



PHOTO BY SUE ZALOKAR

Redefining Bitch

Bitch Media's Andi Zeisler on the new media literacy and the challenges of modern feminism

BY SUE ZALOKAR
STAFF WRITER

Andi Zeisler is a co-founder and the creative/editorial director of the Bitch Media group and the magazine Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture. She is the quintessential “bitch” of pop culture. I mean that as a compliment, which can be confusing in today’s convoluted climate of misogynistic social and cultural messages about women, men and the roles we are socialized to play out in our daily lives. Of those who understand this phenomenon, Zeisler is at top of the list.

In 2006, Zeisler and the Bitch staff moved their home base of operation from the San Francisco Bay area to their current home base in Portland’s Alberta Street art district in Northeast Portland.

In that time, a zine that was born from the philosophical, political and social critique of pop culture from a feminist perspective has evolved to include a media group whose presence in the social media and online world has offered a refreshing, feminist critique of all things cultural.

The magazine was conceived by Zeisler and friend Lisa Jarvis in 1996 as an all-volunteer publication with a circulation of 300. It is now internationally distributed with a circulation of more than 50,000 – no small feat in a climate where print publications have folded up and retreated from newsstands. I asked her how Bitch Media functions as a response to media and pop culture.

Andi Zeisler: We respond to all aspects of the media and popular culture whether it’s news media or movies and TV,

advertising, video games, websites and blogs, art, comics – all of those things are really ripe for analysis from a feminist perspective, some more than others.

Sue Zalokar: *Never ending fodder ...*

A.Z.: Yes. Culture in many ways, as progressive as it is, is still very backwards in many places when it comes to gender and when it comes to representing difference or any sort of deviation from this traditional, white, male status quo.

We see that in politics, we see that in who creates advertisements, who creates movies, who creates culture.

The mission of Bitch is to give a voice to how those representations impact real life and to highlight places that are getting it right and are really doing innovative things. Our mission is two-fold: it’s not to complain about what’s going wrong, it is also to hold up what’s going right and celebrate it.

S.Z.: *What about Hobby Lobby?*

A.Z.: People are calling the decision a slippery slope that will lead to other religious exemptions, but I think there’s another slippery slope: Misinformation has been allowed to stand in for fact in a Supreme Court decision. What other misinformation will be treated as fact in future decisions? There are some scary possibilities.

When I tweeted about the decision last week, I got a lot of responses – from men, primarily – that were like, “(Hobby Lobby) still cover 16 other forms of birth control,” as though that should somehow appease

people who were protesting the decision, as though it’s somehow not a problem that corporations are involved in women’s reproductive choices as long as they’re not involved in all of them.

One man responded to me saying, “Even as a man, I think this is a bad decision on the part of the Supreme Court.” And to me, that very mindset, that “even as a man” modifier, that’s part of the problem.

The challenges to women’s reproductive justice and bodily autonomy is a global issue. It affects education, it affects economies, it affects a million little things that people don’t recognize when they see it as simply “her problem” or “a women’s issue.” It is crucial to have everybody, not just women, in the fight for women’s reproductive justice, on all levels. That’s definitely something that this case has underscored.

S.Z.: *Print vs. digital media?*

A.Z.: We (at Bitch) don’t really think of it as an either/or situation. For us, it is very much a both/and (situation).

It’s figuring out a way to balance what we do. We have the print magazine, but it is not a medium that makes a lot of sense from a practical point of view. It’s really expensive and it’s really wasteful. We also do digital editions of the print magazine for people who want to read it but don’t want the paper waste or don’t have a permanent residence.

There is just something about print media: it’s tangible, it’s archivable. There is something that has a kind of permanence, even psychological that you don’t get from digital media. At the same time, digital media is incredibly important and really

useful.

We find that it’s not necessarily all the same readership. People who read the magazine aren’t necessarily the same people who read the website every day. The people who comment on Facebook aren’t the people who engage on Twitter.

S.Z.: *As a woman who identifies as a feminist, but has always been on the fringe of the real movement, I wonder, how best for people to respond, as feminists, to sexism in media and pop culture and in our everyday lives?*

A.Z.: A lot of it is raising awareness. As a culture, that gets really easy to just brush things off.

S.Z.: *Nobody wants to be that person ...*

A.Z.: Right! Nobody wants to rock the boat too much and it’s really easy to say, “If you don’t like it, you don’t have to watch it.” Or, “You don’t have to buy that magazine. No one is making you do this.” That’s true on an individual basis; no one is holding a gun to your head telling you what to watch.

At the same time, we are affected by messages that half the time we aren’t even aware we’re absorbing. This is especially crucial for young people. They are surrounded by media. They are learning their ideas about the world, how they should act, who they want to be, who they want to hang out with, what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman. They are learning all of that from media and popular culture. Often the messages being sent are

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