

ming schedule is accurately indicated in these guides. In the remaining programmes, the garbled, partial, or disappearing captions are very familiar to deaf and hard-of-hearing consumers. I suspect that the regular disruption of captioning in rerun programmes, especially Star Trek, may be the result of the subtle speeding up of the taped programme to accommodate additional commercial time. Elsewhere, gaps in captioned dialogue, especially the final dramatic dialogues and off-screen comments, may be a consequence of last-minute editing after captioning has been coded. In any case, hearing TV viewers are not expected to tolerate a blank screen during the final scenes of "Northern Exposure" or an on-air apology that sound was unavailable for a broadcast of "Hockey Night in Canada."

Even renting a video is a gamble. If your tastes run to alternative films or anything produced outside of the major American studios, you may be out of luck. It goes without saying that what dialogue exists in a pornographic film won't be closed captioned. Even if Zippy Video has what you want and it carries the closed captioning logo, there is still a good chance that you have blown your three bucks on an uncaptioned video.

Closed captioning functions much like a translation, from one source language into a target language. It is often intended to circulate the contents of a given work and to make it available to wider audiences. It is much more than a simple mechanical process; it involves value judgments, accommodation to publishing standards and print technologies, and a certain amount of creativity. In the case of commercial captioning, captioners are restricted by practical considerations such as the literacy of their audience and the capacity for print absorption by the average reader. This is especially true for children's programming where the captioner must determine whether captions should be verbatim or condensed to conform to a child's understanding of linguistic complexity. Average adult literacy allows for a comfortable reading speed of 200-250 words per minute, but must account for a drop to 120-140 words per minute when a television screen is animated with background visuals. Unlike reading a book or newspaper, reading a captioned TV programme does not allow reviewing a complicated sentence or looking up an unfamiliar word. For these reasons, commercial captioners are sometimes compelled to smooth the syntax in order to retain clarity. Children's programming, for example, is often completely rewritten to accommodate the reading levels of young viewers and to make explicit the inferences of vocal tone that are suggested to a hearing viewer. In the process, subtleties of tone, humour, and cultural differences within spoken English are often sacrificed for what is deemed to be the more important overall message. The captioned text of a children's programme also promotes a cultural conformity and blandness reminiscent of Reader's Digest Condensed Books.

The limitations and cultural knowledge of commercial captioners create another serious problem. During live broadcasts and taped programming, these highly trained individuals are not always briefed with the spellings of proper names for individuals and are expected to caption accurately highly specialized vocabularies. More seriously, most captioners are not adequately prepared by broadcasters or producers to discern subtle linguistic variations within spoken English. In "real-time" captioning, a high-quality captioning produced simultaneously on-air, captioners are at a serious disadvantage. Although the best captioners are highly qualified and flexible practitioners, the act of transcription is a

process which produces as well as captures meaning.

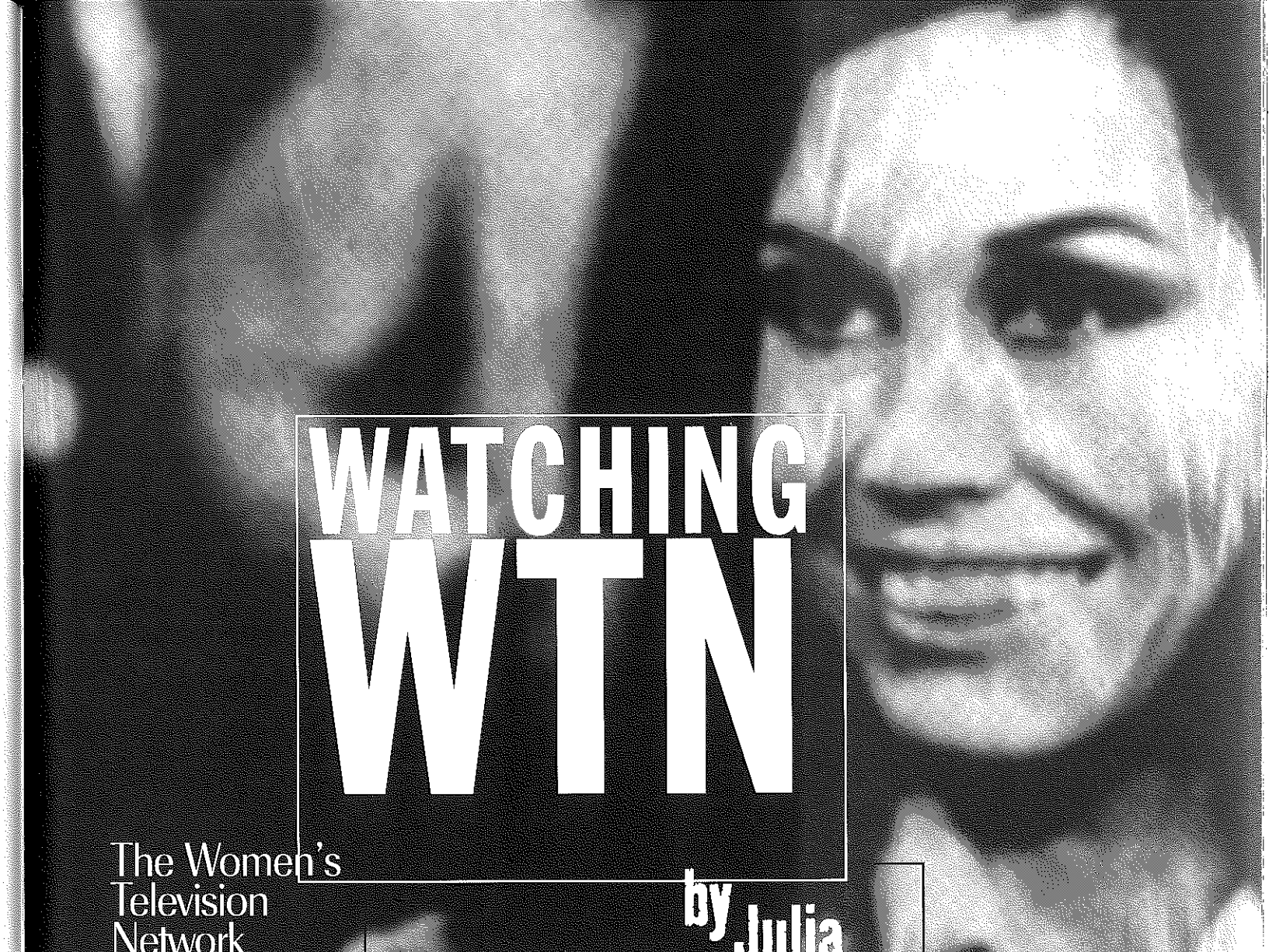
Frequently, captions are riddled with unintentional "Floydian slips" (as a caption for TVO's "Imprint" once read). For example, when the singer Della Reese appeared on the Arsenio Hall show, the first late-night talk show to offer captions, she was very animated in her description of "signifying" with the late comedian Redd Foxx. It was apparent by the context of her story that, by "signifying," she referred to word-play which has its origins in the African American community. To signify, according to Roger D. Abraham, is to play the trickster and to "talk with great innuendo, to carp, to cajole, to needle, and to lie." Reese described a spontaneous session of outrageous insults flying back and forth between Foxx and herself and, to underline the excitement of the verbal sparring, Reese remembered how comedian Richard Pryor encouraged them by shouting, "Signify, signify!" Any subtlety in this exchange was lost as the captioner repeatedly misrecorded her phrase as "Satisfy, satisfy!" Despite the narrative context, the captioners mediated the story by supplying those words that were "heard" or which made the most sense in their understandably limited experience. Rather than criticize the captioners, I would rather point to the limitations in the practice itself. Captioning, like translating and editing, is an ideological practice which has the potential to smooth over cultural difference and distinctions. This dimension is largely unmonitored. In the past, the work of advocacy groups and the CRTC has focussed on the larger problems of consumer access and on the quality of closed captions in general. Very little has been done to foreground the ways captioning, as a form of cultural mediation, influences and intervenes in the acts of television viewing for deaf and hard-of-hearing consumers. Satisfy, indeed.

Note

All statistics are quoted from the only comprehensive Canadian study on the quality of closed captioning:

The Canadian Captioning Development Agency.
Canadian Captioning Profile: "The Monitor Project."
Toronto: CCDA, January 1993.

Frequently, captions are riddled with unintentional "Floydian slips" (as a caption for TVO's "Imprint" once read).



WATCHING WTN

The Women's
Television
Network

by Julia
Creet

purports to
be for women,
by women,
and about
women.
IS IT?

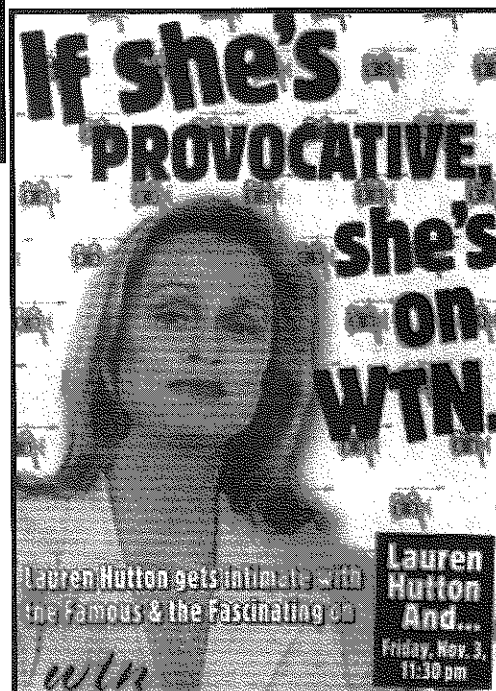
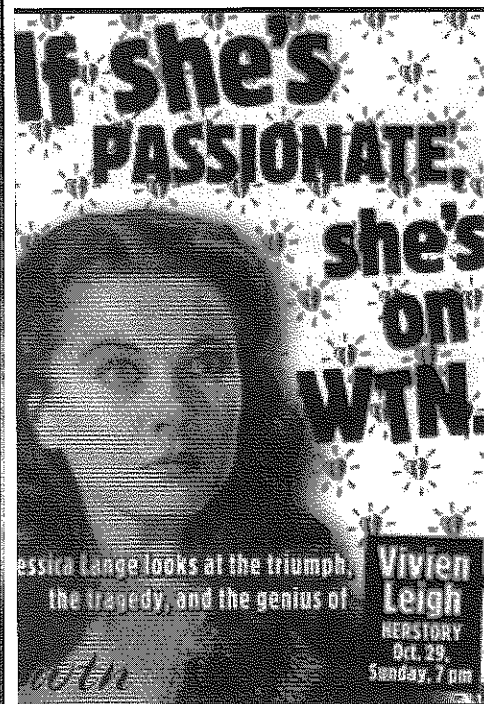
"No!" shrills girlfriend. "Don't stop there." My thumb on the clicker, clicks again. The Women's Television Network disappears into the continuum of mostly unwatched and unwatchable channels. The response is visceral. The thumb clicks on in its inexorable impatience. But what if we lingered a moment longer? Would we see something we want to watch? Would we see ourselves? Is the channel not for us? Named after us? Does it not call out to us by name?

"Come Women. Come watch." Does it not hail us in our cozy living room from its cozy living room set? "No!" says girlfriend, "I don't care if you have to write about it, watch it when I'm not here."

It was a lucky thing then—I guess—that I had lots of free time this summer, days to idle away, or I would never have been able to write this article. I would never have been allowed to watch enough WTN to write something based on more than second-and-a-half slices, speakers cut off in mid-sentence, complaints half-articulated but entirely predictable.

That's where it started, this aversion to WTN. It started with the immediate impression that its feed was a litany of troubles presented live and in person. Unlike the day-time talk shows, which openly thrive on the exploitation of sorrow, misery on WTN lacks entertainment

“Unlike the day-time talk shows, which openly thrive on the exploitation of sorrow, misery on WTN lacks entertainment value. It has none of the scopophilic pleasures of the talk show carnivals, or the carnage on the nightly news.”



value. It has none of the scopophilic pleasures of the talk show carnivals, or the carnage on the nightly news, or the engrossing real-time dramas of CNN. WTN takes a moral approach to misery: it is for information only, consciousness-raising, community-building. But this is exploitation of another kind. Television is a voyeuristic medium, looking in on someone's imagined living room or someone's all-too-real crisis. If it shows the disenfranchised, they are shown as spectacle, as Other to the viewer. But in the hands of WTN, the Other is producing shows about itself. And me. It hails me. "We are producing shows about you." What would be human interest stories on any other channel are women's interest stories on WTN. Women are supposed to be interested in other women as a matter of political principle. Now would I admit, after years of schooling in the feminist arts, that I am not always interested? That I don't want to be represented in this way? Not if I want to keep my job preaching to the converted. But in the privacy of my own home the encouraged reflexes of my thumb battle with my political ideals. They produce a sensation I can only describe as the

embodiment of ambivalence. Intellectually, it is like an Althusserian nightmare.

Louis Althusser (a French philosopher who strangled his wife and whose presence therefore represents a second order of ambivalence in this essay) wrote about the process by which ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects. It can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace "Hey, you there." You turn around, knowing that you are being spoken to. In his example, a policeman shouts and you turn because, being a subject of a policed state, you already feel guilty. Althusser described a circle of recognition—"interpellation," in his terms. For my purposes, you could say that Althusser described how people are interpellated into categories by recognizing themselves to be a member of the group. Thus women recognize themselves to be Woman; gays and lesbian, Gay and Lesbian; brown and black, Black and People of Colour: states of subjectivity, but somehow legislated nonetheless. Cultural,

state, and political "apparati" produce different categories of people, but they are all ideological, left and right. Television is one of those apparati *par excellence*, and "Woman" one of those categories.

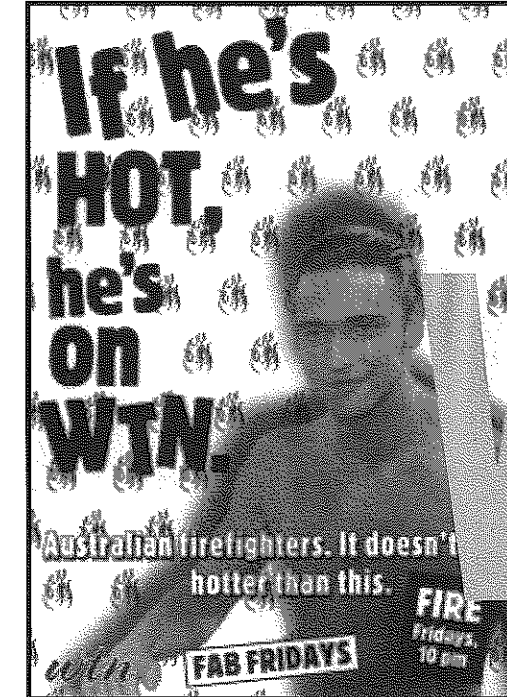
A la Althusser then, a woman watching the program knows it is addressed to her. She is hailed by an almost obsessive repetition of the word "Woman." She knows that she is a member of a target audience, a commercial category built on an unbreakable circle of semiotic recognition. If you watch WTN you will be seen more clearly as a woman; your opinions, as a woman, are being represented to you and the rest of the television-viewing audience. WTN is offering broader social recognition—within a narrow

set of acceptable parameters. Remember, the bottom line is selling air-time. What is so disconcerting about WTN is that it inadvertently highlights the ideological nature of both the women's movement and television together.

Television is an advertising-driven medium that, in a bottom-line kind of way, must be able to identify its audiences and sell them things. Thus, when the initial advertising research for WTN produced a demographic that said that the people who would watch were older adults, sixty percent of whom were female and forty percent male, programming was conceived accordingly. "Feminist" was declared a dirty word because focus groups indicated it would be perceived as man-hating and would turn away viewers. Yet the stories were to be driven by women. They were to show women as capable of being decision-makers. The market researchers were wrong about their audience. It was younger and hipper and, by definition, feminist. Women who were already quite capable of making decisions had made theirs.

My unscientific market survey (I asked my friends) of who watches what, if anything on WTN, produced these results: reruns of "Mary Tyler Moore" and "Kate and Allie" have a faithful following of gay men; "French and Saunders," a British comedy series which is about as far from politically correct as two women can get, is a universal favourite; "Girl Talk," an MTV style, upbeat girls-on-the-street show, aimed at adolescent and young adult women, seems to draw a crowd; and "The Natural Angler," a fishing show which last year starred former Olympic high-jumper Debbie Van Kiegebelt, has high kitsch appeal. (On it I saw one of those truly perfect, "I can't believe I am seeing this" moments. Van Kiegebelt became semi-orgasmic with a fish on her line. "O.K." she said, breathlessly. "Let's reel this guy in." Each fish hooked produced close ups of red fingernails and her high-pitched repetition of key phrases. All the fish were guys. Unfortunately, even this show turned into a human interest story when Van Kiegebelt, satisfied with her day's catch, takes us on a little tour of a nearby historically accurate recreation of an Indian settlement. "I like to make a day of it by taking little sidetrips," says the angler turned theme-park tour guide; typically this show infantilizes its audience.) (See Jody Baker's article "Women and Fish..." on page 49 for another take on "The Natural Angler.") Any show with remotely controversial material is flagged as "adult viewing." So "Shameless Shorts" was shown at midnight, making it very shameless indeed, and "The Creators," a series on women artists, warrants "discretion advised." A whiff of controversy might at least produce a badly needed public profile.

So why did we not watch WTN more? (Past tense here because I have hopes that the current season may prove better.) Look, for example, at the flagship show, "Point of View: Women."



“The absence of signs of lesbianism quite clearly demarcated the limits of what WTN has decided is a profitable representation of "Woman."

“Typically WTN infantilizes its audience.



WTN

“POV: Women” was (it has been replaced this season by a new show, “Take Three”) a current affairs program which, according to the promotional material, “looks at the world around us from a woman’s point of view.” It was to represent the mandate of the channel: “Specifically designed to portray the woman’s perspective and to celebrate her achievements, WTN endeavours to ensure that all women are represented, regardless of age, ethnic or socio-economic background.... Television for women, by women, and about women and their worlds.” Anyone who has been around awhile will recognize the unreconstructed 1970s rhetoric and its rhetorical problems: the mantra-like repetition of “woman” and that of her singular “woman’s perspective.”

“POV: Women” had three hosts. Helen Hutchinson, Sylvia Sweeney and Jeannette Loakman. They were, as promised, visually diverse: older White, Black, and Asian, respectively. One had the sense that they were very interesting women with opinions. But we, the viewing audience, seldom heard their opinions since they occupied the strange place of objective interviewer, representative of their category, and stand-in for women as a whole, all at the same time. P.O.V. wasted the talents of the hosts. Ankles crossed primly at the heels – it is difficult to sit any other way when left defenceless in front of a television camera on a stiff chair with no desk—they did their best to make their guests say something interesting only to cut them off as soon as

they warmed up. The assumption behind the selection of interviewees seemed to be that any woman (and some men) would have something interesting to say if stuck in front of a television camera. Helen Hutchinson’s discussion on depression with Mike Wallace had some depth and meaning, but it’s hard to go wrong in conversation with such a seasoned broadcaster as Wallace. Jeannette Loakman had a good accent, that British film type, but her obvious intelligence was corralled by

scripted questions, which tried to anticipate both interviewee responses and audience objections far too much to be interesting. The interviewers couldn’t pretend that they were objective with a title like “Point of View,” but how could subjectivity be this constrained and boring? Taped but not edited, “POV” was often painful to watch.

The interviewers fared slightly better when they were in the field. One memorable video report showed Sylvia Sweeney interviewing Susan Powter, a popular fitness personality. Sweeney, six-feet and Black, towers over the bleached and kinetic Powter. Powter hypes on about food and the body in flesh-tight spandex against the background of a gym. Sweeney looks bemused from her graceful height but says nothing about her experience of what must be an extraordinarily powerful (woman’s) body. Shortly after I saw this interview, *The Globe and Mail* ran a front-page story on Sweeney (July 29, 1995). Her accomplishments are stunning. She’s a ten-year veteran of the Canadian national (women’s) basketball team, now a television producer herself who won accolades for her documentary on her uncle, Oscar Peterson. But you’d never know it from seeing her on WTN.

Once though, I saw a discussion with three young “Trekkies” with good attitude (one at least slouched); “Trekkie” was the authoritative tag given to all of them. One was obviously a dyke and about the only lesbian I’ve seen on the Network who actually showed signs of being one. The absence of signs of lesbianism quite clearly demarcated the limits of what WTN has decided is a profitable representation of “Woman.” And my desire to see signs of lesbians proves how irresistible the circle of recognition is. I want to be included, knowing that my inclusion would be determined by a board which would have decided, on balance, that trying to sell me something was worth the risk of losing other viewers to whom they might sell something.

This is the paradox of WTN. Powerful women behind the scenes are neutralized or invisible in front of the camera. Sweeney isn’t the only WTN associate to have been profiled as a female success story in *The Globe and Mail*. (One assumes that this a measure of what constitutes “celebration of her achievements.”) Barbara Barde has been written up several times in the business pages of both *The Globe* and *The Star*. Formerly Vice-President of Programming and one of the driving forces behind WTN, she left suddenly after the first season. She now heads Up-Front Entertainment, which will this season produce independently in Toronto what were formerly WTN’s in-house programmes. (It’s a deal that she’s reluctant to discuss, since the move from in-house to independent production satisfies promises made to the CRTC, but seems to me like a bit of a shell game, particularly in light of her departure from head office in Winnipeg.)

First and foremost, WTN is a business. It is sixty-eight percent owned by Randy Moffatt of Moffatt Communications, the owner of the Winnipeg CTV affiliate. Ron Rhodes (whose theory of feminism comes from Carol Gilligan) and a partner own fifteen percent. Linda Rankin, the recently fired president, owns another ten percent. Barbara Barde and The Barde group own eight-plus percent; there are other—minority—shareholders. The original application for a licence made to the CRTC was for a station called “Lifestyle Television.” There’s “Lifetime,” a similarly named and targeted, channel in the United States which plays mostly talkshows and reruns of old sitcoms. It did sponsor the women’s crew of “Mighty Mary” in the America’s Cup and it broadcasts a few PSAs on Breast Cancer to placate its viewers, but it is primarily market-driven.

Regarding WTN the die was cast early, when the marketing department, rather than look exclusively for sponsorship for programming—as independent producers had in the case of “The Natural Angler,” sponsored by the Canadian Sportfishing Association, or the also popular “Car Care with Mary Bellows,” sponsored by General Motors—decided that it would try to raise additional revenue through heavily discounted advertising sales sold by the CTV advertising department, under the direction of Randy Moffatt’s son, Craig. For a show on older women and sexuality the suggested products were adult diapers and denture glue. Sponsorship then became increasingly difficult to organize since it was more expensive than the cut-rate advertising time. If it weren’t for some very smart negotiating to get WTN included in the second tier of cable subscriptions after Roger’s negative optioning scheme backfired, the channel would never have survived.

Since I was concerned that I present a balanced story on the channel, I called WTN’s offices for information. No one from head office in Winnipeg ever called me back and several other women associated with the channel were reluctant to say anything. In spite of much instability—Carlyn Moulton, director of independent production, Kate Thomas, director of sponsorship, and the President, Linda Rankin, were all gone within the first year — there is a loyalty to the original vision of the channel and a desire to see it succeed. Barbara Barde isn’t afraid of the media, however; she thrives on it. Over our three hour breakfast I am almost won over by her. Her history of how WTN made it to air is a mix of heroism and apologia. Apparently, no one expected that the CRTC would really grant the “Lifestyle Channel” a license. The CRTC licensing approval came in June of 1994. Program production started in October. WTN threw on the switch at midnight, December 30th, 1994. In three months, starting from when the office was opened, with limited equipment and money, WTN put on air a brand new television channel with twenty new series in production. It would have been impossible without the fervent belief of all involved in it. Ninety-five percent of its staff were female and they worked night and day. (Many of these women gave up other jobs to work at WTN and many independent producers agreed to work for relatively low wages). One imagines that many of the women dedicated to the promise of WTN were like Barde — smart, funny, tough; a bit of a snake-oil saleswoman.

Smart, funny, tough. That’s what Barde hopes the new season will be. She winces when I mention “POV,” even though the show was originally her idea. She promises that “Take Three” will be better. She admits the first season was monotonous, too serious. This season will be more interactive, will appeal to a broader audience. New ideas are percolating—such as “Class Act,” an etiquette show. Only one problem she says: we can’t figure out who would host it. I laugh. It’s perfectly obvious, I say. Hire a drag queen. Light bulbs go off for Barde. Only one problem she says, where would we find one? We live in different worlds, it seems. [I’ve since heard that they’ve asked Peter Schneider, a nice, but quite proper, gay man to do the job, for no money but just the glory of being on WTN.]

There’s one more thing I want to know. One wonders, with Sweeney and Kiebel’s involvement in the Network, why there aren’t some serious (women’s) sports broadcasts. We do, after all, have a world championship (women’s) hockey teams in both the lesbian and straight-acting divisions. This season, Barde tells me, WTN will air monthly a half-hour British women’s sports digest in addition to the one-half hour a week show called “On Your Mark” (which I still haven’t stumbled upon after months of impromptu viewing). TSN has apparently bought the rights to most women’s sports even though it broadcasts a very small percentage. I think about suggesting that WTN do highlights from the Downtown Toronto Women’s Hockey League. After all, Saturday night at Moss Park Arena is one of the best shows in town. WTN material? Probably not. But most of the women—smart, funny, and tough — playing hockey in this league are just what WTN wants, especially in the corners. But maybe I just want to be on television.