

Jennifer Pozner Is Ahead Of The Game, And She's Not Backing Down

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The US is having a moment of reckoning: the rise of “fake news” is starting conversations about the role of media in shaping (at the very least) national discourse, and the #MeToo movement is bringing awareness to the extent sexual harassment affects women’s lives. These issues are curiously intertwined: when those at the top of media companies are accused of committing sexual- and gender-based violence, or when reporters involved in harassment investigations are permitted to keep writing for major newspapers, one has to wonder how the end product takes a hit. This is the kind of thing Jennifer L. Pozner, feminist media critic, has been thinking about for the entirety of her career.

Having founded [Women In Media & News](#) (WIMN), Pozner is well-known for being outspoken on such issues. Most recently, she’s been writing for *The Village Voice*, analyzing, for example [how men like Harvey Weinstein end up in positions of power across industries](#). But she’s been at this fight for a long time—since she graduated from college and helmed the women’s desk at the only media watchdog in the country, since she founded the first women-focused media literacy and advocacy organization (before those much more famous ladies founded theirs), since she published the first in-depth analysis of how reality TV has been doing a disservice to women since its inception. If there’s an issue related to women in the media, it’s fair to say Pozner has been thinking about it for a while, and is glad others are thinking about it now, too.

The media-focused feminism Pozner has known has always been pioneering: as the editor of her high school’s feminist journal, she would look through the morning’s papers for stories on subjects like rape, reproductive rights, and single motherhood, she says, in attempt to learn about issues her classes weren’t teaching her. “I would read all of it and I would start to write little notes in the margins constantly: *Why is that rape victim’s skirt relevant to this news story?*” It wasn’t, but at the time, in the throes of the early nineties, no one was asking these questions. She kept asking them.

By college, Pozner had her plan: she’d follow in the footsteps of Anna Quindlen and Molly Ivins, becoming a “traditional column journalist.” But that summer, the *New York Times* ran [an excerpt from Katie Roiphe’s *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism On Campus*](#), which claimed that date rape was nonexistent.

“I was confused,” Pozner says. “I was still somebody that believed that if it was in the *New York Times*, it must be true.” But what the newspaper had published flew in the face of the feminism she held close (it was also, as we now know, factually incorrect). Her passion, then, was born: incessant investigation into the treatment of women’s issues by the media.

As she conducted research into the spread of factual inaccuracies, false equivalences, and sourcing problems through the media landscape, she could find only one organization reporting on the issue: *Extra!*, a magazine produced by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a well-known media watchdog established in 1986. It was destiny, but a bleak one: “At the time, this was the only organization in the country that did media monitoring. I thought, ‘Okay, well, that’s what I have to do with my life.’” She took a job as director of the women’s desk in 1999.

At *Extra!*, Pozner did what we should all do: she took a critical look at how media properties cover gender. Covering a PBS series on “the gender wars” in ’99, she [pointed out the bias](#) in screen time given to what would now be known as men’s rights activists despite the program’s proclamations of representing “a diversity of viewpoints.” Later that year, she [called out *TV Guide* on its overly enthusiastic claims](#) that because women journalists have become visible they’re “setting the news agenda for America.” During the 2000 election, she dove into the claims, made by newspapers and broadcasters alike, that both Al Gore and George W. Bush were the “woman’s candidate,” [despite these same media properties reporting on the decidedly unfeminist former actions of the candidates](#).

The work prepared her for her next role: she left FAIR after a couple of years and in 2001, to found WIMN, an organization focused exclusively on analyzing media, advocating “to improve the range and diversity of women’s voices appearing in the media,” and improving media literacy. While Americans may be familiar with other feminist media advocacy groups (the Women’s Media Center, for example, which was founded in 2005 by Jane Fonda, Robin Morgan, and Gloria Steinem), in 2001 WIMN was the only organization of its kind.

Pozner has always been ahead, thinking about things no one else really gets, pointing out problems and flawed thinking no one else has noticed. And it’s extremely difficult to come first.

When Pozner first started WIMN, she says, the organization had a hard time finding funding, with funders either understanding just the feminist component of her work or just the media criticism portion of her work. So she moved forward, working without, focusing on public speaking as a way to disseminate media education, writing abundantly, and authoring a book, *Reality TV Bites Back*, on the harm shows like *Flavor of Love* and *The Bachelor* were doing to our collective consciousness.

“I kept waiting for somebody else to connect the dots,” she says. When no one did, she, again, decided to do it herself. Thus was the birth of *Reality TV Bites Back*: “I wanted to spark dialogue both inside academia among people who study media, among people who study gender, among people who study race and among mainstream TV fans,” she says. “I felt like it was incredibly important for average fans to be able to realize that what they are engaging with is impacting them in a psychological and emotional way.”

This theme extends to all of her writing, and also her speaking. She’s preparing new talks on media literacy and rape culture for an audience that’s newly rapacious for a critical look at the media in this era of “fake news.” Pozner, again, has been ahead, telling us all along that this kind of thinking is extremely important to the very fabric of our lives. “If we watch uncritically without media literacy frameworks, we are opening ourselves up to propaganda and manipulation,” she says. It’s a lesson we could all (clearly) use a refresher on.

And having spent the bulk of her career coming first, pursuing her passion at the expense of stability, Pozner has a lesson for that too: “Don’t let people rob you of your vision,” she says. “If you see a need that is being unmet and you believe you know how to meet that need, do everything in your power to meet that need.”