom owned 33 television stations, eclipsing the FCC’s 35 percent ownership cap (Columbia Journalism Review 2005). Among Viacom’s many holdings is BET, which it acquired in 2001. BET is known for programs such as Uncut, a late-night television program featuring racy and uncensored music videos. Although Uncut started in September 2000 and depicted women of color as oversexed, these images intensified under Viacom. Nzingha Stewart, a female director who has directed music videos for artists such as Joss Stone, notes, “It’s almost like the other videos are like foreplay and the uncet videos are the [sex] act themselves” (Moody 2004). If non-Uncut videos are ads for Uncut videos, then BET and MTV are possibly also ads for Adult on Demand. Arguably, music videos of today are the gateway drug into an actual purchase of the “real thing.” “On Demand” porn is always on tap, and current music videos signify adult entertainment’s availability.

In fact, some of Time Warner’s Adult on Demand choices use titles associated with pop stars whose exposure came from MTV and BET. For example, under the Adult on Demand category “Spice: Wild Side,” you can buy an adult film called Booty Luscious, starring Angel Eyes and Luscious Lopez as “hot back door mamas who want to back up into you” (Time-
Time Warner’s references to J. Lo and the “bootylicious” Beyoncé show a direct link between women in pop music and pornographic symbols. While this clear connection seems to imply an actual cross-cable strategy between Viacom and Time Warner, not all connections are as obvious. But conscious conspiracies are not necessary. As Naomi Wolf argues in The Beauty Myth, what’s required is not a conspiracy, “merely an atmosphere” (Wolf 1991, 18).

And this atmosphere is certainly in the air. Perhaps this explains how the merging of contemporary women with “stripper chic” and Girls Gone Wild has led to the “everyday woman” gone “exotic” (King 2006). Oprah and The Tonight Show may reveal that dancing around the poles is the latest and greatest in cardio, but these trends seem to be part of a larger campaign that appeared when larger media mergers and acquisitions took hold. Arguably, this trend began with the Spice Girls. They nursed the generation of women that author Ariel Levy discusses. Levy explains how women, like those seen in Girls Gone Wild, embraced rampant stripper chic as a form of rebellion while using the “rhetoric of feminism” (Levy 2004). In retrospect, one can surmise that the Spice Girls were a backlash against the feminist-based Lilith Fair music festival. With their token black girl and spattering of glam, they coined and co-opted the slogan “girl power,” laying a foundation for the Britney era. The Spice Girls exchanged artistry and independence for fashion and high heels in the name of “girl power.” The use of feminist rhetoric with sexual commodification is not incidental; since media companies now distribute pornography, there is an economic interest in promoting ideals that are in line with the bottom line.

We see these repetitive patterns because fewer and fewer media conglomerates own more and more of the public’s media outlets. Therefore, programming is given the power to dictate culture, not reflect it. For example, the New York Post, a newspaper owned by News Corp., resists portraying women as anything but sexy. As part of the Post’s reporting of the 2006 Video Music Awards, the paper placed a picture of Christina Aguilera on the cover in a glamorous dress with the caption “SeXtina” (New York Post 2006a). Interestingly, while the rest of the press exalted Christina for cleaning up her act, the Post sexed her up.

In November 2006, paparazzi photographed Britney Spears’s vagina; she was wearing no underwear while in the company of Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan. Celebrity gossip web site TMZ.com heavily covered the
story, and its managing editor, Harvey Levin, appeared on CNN’s Showbiz Tonight, discussing the chain of events (2006). The fact that both CNN and TMZ.com are at least co-owned by Time Warner once again hammers home the circular nature of mainstream media today. CNN, “The Most Trusted Name in News,” pushes a hard-core bottom line, while claiming journalistic legitimacy. The New York Post benefited too. On the cover appeared the headline “Bimbo Summit” (New York Post 2006b). The story, of course, appeared on all the networks. Here we witnessed conformity of media, where all the outlets are forced to mainstream pornography in peer-pressure-filled efforts to keep up and compete.

Why Women in Pop Music?

Undoubtedly, pornography has gone mainstream in all of popular culture. But I reduce my analysis just to women in popular music for a few reasons. First, pop music is distributed through more media than any other form of popular culture. We live in the information age, and women in pop music convey encoded information in all forms of media. We see mainly these women, and when we’re not seeing them we’re hearing them. Consequently, only two conglomerates, Clear Channel and Viacom’s Infinity Broadcasting, dominate the nation’s commercial radio stations. Radio, which uses the public’s airwaves, has the power to encode aurally what we see visually. As Imani Perry notes, “The space a musical artist occupies in popular culture is multi-textual. Lyrics, interviews, music and videos together create a collage, often finely planned, out of which we are supposed to form impressions” (Perry 2003, 141).

Second, girl groups have always been a “petri dish” for feminism (McDonnell 2004). Before the 1996 Telecommunications Act really took hold, female singer/songwriters such as Alanis Morissette, Lauryn Hill, and Tracy Chapman were on the rise. As time moved forward, and more media mergers occurred, the representations of women and music have grown more intense and pornographic, and have moved in parallel with the increasingly intense and violent fare shown in actual pornography.

Third, the tight connection between pop music and pornography is already established. As Pamela Paul writes, “Pop music is intimately connected with the pornography industry as today’s pop stars embrace and exalt the joys of porn” (Paul 2005, 49). These industries are growing even
closer. Now, actual record labels and the strip-club industry are working in tandem. In the south, strip clubs have become the site for record debuts. If a stripper’s dance matches the beat of the song, and the lyrics encourage the stripper to act sexier, it’s a hit. If the record is successful in a strip club, it’s a good indicator it will sell (Mitchell 2006, 29-30).

Lastly, simply put, pop stars occupy a good deal of media real estate. Their omnipresence creates the necessary atmosphere that in turn guarantees the sale of other products. For example, stores like Hot Topic sell clothing and accessories reflected in music videos. Music celebrities endorse products and sell their own cosmetics and clothing lines. Trends are not only purposely set in motion to sell a specific product, but pop stars are signed and marketed for exactly this “crossover” potential. The business model for music sales is completely tied into cross-marketing strategies. Examples include Interscope Records cutting a deal with Hasbro to make actual Pussycat Dolls based on its girl group (Leeds 2006), to a cross-marketing strategy among Epic records, Yahoo!, and Verizon for Shakira’s “Hips Don’t Lie” downloads (Aspan 2006).

If actual products can be assigned to pop stars, then so can ideologies. Feminism has been hijacked and its hijackers use female pop stars to sell behaviors and attitudes about sexuality itself. The most popular myth is the equation of stripping, prostitution, and pornographic imagery with power.

Feminism Hijacked

In a 2004 Pepsi commercial (Associated Press 2004), Britney, Beyoncé, and Pink seemingly transform a tale of bondage into empowerment. In this commercial, they appear as scantily clad Roman slaves of Enrique Iglesias, the emperor. As gladiators in bronze bikinis, they sing Queen’s “We Will Rock You,” promising to put Iglesias “back into his place.” While they rally, a case of Pepsi lands on Iglesias’s throne and flips him into the pit, turning Iglesias into the slave while setting the women free. When Iglesias’s back is turned, a lion appears, foreshadowing the emperor’s eventual fate. A caption, “Dare for More,” appears as the commercial closes. The three women bare their midriffs as they triumphantly throw the Pepsi to the masses.

The slogan “Dare for More” delivers the popular message that women become “more” by wearing “less.” It markets revolution in masks of bondage and nudity while playing on existing tensions about the current
state of female sexual power. Sexual freedom is represented through Pepsi as Iglesias protects it as an emperor would protect his gold. Since Pepsi represents sexual freedom, anxieties about female ownership of sexuality are resolved simply by purchasing Pepsi.

As Pink, Beyoncé, and Britney beat the imperialistic emperor, they reinforce the myth that power is attained when one's body is on display. The message is duplicitous, though. While it represents the slaves as freed, the message in the ad is that if Pepsi is bought, power is redistributed. In the end, Pepsi gives men the last word, as by purchasing the soft drink they are reserving their positions as justified consumers of sex, all under the pretext of female empowerment.

Although Pepsi wants the consumer to pay for its product, it seems strange that the liberated slaves would then give the Pepsi to the spectators for free. But Pepsi is selling more than its beverage; it also sells the devaluation of what women financially gain in exchange for a peek. In essence, even if sexual power is won, it actually becomes worthless. Perhaps Beyoncé, Pink, and Britney giving it up for free explains why young women strip for Girls Gone Wild in exchange for a T-shirt or hat (Levy 2004). This devaluing of a woman's bodily worth fits in thematically with the rest of Viacom's music-video-based fare, and is epitomized in the video for Nelly's "Tip Drill," when a credit card is swiped through the crevice of a black stripper's backside.

Sex itself is not selling Pepsi, but rather a buy-into notion that demeaning women's bodies in exchange for profit is acceptable. What makes it tolerable for these women to perform the myth is that they are portrayed as powerful. Pepsi demonstrates an obvious strategy of product endorsement by employing pop stars. However, not all relationships are as obvious, and product placement within music videos is just a smaller microcosm of a larger macrocosm.

Simply stated, when a commercial airs, or when a product is placed in an actual video, it generates revenues for the networks. Product placement seems to occur not only from an external non-media corporation like Sbarro's Pizza, graced by a few frames in a music video. Rather, the product placement is internal because through media consolidation, one network can piggyback on its sister network to cross-fertilize its message. Looking for ways to plug its other stations, networks implement cross-marketing strategies from channel to channel, with one network pushing
sister networks. A perfect example is The Fuse Network, which is owned and operated by Cablevision. Fuse airs music videos constantly, along with shows like Pants-off Dance-off where non-celebrities strip in front of salacious music videos like Justin Timberlake’s “SexyBack.” Pants-off Dance-off is a clear example of this cross-fertilization strategy. Arguably, The Fuse Network is a 24/7 running advertisement to click over to Cablevision’s adult entertainment menu.

Moreover, the stars themselves appear to be product placement. Take, for example, Madonna and Britney’s video, “Me against the Music, in the Zone.” Created after the infamous kiss between Madonna, Britney, and Christina Aguilera at the 2003 MTV Music Video Awards, the video subliminally slips in Sbarro pizza and a plug for cellphones with video-camera capability. While Sbarro sells pizzas on the lips of pop stars, Madonna voyeuristically watches herself and Britney on large video screens. A message that there are no barriers between the viewer and pay-per-view cuts through.

Both the placement of the camera and the video within a video are significant. They symbolize consent to both the male gaze and surveillance. The camera’s increasing presence in music videos reinforces the breakdown of privacy and the lack of boundaries in actual life. This is the reality of many young women 20 and younger who, according to Lia Macko of MSNBC, believe that the lack of sexual boundaries is a sign of female power (Macko 2003). There is increasing pressure on young girls to make out with one another, but only in front of men. “Girl-on-girl” action is now dubbed a form of currency, as college girls get into fraternity parties for free if they French-kiss one another (Joiner 2006). Girls who make out with other girls may place themselves at the center of attention, but “you have to be watched—by males.” And if this doesn’t occur under the surveillance of boys, then people might think you’re actually a lesbian, an extremely undesirable proposition (Joiner 2006). Ultimately, under this line of thinking, it is the very act of being watched that makes a woman powerful.

But the camera is no longer just a symbol, it is a literal device. Viewers are now encouraged to emulate the movements of pop stars and send in their own footage. A cross-marketing strategy between Verizon Wireless and Yahoo! Music invited fans to submit footage of themselves dancing to Shakira’s “Hips Don’t Lie.” This comes as no surprise since Girls Gone Wild founder Joe Francis “aimed his cameras at a generation whose notions of
privacy and sexuality are different from any other” (Claire Hoffman 2006). Nursed on MySpace profiles and reality television, many young people today are comfortable being perpetually photographed and having those images posted on the internet for anyone to see. Even places that offered an alternative to big media have been absorbed by the conglomerates, as MySpace.com was recently purchased by News Corp.2 (Siklos 2005).

Perhaps it is a striking coincidence that standard pornography fare like “girl-on-girl action” is also standard fare in music videos. A great example of manufactured lesbian sexuality is the group t.A.T.u. Ivan Shapovalov, a former child psychologist and ad executive, placed an ad for two teenage girls and concocted a lesbian love duo. Their video for “Not Gonna Get Us” featured the girls in Catholic-school-girl outfits making out with each other. The buzz surrounding these girls focused on how strong and empowered they were. When the authenticity of t.A.T.u. was called into question, the marketer, Shapovolov, used psychology to defend his interests: “Most teenage girls, if not all of them, have these kinds of feelings,” he said. “They simply came to the fore in our project” (Porter 2003). Also, one should take note the spelling of the group’s name: the capitalized “A.T.” is an abbreviation for “tits” and “ass” backward.

The multi-textual message surrounding t.A.T.u. was that they were lesbians who also had boyfriends, perpetuating the myth that unclear sexuality boundaries make a woman powerful. When they sing the lyrics, “Not Gonna Get Us,” it’s a tease. Maybe the viewer can’t have t.A.T.u., but they can certainly order this style on the On Demand menu. We all agree that sex sells, but what sells sex? The real thing is on pay-per-view, and it’s only a click away.

Viacom, among its many properties, also owns Spike, a cable channel that advertises itself as “America’s Network for Men.” In 2003, Spike aired Stripperella, an animated series starring the voice of Pamela Anderson as a “superhero stripper.” Viacom’s ownership of all these different channels gives it the power to confirm cultural myths that equate stripping with superpower. The music videos in which women are lauded for pulling their clothes off are endless. Moreover, other images of women that challenge porn culture’s status quo seemed to have been phased out. If we compare t.A.T.u. to the Indigo Girls or K.D. Lang, lesbians who actually discuss their sexual identity in an honest way, t.A.T.u. and Madonna and Britney
reveal a constructed sexuality completely part and parcel with the rest of Viacom's programming.

Christine Aguilera's "Dirrrty" is another classic example of a music video that tricks the viewer into believing that placing one's body on display is a feminist rite of passage. Aguilera is shown in a boxing ring, caged in by thousands of eyes watching her. The eyes surrounding her suggest a performance of sexuality rather than authentic sexual expression. Because she is physically aggressive and gets "dirrrty," the viewer is deluded into thinking that she has become masculinized and equal. But really what we see here is the relentless and futile attempt of women once again thinking that if they act like men, double standards will get reversed. Unfortunately, Christina has to get naked to be heard, and lives under the sad assumption that she is challenging those double standards and taboos. This is what I call compliance masked in defiance: taking your clothes off to be heard.

We see this over and over again: women in pop music getting naked to get heard while thinking they are challenging the status quo. Following Natalie Maines's comment during a March 2003 concert in London about being ashamed that President Bush was from Texas, the Dixie Chicks countered widespread criticism by appearing on the cover of Entertainment Weekly magazine. Under the title "The Dixies Come Clean," the three Dixie Chicks are shown naked and huddled together, their bodies covered in revolutionary words (Willman 2003).

The Dixie Chicks posing naked in protest is actually a prime example of the myth that nudity is power. Facing a backlash from Clear Channel, which censored their music, it was the only way they could recover. By agreeing to pose naked while claiming independence, they consented to the myth. Before Clear Channel owned 1,200 radio stations and programmed 5,000 others, the Dixie Chicks' comment would not have led to such severe censorship of their music. While Howard Stern and others rail against the censorship imposed by Clear Channel and Infinity Broadcasting, the Dixie Chicks' ordeal encoded graver consequences. It was more than a threat to Bush supporters; it was a threat to female musicians to "shut up and sing." As one writer puts it, "the Dixie Chicks were not known as outspoken political or social activists. They were country music superstars... can the Dixie Chicks ever return to the heights of popularity they enjoyed before 'the incident' of 2003? Perhaps not" (Lori Hoffman 2006).

Music videos undoubtedly objectified women long before the 1996
Telecommunications Act, but what has changed is that women are presented as subjects while being re-objectified. In the 1980s, with the exception of girl bands, a collection of women signified objectification and interchangeability. Examples of this are found in early Robert Palmer and David Lee Roth videos. The women in these earlier videos did not have careers as pop stars; they were clearly placed in the videos as ornamentation, their passivity implicit. To put it another way, they did not have a voice; their presence affirmed women’s status as other. Today, women have voices, but they perform the role of subject rather than embody it. The music video for the remake of Patti Labelle’s “Lady Marmalade” is a clear example of how a subject’s words and interviews rally independence, while her body speaks the language of subordination. In this video, Christina Aguilera, Lil’ Kim, Mya, and Pink are dressed as scantily clad “hookers.” In interviews, the artists, particularly Aguilera and Lil’ Kim (Goldberg 2000), claim they are challenging sexual double standards between men and women. While in the video Aguilera touches her pubic area, all the while perching doggie-style on a bed, in her interviews she claims she is fighting for her rights to be sexual without being called a slut (Lo 2004). The artists claim agency, yet in the video they are prostitutes who work for a “madam” played by a cross-dressing Missy Elliott. Eerily, the video tells us that the quest for success for a female artist is indeed tied into “whoring” oneself. Reminiscent of earlier 1980s music videos that feature many women with one man, in “Lady Marmalade,” the male pop star is physically absent from the video, but the male gaze isn’t. He is still ultimately the subject. As the video closes, Missy Elliott exhibits the artists to the viewers. Perhaps she is sending a subliminal message of what’s on the pay-per-view menu.

The argument could be made that women are in control of their own exhibition of their bodies. However, other videos assure us that men are “pimps,” the ones in charge, and women are merely subordinate “hos.” 50 Cent’s video for “P.I.M.P.” clarifies what little ambiguity there is on the subject. The video opens with 50 Cent holding an iPod the way one would hold a remote control. As he moves the dial, the women in the video dance in circles around him. Make no mistake: this move symbolizes that the world of women revolves around him. The iPod is cleverly positioned in the video to show how products (black women) can be controlled through a product itself. The message that owning an iPod will ease current anxieties about male and female sexual power is similar to the message conveyed in
the Pepsi ad featuring the gladiators. The remote control subliminally hints that these women can be bought “On Demand.” The black woman as accessory is a repetitive theme in Viacom’s other media. I encountered an example of this pattern at a bus stop in New York City. The Viacom-owned glass kiosk surrounding the sitting area featured an advertisement for 310 Clothing with a photo of a black man and woman who resemble the pimp-and-ho’ archetype often presented in rap and hip-hop videos. The caption reads, “Footwear, Clothing and Accessories” (emphasis added).

As media become more concentrated, the split between programming and advertising has diminished. We can almost look at porn and pop music the way advertisers look for favorable atmospheres in which to sell products. A strong example is when News Corp.-owned Fox premiered an ad for DirecTV, with Jessica Simpson reenacting her sexual vixen role from The Dukes of Hazard. Not surprisingly, the ad capitalizes on the myth that through sexuality, anything is possible. Jessica “kicks some ass” as she karate-chops in standard stripper chic. Since major media conglomerates profit from selling adult entertainment, these entities have an interest in cultivating environments that are in line with what they are selling.

From Talent to Tramp

“No matter how seriously she once took herself, no matter how good her voice or her level of talent, she must start looking like a tramp.” - Gina Vivinetto, pop music critic for Florida’s St. Petersburg Times (Vivinetto 2004).

Nowhere has this statement more appropriately pinned the tail on the donkey than in the career of Jewel. Countless other stars are also following the same trajectory, thus illustrating that the female musician is under pressure to conform to the porn standard. Even if the pressure isn’t blatantly set forth by the record company, women who don’t conform to these images have to compete with the ones who do. These tensions do exist. For example, Amy Lee of the band Evanescence once said: “Jewel has gone from folk songstress to cover girl, and 40-something Sheryl Crow struts onstage in hot pants as she bemoans that other artists are being marketed like ‘porn stars’” (Vivinetto 2004).

On its face, Jewel’s video for “Intuition” appears to satirize the cross-marketing and commercialization of pop stars. She sings the lyrics: “If you want to have something to sell, sell yourself.” Jewel hides behind the satire
because she is so uncomfortable selling herself. Jewel says, “I had to take my robe off and there’s traffic behind me and my butt’s hanging out. It was so embarrassing” (Today Show 2003). The video opens with her shirt flying open and ends with the ultimate “money shot” as a fire hydrant sprays her with water.

Nelly Furtado is among the ranks of women artists whose careers were built on more folk/pop-style sensibilities. She flew like a bird from folk/pop into a more hip-hop-produced album called Loose, with her first single titled “Promiscuous.” By transitioning from talent to tramp the artist feels as if she has arrived. According to Furtado, “I bloomed” (Associated Press 2006c).

Over time, the tone of an artist’s sexuality is part of the “multi-textual” space that she occupies. The path from talent to tramp, however, is not a one-way street. Porn stardom easily crosses over into pop stardom, indicating that a symbiotic relationship exists. Traci Lords is one example of a former porn star who transitioned into pop music seamlessly. In fact, having a sex tape released is almost a surefire way into the recording industry. After all, it was Paris Hilton’s sex tape that catapulted her career; she released her CD debut, Paris, shortly after the sex tape hit the internet.

Hilton’s debut CD was said to have remained “true to the pop-porn formula: lots of hip-hop beats and Paris whispering and sighing” (Gottlieb 2006). More telling is that when Paris released her CD, coupled with a sex-laden music video, she campaigned against promiscuity (Montique 2006). This combining of sexually charged images with promises of celibacy is a music industry sales formula, which I explore further in the next section.

Young Pop Stars and Kiddie Porn, Hmm

“Kiddie sex is big business. . . . Hustler’s Barely Legal is their third best-selling sex magazine” (DeRogatis 2001).

There is an unnerving preoccupation with extremely young female pop stars who are simultaneously “innocent” and “slutty.” There is also a striking quality about all these young girls, one that porn companies promote. They represent the girl next door, the girl most likely “not to do it.” Atoosa Rubenstein, editor in chief of Seventeen magazine says, “All of our pop stars look like porn stars. However, they’re all virgins” (Rosenbloom 2006). Britney Spears was quoted as saying, “look if you want me to be some kind of sex thing, that’s not me. I will never do that” (Diers 2004).
Although Spears was until recently married with two children, her entire image was built on “a Mouseketeer trafficking kiddie porn, a school-girl queen selling sex in a leathery cat suit.” Her “Lolitaesque” appeal fringed on confusion between an overlap of sex and violence (Saroyan 2000).

Part of the initial allure of Britney Spears and Jessica Simpson was their hyper-sexed image coupled with their virginity pledges. It appears that the “virgin” title covered up their seductive images. Yet it was the virgin appeal that made them seductive. Their sexual innocence was a symbolic mental hymen; it existed so the viewer could violate it. The virgin message, coupled with overtly sexual images, creates a gray area between innocent child imagery and child pornography, and ultimately serves a larger function. If the seductive/virgin image can appear everywhere, websites like Child Supermodels featuring “tween girls” in skimpy bathing suits can exist with ease, allowing pedophiles to have a “field day without breaking the law” (Harris 2006).

The music industry is obsessed with advertising the teen age of the female pop star coupled with a sexually charged picture of her: Joss Stone only 16, Lindsay Lohan only 17, etc. Indeed, the stories of Britney Spears, Jessica Simpson, Leanne Rimes, Mandy Moore, Christine Aguilera, Jewel, t.A.T.u. are the stories of the girl-next-door who is most likely not to do it, but who in the end gives it up. This tale is remarkably consonant with 

Barely Legal, and is a gateway into one of Adult on Demand’s categories: “First Timers.” Moreover, the banality of these images makes 

Barely Legal a far more comfortable place than it should be. The ubiquitous presence of magazines like this is barely questioned.

The tale of the teen who takes it off has longevity and is an avenue between the worlds of pop music and pornography. Tiffany and Debbie Gibson were two of the most memorable 1980s teen idols, and both posed nude for Playboy in hopes that it would jump start their careers (Playboy 2002; 2005). The issue Gibson appeared in, which Playboy marketed as the “Teen Queen” issue, coincided with the release of her new single, “Naked” (Playboy 2005).

Boundaries seamlessly disappear as more and more young pop stars are sexualized. Jessica Simpson’s father, Joe Simpson, said during an interview on 20/20 that Jessica’s breasts enter the room about ten feet before she does. The interviewer, Elizabeth Vargas, then remarked on how it’s not often that a father discusses his daughter’s breasts on television (Simpson 2004). In addition, other magazines quote Joe Simpson as saying: “Jessica never tries to be sexy. She just is sexy. If you put her in a T-shirt or you put...
her in a bustier, she's sexy in both. She's got double-Ds! You can't cover those suckers up” (Graham 2005).

The response to Joe Simpson’s remarks about his daughter’s breasts is as painfully casual as our response to issues of incest and rape. Perhaps the “porno-ization” of the pop star affords her less protection, allowing the public to blindly accept that these young celebrities are indeed commodities—manufactured, marketed, and sold by their owners. In the end, we are failing to respond to the important issues, instead fixating on other, more trivial matters. Hot-button issues are being put on the radar, and we are contesting what is least important. The spotlight on the latest, greatest controversy gives an impression that the problem is being addressed. Nothing illustrated this more than the Janet Jackson Super Bowl incident, where the media and government officials concentrated on content regulation, not the real source of the problem: media consolidation.

Backlash: Ploys and Decoys

When Justin Timberlake tore off a piece of Janet Jackson’s costume during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show and revealed her pierced nipple, the media framed the split-second incident as a broadcasting indecency issue. This response ultimately reveals our desensitization to pornography and not our hypersensitivity to it. Nelly’s crotch-grabbing and Timberlake’s dry-humping only moments before would have been just another day at the office for CBS if the breast had not been exposed. What is telling is that the response itself fixated on her naked nipple; “not that a man, in public, on camera, abruptly ripped off her shirt” (Camon 2004). The act of tearing women’s clothing off, that of black women in particular, is at this point run of the mill. We are under the illusion that we live in a moralistic, puritanical culture and fear censorship by the FCC. The reason Janet Jackson spurred so much attention is because there was actually censorship in the incident and its immediate aftermath. Janet Jackson’s exposed breast says more about what we don’t see than what we do see.

What the nation experienced was Viacom’s pornographic empire encroaching on the space of broadcast television. At the time, Viacom owned CBS, the network that broadcast the Super Bowl. This fact was one of the least discussed elements of the Janet Jackson incident. Journalists wrote about exposing the NFL for what it is (Jenkins 2004), rather than
exposing our whole corporate media structure for what it is. Because the FCC chases skin, not substance, the response endlessly recycles discussions of content regulation, not the real source of the problem: ownership deregulation. Technically, the FCC is powerless to regulate content distributed over cable. So, whether something is under the purview of the FCC because it travels through the air or through cable wires isn’t the issue, because before the 1996 Telecommunications Act was passed, the agency was supposed to limit mergers.

Women’s bodies that deviate from the pornographic agenda spark the censorship that occurs as a result of media consolidation. But stories that talk about the FCC’s fining of stations for borderline broadcasting scream, while stories that tie indecency to media consolidation merely whisper. After all, the mainstream news keeps us constantly informed of CBS’s appeal of the $550,000 fine for the Jackson incident (Associated Press 2006b). When the FCC looks at indecency, it focuses on which shows were in violation of broadcast laws (Bloomberg News 2006). Not surprisingly, the stories that discuss the problem are mostly printed by independent news sources.

Moreover, conversations that focus on the FCC’s power to regulate broadcast waves versus cable and satellite also miss the point entirely. According to Ruth Marcus of The Washington Post, “The bigger problem with focusing on broadcast indecency is that, in the real world, it’s almost meaningless. More than 85 percent of American households get their television programming through satellite or cable, which aren’t, and as a constitutional matter probably couldn’t be, subject to indecency rules (although the broadcast stations carried over cable are, of course)” (Marcus 2006).

Statements that discuss FCC regulation over broadcast stations that are carried over cable further blind us from seeing the influence cable stations have over broadcast stations. The main reason for this is because all these stations are under one umbrella company, such as Viacom, and are shared by only a few corporations. The Janet Jackson controversy alone showed that all of the other standard fare, like crotch-grabbing and dry-humping, are Viacom’s signature moves set free on CBS. That this slipped by unnoticed proves how the broadcast networks have become extensions of the umbrella companies. The only gestures separating content on cable and broadcast TV are mere formalities like blatant nudity and curse words, and sometimes not even these.5

MEREDITH LEVANDE • WOMEN, POP MUSIC, AND PORNOGRAPHY

311
Moreover, while spectrum is called the great highway in the sky and is considered a precious resource, actual interstate highways are also public resources. In my travels as an artist and speaker, I have driven all over the country on these highways, both local and interstate; they are gorged with billboards for Hooters and strip clubs, billboards that are owned by Viacom, Vista Media, Clear Channel, etc. That these conglomerates hoard what little space is left shows that no stone is left unturned. In fact, part of the allure of owning billboard space is that while digital technology can be turned off, billboard space cannot be; people are given no choice but to see the ads. After all, no one is going to close their eyes while driving down a highway. Paul Meyer, the global president of Clear Channel Outdoor, states, “Technology helps people avoid other advertisements, but we are the one unavoidable media. There is no mute button, no off switch. You can’t change the channel. We’re there” (La Monica 2006). So, arguments and nuances about which type of signal is under the FCC’s purview to control are even more meaningless in light of how much of our other public spaces are owned by these same few companies.

Free Press, a national, nonpartisan organization working to reform the media and involve the public in media policymaking, conducted a study called “Out of the Picture,” which found that media consolidation shuts out women and people of color (Turner and Cooper 2006). This study focused on lack of minority media ownership and its link with increasing media concentration. An earlier article posted in The Nation, titled, “Co-opting Consumers of Color,” also said that decreased media ownership by people of color coincided with a loss of industry voice and jobs, and that “BET regularly programs what some regard as the most @#%! moments in black popular culture” (Themba-Nixon 2006).

These studies show a direct causal connection between media consolidation and the exclusion of women and minorities from industry jobs. Logically, if fewer women and people of color own licenses, then there are fewer voices heard that counter the corporate-porn, status-quo representations of these groups. It’s not that fear of censorship by the FCC isn’t real. It’s really more about who should fear censorship by the FCC. Portland radio station KBOO was fined $7,000 in 1999 for playing poet Sarah Jones’s “Your Revolution.” Jones’s song used sexual references to speak out against hip-hop songs, currently in heavy rotation in larger markets, that degrade women (Milne 2001). When Jones challenged the FCC, the commission issued a
report saying that Jones was “sexually pandering and intending to shock.” When Jones explained to the FCC that she was expressing her experience as a black woman growing up in a culture where women of color are often perceived as oversexed, the commission still did not overturn its decision (Milne 2001). Fearing fines, other independent stations did not play Jones. Sarah Jones’s story demonstrates that sexual portrayals of women’s bodies are allowed, not by artists, but by corporations.

Sarah Jones may not be able to use irony or satire to make her views known, but Viacom sure can. One of Viacom’s favorite tricks is to claim satire when it shows derogatory images of women. MTV aired an animated short called Where My Dogs At? that showed a Snoop Dogg look-alike holding two black women on leashes while they defecated on the floor. It aired this on a Saturday at midday, which some critics consider prime time for young viewers. When media watchdogs expressed outrage (Clark-Flory 2006), MTV claimed they were satirizing the 2003 Video Music Awards, which featured Snoop Dogg leading two collared women around by leashes.

MTV uses satire to defend its overtly racist and misogynist practices and also likes to air videos of artists that satirize porn culture, but with one exception: it only shows videos that satirize the current culture if they perpetuate the images being satirized. Pink, who “rocked” the Pepsi ad discussed earlier, campaigned on Oprah for women to wise up. In her video for “Stupid Girls,” Pink definitely defies the values of porn culture, but that’s not why MTV plays it. Rather, MTV airs the video because it recycles the images she’s questioning. The video closes with Pink mimicking Paris Hilton rolling around on a soapy car for a Carl’s Jr. hamburger ad that was considered too racy for television.

The narratives that frame the indecency problem as a content problem are in tandem with other forces in the music industry that suggest there is a turn toward “values.” For example, in an article titled “Sexing It Up Doesn’t Necessarily Sell Albums,” the author cites the existence of Alicia Keys, Evanescence, and Norah Jones as proof that the industry was rolling back its sexually charged tendencies (Billboard 2004). And while we are blessed by the music of artists like Alicia Keys, exceptions only prove the rule. It appears that certain roles exist for women in popular music just to temper the status quo. In other words, something non-offensive has to exist. As Salon.com music critic Thomas Bartlett says of musician Norah Jones: “[Her] music seeks, above all else, not to offend, so there are no
rough edges, no prickly or unpleasant sounds, no unexpected harmonies” (Bartlett 2004).

It appears that Jones’s albums sold so well because there was a belief among her fans that she was not the result of marketing. According to Seth Mnookin of Slate: “The conventional take on Jones is that she is a homegrown success who prevailed in an era of pre-manufactured and over-marketed pop stars” (Mnookin 2004). Actually, six months before Jones’s first record was released, “serious press and promotion went into establishing Jones as an artist whose success wasn’t the result of serious press and promotion” (Mnookin 2004). Blue Note, Jones’s record label, carefully planned the textual space that Norah was meant to embody.6 In effect, purchasers of Jones’s music could consider themselves not as consumers, but as independent thinkers above the corporate machine. As Mnookin so eloquently puts it: “So how do you market one of the best-selling artists of the past decade without making her willful fans feel as if they’re being spoon-fed a star? By continuing to pretend you’re not marketing her at all” (Mnookin 2004).

Conclusion

Before the 1996 Telecommunications Act and its subsequent revisions in 2003, media companies were restricted as to how many newspapers, networks, and cable companies they could own. Media conglomerates turned into behemoths when they were permitted to own more and more outlets. That some of these outlets are cable companies that allow a viewer, through the click of a button, to buy “First Timers,” “Booty Luscious,” and “Blue Jean Babes” at home drastically altered the overall landscape featuring women from channel to channel. This was particularly evident in popular music during the late 1990s, when a dramatic shift occurred in the way women in music were represented. Women who could play instruments, write songs, and sing were replaced with auto-tuned voices and air-brushed bodies. Moreover, these new female artists consistently defend their overt performances of sexuality as evidence of female empowerment. This message conveniently supports a larger media universe that directly profits from sales of adult entertainment products.

The music videos featuring female pop stars aired by Viacom and The Fuse network are remarkably similar to the pornographic fare offered On

314
Demand, suggesting that women in pop music are arguably “product placements” for adult entertainment purchases. The few media companies that exist utilize all available resources—including newspapers, billboards, and radio—to promote content in line with the overall pornography agenda, allowing little opportunity for counter-images to air. So, in addition to disseminating these messages on television, the same media company employs its other holdings to drive it home.

At the time of the FCC’s relaxation of ownership limits in 2003, portrayals of women in music moved in parallel with increasingly pornographic fare, showing an unusually easy synergy between the two worlds. Collectively, the story of women in popular music all too often is the story of the “girl next door,” who, in the end, the viewer gets the pleasure of watching “bloom.” As music videos showcase Catholic-school-girl uniform shirts that spontaneously fly open while baring midriff, Barely Legal flies off the shelves. Moreover, artists like Jewel are shockingly transformed from folk songstress to money-shot madness.

Against this cultural backdrop, the Janet Jackson incident, which is now chronicled as a naked, exposed breast on broadcast television, was framed as a decency issue, spurring conversations over the type of content that the FCC is charged to regulate. These conversations that focus endlessly on FCC censorship conveniently ignore the censorship that occurs as a result of media mergers. Ironically, an exposed breast is used to hide how massive media mergers generate mega porn.

A woman’s naked breast launches questions about indecency, never addressing how women’s bodies are now corporately controlled. Moreover, when media consolidation is talked about from political and artistic standpoints, it is rarely presented as a feminist issue. The various narratives presented here suggest the need for feminist critical interventions that expose the links among media conglomerates, their ties to pornography distribution, and interests in repackaging female sexuality so as to cultivate atmospheres that lead to its purchase.

NOTES
1. News Corp., in order to gain more control of its own shares, transferred the DirecTV Group to Liberty Media, controlled by John C. Malone (Bloomberg News 2007). This gives the appearance of a relinquished trade rather than a true one because News Corp. and Liberty Media are brother/sister companies,
each holding interests in the other. Many media companies share holdings with one another.

2. MySpace, of course, is now busting out at the seams with porn stars. This is the main place that adult performers, like Jenna Jameson, use as a networking tool (Jacobs 2006). “MySpace also hosts 110 online groups devoted to porn stars.” (Jacobs 2006). These groups are open to anyone 14 years and older who wants to become a member of clubs along the lines of “future porn stars of America” (Jacobs 2006). Not surprisingly, MySpace is the location where careers can cross over. One performer, Tila Tequila, who posed for Playboy, believed she was revolutionizing the record business model when she acquired over 1.7 million friends on MySpace. Her video for the single, “I Love U” could’ve easily been called “I Love to Show You My Body!”

3. In a 60 Minutes CBS interview with Judith Regan of Regan Books, which published Jenna Jameson’s How To Make Love Like a Pornstar, Regan says “I believe there is a “porno-ization of the culture” (Regan 2005). Interestingly, at the time News Corp. owned Regan Books. Through media consolidation, News Corp. was able to publish Jameson’s book, reinforcing the rest of News Corp.’s pornographic agenda.

4. One of the arguments that I find most absurd is the debate over whether the FCC can regulate content traveling through the air or through cable and satellite. Broadcast spectrum is considered a public resource because technically it belongs to everyone. Cable, however, is considered a private resource and thus not subject to government control. But one of the biggest flaws in this argument is that all the roads, streets, and cities that were dug up to install cable are public. Public land, owned by the people who pay taxes in their respective cities, is a public resource in the same way that spectrum is.

5. In 2006, CBS split from Viacom, claiming that “it wanted to allow investors to value its array of companies separately” (Associated Press 2005). But I think this was a deliberate decision by CBS, which knows that the NFL would probably never grant CBS the Super Bowl contract again if it were still in cahoots with Viacom, the company that produced the Jackson halftime show. When CBS divorced itself from Viacom it proved it was the partnership indeed that cooked up the “wardrobe malfunction.”

6. Although Blue Note parleys Norah Jones as a very jazzy, soft, classy artist that one can buy and be above the machine, Norah has many more dimensions than Blue Note’s presentation of her. I have had the personal pleasure of hearing Norah Jones play live in New York City clubs. She solos on an electric guitar in an amazing band called “Sloppy Joanne.” Rumor also has it that she’s been known to sport pink wigs while playing in punk bands at dive bars around the city. Norah’s dynamic musical abilities deviate far from Blue Note’s imaging of her, showing a carefully crafted space that Norah was intended to appropriate.

7. “Who Wants to Be the Next Pussycat Doll?” clearly takes its cues from the
Spice Girls. Aired on the CW, a concoction owned by Time Warner and CBS, the reality show predictably co-opts feminist rhetoric, revealing a tried and true formula. Robin Antin, the founder, says the word “empowering” a bit often. Antin believes that self confidence is developed when a woman can dance sexily in public (Cutler 2007).

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