

Unraveling the Knot

Political Economy and Cultural Hegemony in Wedding Media

Erika Engstrom

The U.S. bridal industry is estimated at between \$50 and \$70 billion annually; the potential for this market is huge: Nearly 2.4 million marriages are performed each year (Gibbons, 2003). The investment of money and time that goes into the traditional wedding, with the average “big” wedding costing some \$20,000, makes it not only a major event, but also a major expense for those starting married life; more than half of couples who choose to hold a wedding pay for it all themselves (Ellerbee & Tessem, 2001), which can lead to their starting their married life in debt (Currie, 1993). . . .

Bridal media in general “rev up” expectations for big weddings by exalting the complexity and cost of the event, contended Gibbons (2003). Today, one easily finds myriad bridal and wedding gown magazines at any supermarket or newsstand, with titles such as *Bride’s*, *Modern Bride*, *Elegant Bride*, *Bridal Guide*, *Bliss for Brides*, *BrideNoir* (for women of color), *Martha Stewart’s Weddings*, *Wedding Dresses Magazine*, and newer, specialized titles such as *The Wedding Channel.com’s Wedding Bells*, *InStyle Weddings*, and *Allure Bride* (from the publishers of *Allure* magazine). These publications concentrate on bridal accoutrements, such as gowns, accessories, party favors, jewelry, and cosmetics, rather than on the meaning and subsequent relationship created by the wedding ceremony (Filak, 2002).

In addition to gala weddings as portrayed in Hollywood films, various reality television programs have been added to the bridal media milieu. Focused on the experience of ordinary people in actual, unscripted environments (Deery, 2004), documentary-style wedding programs record couples’ efforts to escape their current habitus by creating the perfect wedding (Herr, 2005). For example, The Learning Channel’s *A Wedding Story*, one of the first programs in the wedding reality genre, offers viewers a familiar version of the wedding, which requires the white wedding gown for the bride, a church ceremony, and outward indication of expense at the reception (Engstrom, 2003; Engstrom

From Engstrom, E. (2008). Unraveling the knot: Political economy and cultural hegemony in wedding media. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 32, 60–82. Published by Sage Publications, Inc.

& Semic, 2003). Lifetime's ("Television for Women") *Weddings of a Lifetime* specials gave viewers fairy tale weddings that served as thinly disguised advertisements for particular venues and services, specifically, Walt Disney World's Fairy Tale Wedding Pavilion (Levine, 2005).

Taken together, bridal magazines and the portrayal of the lavish wedding across media forward the message that weddings serve as the endpoint of romantic relationships and, relevant to this study, *the* life goal for women. . . .

The current study examines the hegemonic messages about today's wedding in American society, and, by extension, its accompanying dictates of consumption and the role of women, disseminated by The Knot, a bridal media company. The Knot, self-proclaimed as the "#1 wedding website," with 2.1 million unique visitors a month, consists of brand extensions in print, with the publication *The Knot Magazine* and a series of books. Most recently, it has ventured into the world of television, with its reality television program *Real Weddings from The Knot*, produced in partnership with the cable outlet Oxygen.

With its various crossover alliances and relationships with major retailers and other media, such as Oxygen, The Knot serves as a prime example of the political economy of the media.¹ Not only does The Knot's structure reflect media economy, its product can be viewed as cultural "work," the product of media messages central to "the production and reproduction of the social relationships within capitalism" (Carragee, 1993, p. 330). Indeed, one can argue that weddings and their requisite expense, through capitalism, create and legitimize social relationships, namely, marriage. . . .

Unraveling The Knot's Media Ties

TheKnot.com launched on America Online in September 1996. Founded by "four good friends, two of whom had barely survived

their own wedding, due to the lack of updated information and real-world resources available" (*Company Milestones*, 2007), The Knot now serves as "wedding central" online, with links to various wedding item retailers, and claims to be the largest online retailer of wedding favors and supplies. Brides- (and grooms-) to-be can click on links such as "Wedding Planning," "Wedding Budgeter," "Wedding Fashion," "Bridal Beauty," and "Grooms" (who only have one link dedicated to them). The site even offers a link to apply for a "The Knot" American Express credit card. TheKnot.com promotes itself as the only wedding brand on AOL, MSN, and Yahoo Internet portals, and also has established marketing alliances with May Department Stores Company, the umbrella company of Robinsons-May, Filene's, and Famous-Barr, under which The Knot promotes these stores' wedding registry services (*The May Department Stores*, 2002). . . .

In March 2005, The Knot announced the debut of its online TV channel, The Knot TV, linked to its main Web site's "Talk" section (Tedeschi, 2005). The program schedule relies on *Real Weddings from The Knot* and short videos of bridal makeovers and "fashion reports," featuring streaming video of runway shows of designer wedding gowns. Visitors can view fashion reports on demand, but must wait for a short commercial first (such as for Crest's Whitening Strips tooth bleach). Thus, even "on demand" video on The Knot is accompanied by some form of external sponsorship.

The Knot's media holdings continue to expand, with the acquisition of Great Boyfriends.com, a site where women recommend men to other women, and TheNest.com, a site devoted to all the domestic necessities of newlyweds just setting up house. TheNest.com, aimed at the "freshly married," offers blogs, advice columns, and recipes, in addition to guiding its visitors to retail merchants of housewares, appliances and automobiles, and lending companies for home mortgages (Oser, 2005).

The Knot Magazine includes full-page promotions for these Web sites, with directions for readers to consult TheKnot.com Web site throughout its editorial content.

Though it appears to Web site visitors as a one-stop shop for everything bridal, advertising comprises the bulk of The Knot's income. According to its annual report of earnings, in 2004 The Knot's net revenues totaled \$41.4 million. Most of it (\$17.6 million) came from sponsors and advertising, including local vendor and national advertising sales, with merchandising accounting for \$13.1 million, and its publishing ventures bringing in \$10.7 million (*Annual Report*, 2005). In 2005, net revenues increased to \$51.4 million, with revenues from online advertising and sponsorships increasing to \$25.8 million, while merchandise revenue declined by \$0.5 million (*Form 10-K for The Knot, Inc.*, 2006). The Knot's publishing revenues increased to \$13 million in 2005. These figures point not only to the company's success in securing advertising and sponsors, but also to the demand for bridal media and the need for wedding products and services. . . .

Cultural Hegemony in *Real Weddings from The Knot*

"Weddings, marriage, romance, and heterosexuality become naturalized to the point where we consent to the belief that marriage is necessary to achieve a sense of well-being, belonging, passion, morality, and love," wrote Ingraham (1999, p. 120). This hegemony encompasses our commonsense and unquestioned notions about marriage, such as the expectation that women buy into, literally, the wedding ideal. Several studies have used hegemony theory specifically to analyze wedding-related media. Lewis (1997) used hegemony to examine the gendered messages contained in wedding photography and concluded that wedding photography illustrates notions of perfection, "ideal" body language, and glorification of the bride in all her finery,

and legitimizes consumerism through the acceptance of its high cost and necessity.

Reality TV wedding shows, Herr (2005) observed, "could be considered the next logical step in the professionalization and commercialization of the American wedding" (p. 24). . . .

Real Weddings from The Knot debuted in 2003 as a joint venture between The Knot and the Oxygen cable network. Oxygen, cofounded by Oprah Winfrey, is independently owned and operated and available to 52 million cable households (*About Oxygen*, 2007). Its mission, according to its Web site, is "to bring women (and the men who love them) the edgiest, most innovative entertainment on television" (*About Oxygen*, 2007). Presented on Oxygen during cross-promoted "Wedding Weeks" about twice a year, the program features couples from "all walks of life with all kinds of weddings" (*Oxygen Proposes to The Knot*, 2004). . . .

Each 30-minute episode follows the wedding couple as they prepare for their wedding, often weeks in advance. Voiceover narration from the bride introduces and concludes each episode; other audio comes from natural sound and participants (e.g., the groom, parents, family members, wedding coordinators) who speak directly into the camera. Viewers watch as couples write their own vows, choose flowers, put together party favors, and perform other wedding-related activities. For each season of *Real Weddings from The Knot*, episodes are presented in weekend marathons, ending with a special "wedding gown" fashion show. . . .

Major Content Themes

BRIDE AS PHYSICAL OBJECT

The wedding provides a venue in which women are still expected to show, and display to others, their femininity. The one day in which a woman, any woman, can be a star is her wedding day, and the reward for adhering to a hegemony of femininity is a

temporary status of being a celebrity, as noted by Boden (2003): “Overwhelmingly, femininity is conceptualized as ‘picture-perfect,’ triggering visual pleasure for the bride as well as her audience for conforming to the cultural requirements for a successful bridal appearance” (p. 62).

Of all the required accoutrements of the wedding, the bridal gown holds utmost importance in *Real Weddings from The Knot*. In all episodes, brides wear some type of formal, white (or cream-colored) dress. Brides are often shown being fitted for their dresses, many times with female onlookers, such as mothers, tearfully expressing how beautiful they look. The term *princess* is used repeatedly as brides become the object of their own gaze, as illustrated by the following: “I feel really pretty. I feel like a princess,” comments 23-year-old Jen, a former recording artist who has given up her career in favor of marriage; “It’s starting to hit home, the whole reason why we’re here is this dress. . . . Oh, my god, I feel like a princess,” says Orisha, whose marriage to John comes after they have already been living together and have a daughter.

For Cara, who claims in her voiceover introduction, “Every bride dreams of being a princess on her wedding day,” her dress serves as a source of unhappiness, as she tries on her ill-fitting, custom-made gown: “I don’t love it. It’s not what I imagined.” Her comments point to the significance a piece of apparel holds—her happiness hinges on how this dress looks and feels. The “magic” surrounding the perfect dress holds significance for many of these brides; several seek that perfection by hiring designers to make a one-of-a-kind gown, such as Amy, who started looking for dresses a year before the wedding, and after trying on “100” dresses and not finding the “right one,” had a couturier make one for her. Tiffany, who has overseen every detail of her New York Harlem Renaissance wedding, is shown being fitted in a Vera Wang gown, and is given walking lessons by prominent *Vogue* editor Andre Leon Talley.

More so than the bride herself, it is her *dress*—her “packaging” (Goldstein-Gidoni, 1997)—rather than her person as a human being—that serves as the center of attention. Brides are seen getting dressed on the wedding day, often assisted by others, due to the elaborateness and complexity of the “costuming.” Recurrent images also include the bride being formally photographed, with the white dress serving as the focus of the viewer’s gaze. In sum, women about to be married are *transformed* into “real” brides once they wear the wedding gown, which this program promulgates as the true mark of the princess bride.

The other requirement women must meet to become a bride is that they be made up with cosmetics and their hair be done in a special coiffure. Makeup’s transformative power becomes magnified on a woman’s wedding day. While making up has become a tangible way for women to confirm their feminine identities (Peiss, 1996), similarly, through special application of cosmetics, and hairstyling, brides become “transformed” from mere woman to bride. In nearly all episodes, brides, and their female attendants, are shown at beauty salons on the wedding day and/or having their cosmetics applied by either a makeup artist or themselves. For example, Katie, a model and dental hygienist, insists on doing her sisters’ makeup and hair herself because she wants them to “look perfect.”

While these brides all undergo beauty regimens of some sort, the notion that beauty requires pain is especially noteworthy. For example, 20-something Kaijsa has her hair done in an “up do” at a beauty salon and says, “I don’t like pain, but if it makes me look good, I don’t care,” while wincing as her tiara and veil are positioned into her coiffure. Especially telling is how this idea of pain equaling beauty extends to younger female bridal party members. One of Lori’s two young stepdaughters-to-be (she is marrying Mark, a divorced father) cries in pain because her hair pins hurt, as the other comments, “Beauty is

pain.” Thus, this example illustrates that not only do brides expect to experience some kind of pain or discomfort, but young girls already understand that beauty involves some amount of sacrifice, sometimes to the point of crying.

The emphasis on female beauty becomes even more heightened with the juxtaposition of images of grooms getting dressed and ready for the wedding day. The most common image among these episodes features the groom visiting a tuxedo shop a day or two prior to the wedding for a final fitting, or getting dressed on the wedding day. Even this aspect is implied to be controlled by the bride, as the men on the program are not shown actually *selecting* their attire. For example, in Orisha and John’s episode, John and his attendants make their requisite visit to the tuxedo shop to have a last-minute fitting, with Orisha and other female family members supervising. Speaking into the camera, Orisha reminds viewers, “I picked the color for the tux. It’s my theme here.” Typically, however, attention to men’s apparel is confined to brief visits to the tuxedo shop or making last-minute adjustments to neckties on the day of the wedding. While brides are shown at length trying on and admiring their gowns and being assisted by other women on the wedding day, men’s apparel receives little attention, if at all.

The importance of brides’ physical beauty becomes further underscored as women are consistently shown having their makeup applied by someone else, appearing on camera with a facial mask (Orisha has a mud mask and Kaijsa is shown taking a bath with cold cream and cucumber slices over her eyes), or having their hair coiffed in a salon. In contrast, while John has his braids done by a female family member at home and Todd has his hairdresser brother coif his hair, men are never seen shaving or applying beauty products. The absence as a rule of such images of men attending to their visage makes the occasional exception even

more jarring, as in the case of Catina and Todd’s episode. In addition to doing his hair, his hairdresser brother applies facial makeup to Todd, explaining that doing so will prevent Todd’s face from being too shiny for the wedding photographs. Todd’s other brothers laugh as they look on, which further emphasizes that such treatment is inappropriate for men.

In sum, physical appearance is clearly a much more important aspect of “looking the part” for women than for men on the wedding day (and, indeed, every day). . . . One can consider the process of the wedding, that is, the “making” of the bride, as a disciplinary practice that creates ideal feminine beauty. The special attention given to the application of makeup on the female face further emphasizes the unpainted female face as “defective” (Bartky, 1988), and in need of correction, in contrast to the male face. When the male face is subjected to similar treatment, as in the case of Todd, and with justification (to ensure aesthetically pleasing wedding photographs), the male is apt to be ridiculed. The application of makeup for women, however, is “natural,” in that, as Hall and Hebert (2004) noted, makeup creates feminine identity; women are not truly women without it, or without the accompanying discomfort (including starving oneself) required to look beautiful.

SUPERBRIDE/MANAGER

In *Real Weddings from The Knot*, the bride’s major responsibilities are to look beautiful and to oversee the planning of her wedding. Boden’s (2003) “superbride” serves as the role model for the brides in these episodes, with a common theme pointing to the traditional view that wedding planning, centered on shopping and attainment of material goods, falls into the feminine realm (Lowrey & Otnes, 1994). As they decide every detail of what is supposed to be their “special day,” these superbrides frantically make arrangements, run errands, and

ensure everything from wedding rings to bouquets are accounted for, all the while commenting to the viewer that they don't mind being frazzled, because it is "worth it."

Brides in this program consistently direct ceremony rehearsals, tell people what to do and how to act, and oversee catering, decorating, and their own and others' apparel, even when they hire wedding coordinators. For example, Catina, who will marry Todd in a big church, choreographs the dance numbers for her elaborate wedding, and Katie orders her bridesmaid sisters to "stand up straight," just as they are to walk into the ceremony. While their grooms do participate at times, such as by making party favors or going to food tastings to choose their reception menus, final decisions are made by the brides.

The episode featuring Amy, who has been with Mark for 5 years, serves as a notable example of an extreme "superbride."² This episode is marked by Amy's constant bossiness, penchant for tirades, and verbal abuse of her parents (which includes constant profanity and directives for them to "shut up")—which they seem to take in stride. Amy oversees every minute aspect of her wedding at a mansion in the New York countryside, including the coordination and assemblage of gift baskets for guests, and even gluing artificial flowers to guests' flip flops. Her mother comments, "She's a girl with a mind of her own, she knows what she wants." Her future husband, Mark, even acknowledges her controlling nature when he explains to the viewer that "Amy wears the pants. She's the boss of the family." Indeed, Mark is rarely seen in this episode; he goes off-roading on motor bikes just hours before the wedding and mainly stays out of Amy's way.

On the wedding day, she becomes upset to find her bouquet is the wrong color, and her parents nag her about being late to the ceremony, as she calmly smokes a cigarette. Ironically, this "superbride" is 45 minutes late to her own wedding. However, Amy's controlling nature apparently doesn't bother

Mark, as he tells her, in front of the wedding audience, "You are my sunshine, my angel." Amy's seemingly stressful wedding preparations all work out in the end, and as she says in the voiceover conclusion, "In the future, I'll forget all the worry and stress that went into planning this wedding."

Even as Amy serves as the extreme superbride, all the brides in these episodes illustrate superbride behavior in one form or another. In contrast, the grooms generally serve either as companions or assistants to their future wives (Bill accompanies Amy to a meeting with their cake designer, John and Danielle visit their florist, Kaijsa and Ryan go food tasting together), or stay out of the planning altogether. For example, Lori does the planning for her and Mark's destination wedding. "It doesn't bother me that I'm doing most of the planning by myself, because Mark does all the work when we're at home all week long," Lori comments.

Grooms who do participate usually do so in a secondary capacity: Ryan helps Kaijsa with seating assignments for the reception; Jeff builds special platforms for the wedding lanterns for his and Jessa's budget wedding and goes shopping with her at Wal-Mart; Gus runs errands based on Katie's "to-do" list to "help relieve some of Katie's stress." However, even as some grooms try to be helpful, brides often become frustrated when their men fall short on even the seemingly simplest tasks. For example, Sarah-Jane does all the planning for her wedding with Nate, constantly making to-do lists every day and stressing out over the "68 things" she must do. Nate's major task is to learn how to dance for their reception. Sarah-Jane becomes upset when Nate still can't remember the dance, after 8 months of lessons. At Kaijsa and Ryan's wedding rehearsal, Kaijsa asks Ryan to help her direct the intricate Jewish ceremony. After it becomes clear that nobody listens to her instructions, she finally throws her hands up in frustration.

Overall, brides assume responsibility for most of the wedding planning, details, and

errand running. In the case of millionaire John and his bride Danielle, viewers see them visit their florist together, and discussing wedding and reception details on camera. John appears intricately involved with every aspect of their glamorous Newport, Rhode Island, wedding, which involves two reception sites, one for cocktails at the Tennis Hall of Fame and another for the “real” reception at a mansion that John had chosen as a wedding site when he was a boy. However, he makes a point to explain to their guests at their rehearsal dinner and again at their reception that Danielle has made most of the decisions. “We’ve put—*she’s* put—a lot of planning into this for the last two years,” he says while making a toast at their reception, making clear that she has been the one in charge. Overall, then, while grooms may participate in various ways in the wedding planning, the main responsibility falls to the brides. . . .

WEDDING DETAILS AND CONSUMERISM

As viewers watch the wedding plans unfold, noticeable attention is given to items specifically chosen for the ceremony, such as the aforementioned all-important wedding gown, shoes, bridesmaids’ dresses, flowers, wedding cake, entertainment in the form of live bands and recorded music, and locale. Larger scale weddings take place at some sort of unique venue, such as an historic mansion or hotel, country estate, or exclusive club. For example, writer Susan Orlean (*The Orchid Thief*) and husband John hold their upscale Manhattan wedding at The Explorer’s Club, and hire a gospel choir to provide music; millionaire John and model Danielle marry at a Newport, Rhode Island, mansion; and Alison, an antiques store owner, and Tommy, a stockbroker, hold their wedding at Alison’s parents’ horse farm, complete with 7,000 flowers and a 9,000 square-foot tent to hold their 800 guests.

Attention to details such as party favors for guests emphasizes the importance of items and gifts as ways for couples to imbue their weddings with a personal touch. For example, John and Danielle give boxes of Krispy Kreme donuts to guests, specially delivered in a vintage-style Krispy Kreme truck. Specifics on wedding cakes also get attention, as the viewer goes along with Amy and Bill as they consult with their wedding cake baker on their novelty, shopping-themed cake, or watches Jessa, a research scientist and bride “on a budget,” bake and decorate her own wedding cake.

The wedding budget serves as the central theme of Jessa’s wedding with Jeff, a medical student. In their episode, viewers are told simply that they are on a budget, and watch them shop for wedding supplies at Wal-Mart. While the television version of their story emphasizes their tight budget and the amount of work they put into creating their version of the dream wedding, the online synopsis of their episode terms their wedding as being on “a graduate student budget of only \$6,000.” The emphasis on the “homemade” quality of their wedding—with even the couple commenting that others might call them “cheap” but they prefer “thrifty”—conveys the message that Jessa and Jeff cannot do much with “only” \$6,000, and suggests that couples with similarly “small” budgets should expect to bake their own cakes as well. Juxtaposed with the more usual sumptuous weddings, Jessa and Jeff’s homemade country wedding, as well as Whitney and Jeff’s country-style barbecue reception, look shabby; the resulting message to viewers reinforces the “big, white wedding” ideal, in which guests are treated to lavish parties and gifts. . . .

Discussion

As a producer of cultural work, *The Knot* serves as an ideal example of the modern

media conglomerate, but even more so of media synergy, as a single corporation's several outlets "can use each other to move content and promote themselves" (McAllister, 2000, p. 109). Media synergy allows The Knot to promote itself through its Web site, magazine, specialty publications, and reality television series. Similar to the "synergistic melding" of the Lifetime cable channel, its owner, ABC, and ABC's owner, the Walt Disney Company, that resulted in *Weddings of a Lifetime* (Levine, 2005), The Knot's foray into the world of reality television provides another means by which it can self-promote and further its reach among its target audience—immediate and potential brides.

If American society in general consists mostly of a middle class, then weddings, according to Herr (2005), allow for the creation of a "spectacle," with the goal of "moving up," so to speak, to a higher class for one special day. *Real Weddings from The Knot* and its online and print counterparts create and provide for women an escape, albeit temporary, from the monotony of a middle-class habitus. While *Real Weddings* offers viewers a range of weddings, from down-home to glamorous, the program's underlying message instills the notion that no matter what one's socioeconomic status, the wedding requires some degree of special effort that always involves additional work and money. All these weddings involved the wearing of special clothing (wedding gown and tuxedos), reception with elaborate decorations, music, and specialty items (e.g., a wedding cake), which create a clear departure from the everyday. Even the sumptuous receptions of John and Danielle, the millionaire and the model, serve as departures from their already upscale daily life. . . .

The feminine ideal forwarded by *Real Weddings from The Knot*, and bridal media in general, provides a contrast to a wider picture of the status of women in American society today. While the program portrays strong women who "know what they

want" and have established successful careers for themselves, the wedding demands them to play roles that remain decidedly feminine. This was illustrated by Cara, a Wall Street broker who has earned a seat on the New York Stock Exchange, who plans and gets her "fairy tale" wedding. However, even as women like Cara make progress in the male-dominated business world, and seemingly promote feminism, in terms of creating equality in that sphere of social life, they still symbolize the feminine values embodied in the self-image of beautiful, finely dressed "princess" (a term denoting a secondary royal status, an ideal embraced by the program).

In sum, while the take-control, almost-masculine attitudes of "superbrides" such as Cara and Amy demonstrate on the surface their independent attitude, they still adhere to feminine ideals of physical beauty and play the role of demure bride on their wedding day. Thus, ironically, even as they control their "special day," they succumb to and happily accept the stress, worry, and even pain required to look the part of the blushing bride. The acceptance of the disciplinary practices surrounding the bridal role illustrates what Bartky (1988) called "the economy of enforcement," in which women both dictate and subject themselves to such rules, and "men get off scot-free" (p. 81). The imbalance between the genders in this regard, with women dedicating their time toward making themselves beautiful and creating the perfect dream wedding, and men for the most part left out of wedding planning, further demarcates the line between the feminine and masculine. In this sense, weddings remain "women's work," rather than an endeavor whose labor is shared by both partners.

Conclusion

Regarding this particular media corporation, the name *The Knot* seems more than

apropos. Through its reality television show, *The Knot* ties entertainment, information, and ultimately, merchandising together to create what Mosco (1996) termed an “institutional circuit of communication products” that links the bridal industry, the primary producers of bridal products, to consumers, by presenting the weddings of ordinary people. As a “one-stop” shop for all things bridal, it provides its readers and viewing audience, through a variety of media, formalized instruction in the art of party planning, a social endeavor one does not normally learn in school. It also has established relationships with its advertisers by providing its Web visitors direct access to an array of retailers, including its own online store. Wedding accessories thus can be purchased simply by clicking an icon of one’s choice. In this sense, its media side supports its business side quite efficiently. In terms of political economy of the media, then, *The Knot* creates not only media products supported by advertising revenue but also directly encourages retail sales for its advertisers’ financial success.

In turn, because *The Knot*’s survival depends on its advertisers’ sales, the messages it sends through its own media product, in the guise of the editorial sections of its magazines, Web site, and its reality television program, promote the need for the items its advertisers sell. These messages relay to its female audience a repeated and uniform version of the wedding, disallowing alternatives that would negate the importance of seemingly vital elements, namely, those that *The Knot*’s advertising and editorial content feature. Because hegemony exists only when the possibility for counter-hegemony exists, *The Knot* must constantly remind its audience that other wedding styles either are undesirable (cheap) or—as is implied by ignoring them—do not exist. In this way, *The Knot* also advances a cultural hegemony regarding how one can and is supposed to enact the wedding, a personal commitment made publicly.

The public nature of the wedding creates another dimension that *The Knot* addresses, that of instructing women to perform the role of bride in the correct manner. In that hegemony exists not by state-imposed force but by consent, women who wish to marry correctly, then, adhere to the rules suggested by *The Knot* and other bridal media. Fear of deviating from the correct wedding script thus leads to what Landy (1994) termed a “convenience of conformity,” wherein brides follow the rules set by the experts. In the process, *The Knot* reestablishes the big, intricately planned wedding as *the* ideal, and the image of the beautiful and beautifully dressed bride as the pinnacle of femininity.

While *The Knot* concentrates on weddings (and with its new Web site *TheNest*, the proper way of setting up one’s new marital home), its media product/cultural work provides additional instruction in the proper way women should fulfill non-bridal roles. As discussed above, many of the women featured in *Real Weddings from The Knot* also have careers, and successful ones at that. In this sense, the very inclusion of such facts can allow one to view it as feminist. However, the program gives even more time to depictions of these same women undergoing beauty regimens, being fitted for bridal gowns, and devoting large amounts of time to a clearly feminine project.

“Sometimes consumerism has been seen as the principal source of women’s oppression in the twentieth century, as a force, which by promoting a falsely feminine identity, distracts them from what would otherwise be their true identities, as humans and/or women,” observed Bowlby (1996, p. 381). The subtle, and not so subtle, messages that associate happiness with consumption and perfection with femininity, conveyed by *Real Weddings from The Knot* and similar programs in the reality genre, provide additional evidence for such a claim. The resulting cultural work points to an image of the successful woman as fulfilling the role of beautiful consumer.

Regarding The Knot's emphasis on femininity and its relation to feminism, the amount of time and effort required to organize the kinds of weddings presented on this program and others like it thus serves to distract women from otherwise devoting that time to other facets of their lives, including activities that would put them in competition with men in the working world. Moreover, the additional self-enforcement of the disciplined bridal body provides evidence for Bartky's (1988) assertion that "normative femininity" has become more and more centered on women's appearance, even as older forms of patriarchal domination erode (p. 81). Thus, while American women continue their progress toward equality in larger society, one can view the cultural hegemony forwarded by bridal media as an acceptable means by which patriarchal values and traditions endure.

Notes

1. Political economy of the media here refers to the study of power relations involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of resources and products of communication, with media products and audiences serving as both (Mosco, 1996). Regarding communication studies, political economists examine the structure of media industries and their relationships with other economic sectors within a capitalistic system (Steeves & Wasko, 2002) and how media and communication systems and content "reinforce, challenge, or influence existing class and social relations" (McChesney, 2000).

2. Amy's behaviors are illustrative of demanding behaviors of brides as described in the popular book *Bridezilla: True Tales From Etiquette Hell* (Spaemme & Hamilton, 2002). Though the book uses a humorous approach in discussing bad manners exhibited by brides who seek to create the perfect wedding, it offers insight into how obsessive wedding planning can go awry and the problems created by some brides' overly materialistic concerns.

References

- About Oxygen*. (2007). Retrieved May 4, 2007, from <http://www.oxygen.com/basics/about.aspx>
- Annual report*. (2005, March 21). Retrieved March 28, 2005, from <http://biz-yahoo.com/e/050321/knot.ob10-k.html>
- Bartky, S. L. (1988). Foucault, femininity, and the modernization of patriarchal power. In I. Diamond & L. Quinby (Eds.), *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on resistance* (pp. 61–86). Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Boden, S. (2003). *Consumerism, romance, and the wedding experience*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bowlby, R. (1996). Soft sell: Marketing rhetoric in feminist criticism. In V. deGrazia, with E. Furlough (Eds.), *The sex of things: Gender and consumption in historical perspective* (pp. 381–387). Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Carragee, K. M. (1993). A critical evaluation of debates examining the media hegemony thesis. *Western Journal of Communication*, 57, 330–348.
- Company milestones*. (2007). Retrieved May 4, 2007, from http://www.theknot.com/au_milestones.shtml
- Currie, D. H. (1993). Here comes the bride: The making of a "modern traditional" wedding in Western culture. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 24, 403–421.
- Deery, J. (2004). Reality TV as advertainment. *Popular Communication*, 2, 1–20.
- Ellerbe, L., & Tessem, R. (Executive Producers). (2001, February 25). *The American wedding* [Television cablecast]. New York: Lucky Duck Productions. (Available from A&E Television Networks, <http://www.aande.com>)
- Engstrom, E. (2003). Hegemony in reality-based TV programming: The world according to *A Wedding Story*. *Media Report to Women*, 31, 10–14.
- Engstrom, E., & Semic, B. (2003). Portrayal of religion in reality TV programming: Hegemony and the contemporary American wedding. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2, 145–163.

- Filak, V. (2002, August). *Marriage, magazines and makeup tips: A comparative content analysis of Bride's magazine and Glamour magazine*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Miami, FL.
- Form 10-K for *The Knot, Inc.* (2006, March 17). Retrieved May 16, 2006, from <http://biz.yahoo.com/e/060317/knot10-k.html>
- Gibbons, S. (2003, June 4). Bridal media promote merchandise, not marriage. *Women's eNews*. Retrieved June 23, 2003, from <http://www.wenews.org/article.cfm/dyn/aid/1353/>
- Goldstein-Gidoni, O. (1997). *Packaged Japaneseness: Weddings, business and brides*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Hall, A., & Hebert, L. (2004, August). *The evolution of the makeover from print to television: An analysis of the social construction of the female body image*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Toronto, Canada.
- Herr, R. A. (2005, May). *The dream and the reality of the American wedding: Taste, style, and reality television*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New York.
- Ingraham, C. (1999). *White weddings: Romancing heterosexuality in popular culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Landy, M. (1994). *Film, politics, and Gramsci*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Levine, E. (2005). Fractured fairy tales and fragmented markets: Disney's *Weddings of a Lifetime* and the cultural politics of media conglomeration. *Television & New Media*, 6, 71–88.
- Lewis, C. (1997). Hegemony in the ideal: Wedding photography, consumption, and patriarchy. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 20, 167–187.
- Lowrey, T. M., & Otnes, C. (1994). Construction of a meaningful wedding: Differences in the priorities of brides and grooms. In J. A. Costa (Ed.), *Gender issues and consumer behavior* (pp. 164–183). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- The May Department Stores Company and The Knot announce marketing alliance* [Press release] (2002, February 25). Retrieved March 4, 2005, from <http://www.theknot.com/02.25.02.shtml>
- McAllister, M. P. (2000). From flick to flack: The increased emphasis on marketing by media entertainment corporations. In R. Andersen & L. Strate (Eds.), *Critical studies in media commercialism* (pp. 101–122). New York: Oxford University Press.
- McChesney, R. W. (2000). The political economy of communication and the future of the field. *Media, Culture and Society*, 22, 109–116.
- Mosco, V. (1996). *The political economy of communication: Rethinking and renewal*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Oser, K. (2005, May 23). TheKnot.com seeks to extend its engagements. *Advertising Age*, 76(21), 144.
- Oxygen proposes to The Knot: 10 more episodes of Real weddings from the knot* [Press release] (2004, March 1). Retrieved October 4, 2004, from <http://www.theknot.com>
- Peiss, K. (1996). Making up, making over: Cosmetics, consumer culture, and women's identity. In V. deGrazia, with E. Furlough (Eds.), *The sex of things: Gender and consumption in historical perspective* (pp. 311–336). Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Spaemme, N., & Hamilton, J. (2002). *Bridezilla: True tales from etiquette hell*. Plano, TX: Salado Press.
- Steeves, H. L., & Wasko, J. (2002). Feminist theory and political economy: Toward a friendly alliance. In E. R. Meehan & E. Riordan (Eds.), *Sex and money: Feminism and political economy in the media* (pp. 16–29). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tedeschi, B. (2005, March 14). Websites try offering TV shows. *New York Times E-Commerce Report*. Retrieved March 28, 2005, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/14/technology/14ecom.html?ei=5088&en=2adcb055d1d>