Jennifer Pozner knows a thing or two about “Bridezillas” and “Bachelor Babies,” but she’s no reality-TV junkie. Pozner is a media critic and the founder and executive director of Women in Media and News (WIMN), a multi-faceted organization created in 2002 to address the marginalization and underrepresentation of women in media on just about every level.

One strategy Pozner deploys to advance WIMN’s mission is media literacy education. “Bridezillas, Bachelor Babies, and Husband-Hunting Harems: Decoding Reality TV’s Twisted Fairy Tales” and “Condoleezza Rice is a Size 6 and Other Things I Learned from the News” are some of the recent multi-media presentations Pozner has given at college campuses across the country. WIMN also offers media training workshops for grassroots women’s and social justice organizations, works for equity in the media democracy movement, and provides resources for media producers to diversify and broaden the sources they use for news stories.

A study of nightly news programming by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting found that only nine percent of professional and political voices presented on the three major TV networks in 2001 belonged to women. Part of Pozner’s goal for WIMN is to establish a comprehensive POWER Sources database. POWER Sources—which stands for “Perspectives of Women Expand Reporting”—will be a free online service for journalists who are striving for equity in their coverage to identify women professionals and experts from a variety of disciplines, from plumbing to politics to physics.

POWER Sources is projected to launch in 2006, but Pozner herself is filling the gap in the meantime. On a case-by-case basis, she personally guides media makers to appropriate sources, while traveling frequently to attend conferences and give lectures and trainings.

Even with her heavy schedule, Pozner finds the time to critique popular entertainment and news media for a variety of local and national publications, and expand WIMN, whose mission embodies the spirit of all her endeavors.

Interview by Emily Udell
Illustration by Susie Ghahremani

What makes the work of WIMN important now?
Studies have been done that show women are systematically marginalized and nearly invisible in many news venues. While it’s great to do the studies, media outlets don’t respond to the studies. I interviewed producers from Face the Nation and Meet the Press after September 11, when studies showed that they were rarely, if ever, quoting women and having them as guests to talk about terrorism and war. Nine percent of the
The simplistic answer is that sexism exists in the media democracy movement just as much as exists on the left in general, which is still very male-dominated when it comes to people at the top, who get funding, who get their leadership respected and heard. But in terms of feminist and social justice groups, the reason that structural media reform has not been on the top of most groups’ agendas is that we are all spread thin. How do you tell somebody who’s working so hard to make sure that an Afghan woman isn’t sent by Immigration back to the same forces that abducted her father and killed her brother, that they need to take time out of what they’re already doing to attend your rally at the FCC? Those contradictions haven’t been made, in the past, to some degree, because who has the time? But the contradictions need to be made. What we’re doing is trying to raise the stakes and break down forever in the social justice movement why media matters as the overarching issue that connects every issue that they’re working on. ¶ Within the media reform community, WINM is constantly working to make sure that the issues of gender and race and class are not sidelined as important issues that we’ll talk about on another day.

Many feminists activists that I talk to say that their activism around women’s issues is interwoven with other struggles like LGBT rights, labor rights, racial oppression, globalization, and environmental issues. Do feminist activists dilute their effectiveness by approaching issues this way, or is this the strategy of the future? ¶ Whether or not young women identify specifically, semantically as feminists, they’re bringing a feminist progressive agenda to globalization, to alternative models of citizenship for immigrant domestic workers, to fighting prison abuse, to activists across the board. That’s why their organization is structured the way it is and why our organization is unique in the landscape.

One of the goals of WINM is to get media reform issues on the agendas of grassroots women’s organizations and get women’s issues on the tables of organizations that are doing media reform work. Why hasn’t this bridge been explicitly created already, when it seems like such a logical connection?

The fact is that the majority of the millions of people—many of them young girls—who tune in to every episode of The Bachelor to find out who will get to go home broken-hearted are being told that only the women with the lowest self-esteem, the lowest standards, and the lowest-carb diets will be rewarded with love and security. Those people are not bringing a lot of critical, political approaches to these images. If we don’t take a look at what the public is seeing on a regular basis, and what the public is learning about women, especially in this form of “reality TV.” ¶ And the Bush administration’s “concep- tional dramas” to tell us that women are costly gold diggers, are bitchy and not to be trusted, especially by other women, are dumb as a pile of rocks, are unable to live free, happy, posi- tive, successful, fulfilling lives unless they’re married and unless they’re very classically western and idealized. These shows are the new backlash against women.

But I guess it comes back to: Why does pop culture matter? ¶ We get our ideas about ourselves in many ways from pop culture. If people say “just turn off the TV!” and “just support indie media,” well of course we should support indie media, of course we should make our own images, of course we should not bring toxic images into our own homes if we don’t want them, but what of the people who haven’t been through media literacy programs, what of the people—the millions of people—who need our help in understanding what these shows are about? We need to be a little less inside the playing field, and we really need to work with people where they are. And where are they? They’re in pop culture. We don’t just get our information from the news, we don’t just get entertainment from pop culture, we get both from both of those venues and we need to look at both of those venues pretty critically.