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In Bold: A Digital Publication

Marlena Ahearn

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inbold2017.wordpress.com

Abstract

In Bold is a millennial-targeted digital publication that discusses and critiques body positivity, fat activism, and how mainstream media presents and talks about bodies. The website is a destination for women seeking resources, inspiration, and entertainment for women who don't see themselves represented, celebrated, and respected in society or media. Critique of media is often focused on a lack of diversity of race and gender, not of fat or body diversity. This oversight in academic spaces and in society contributes to the intense dissatisfaction and contempt women have for their bodies. *In Bold* seeks to challenge how women are typically represented in media and inspire a generation of women to reject fat stigma, and demand more diverse body representation.

Executive Summary

In Bold is a website created to be a resource for “plus-size” women and fat-activists. It curates content that critiques how bodies and women are represented in society and media and also provides resources for women to be inspired to challenge beauty and size standards. The project seeks to challenge internalized ideas about bodies and how they are represented and criticized through service pieces like “8 Fat Positive Podcasts To Listen To Now” and op-eds like “How The Media Defines The Perfect Woman.”

In Bold is a millennial-targeted digital media platform that discusses and critiques body positivity, fat activism, and the various conflicting ways bodies are represented and talked about in mainstream media. For example, when you pick up a glossy covered women’s magazine on a shelf or from your mailbox, you’re immediately faced with a conventionally beautiful celebrity or model who is perfectly lit and her body is contorted and edited to appear front-cover worthy. Usually, front-cover worthy means thin though when fat/plus-size women — or even average-sized women — occasionally grace the cover, they are praised as *brave* or even *liberated*. This thinly veiled praise only informs the reader that these body types that stray from the thin and white norm are valuable and acceptable when they are making a statement.

As you flip through that magazine you’ll find a fashion spread with thin, picturesque models in editorial garb, Shakira’s trainer’s workout routine for a flat stomach, an article about loving yourself, and a recipe for buttery pasta — for cheat day, of course. Critique of these conflicting and problematic messages isn’t new, but body representation still hasn’t changed.

My response to this problem I see in mainstream media was to create a platform where these ideas converge and where resources are housed for inspiration and entertainment for

woman who don't see themselves represented, celebrated, and respected in society and mainstream media.

In creating this website, I had three objectives in order to successfully challenge the body representation norms and create diverse content tailored for fat-accepting women. My first objective was challenging the rhetoric used in mainstream media. When talking about bodies and body image, there is particular discomfort with the word fat. Fat is a generally avoided word especially by mainstream media, unless they're talking about how to burn it. 'Obese' and 'overweight' are used instead in magazines and online, but are in fact not empowering. 'Obese' implies that your weight and height are disproportionate based on BMI measurement and has very negative health associations, despite health and weight not being mutually exclusive. 'Overweight' similarly implies that a person is 'over' an idealized weight — whether their own or a societal standard. Fat is embraced and celebrated by the fat activist community and *In Bold* is no exception. *In Bold* uses the word frequently to confront and challenge the notions that fat is bad and fat isn't acceptable.

The second was finding a way to change the typical representations of women, especially in body-positive environments. Instead of having an average-sized woman smiling peacefully to represent body positivity, I wanted to showcase women of various body types, races, and identities. I worked with a photographer to highlight many women and their intersectional identities.

The third objective was to curate diverse kinds of articles for the site. My method for developing different points of view and story formats was to create four verticals: conversations, expressions, headlines, and issues. Conversations houses Q&As with fat-activists and people in the plus-size industry. Expressions has shorter listicle pieces and blog posts about fat acceptance

and intersectional body positive resources. Headlines holds aggregated news pieces about body representation and diversity in media. The Issues vertical has longer think-pieces and features about body diversity in the fashion industry and in the fat-acceptance movement.

Sixty-seven percent of women in the U.S. wear size 14 or larger, but only two percent of the women portrayed in media are a size fourteen or above. Using the methods described above, *In Bold* seeks to inspire conversations about the lack of body diversity in media, be a resource for information and analyses of fat-acceptance, and both embrace and represent women's bodies.

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my mother for supporting my education at Syracuse University and for being with me through everything. Nothing would be possible without you. I would also like to thank Professor Melissa Chessher for her advice, guidance, creativity, and expert editing while advising me through this project. A very special thank you to Professor Harriet Brown for endless inspiration, guidance, and patience as my reader. Thank you to Professor Dana Olwan and Professor Aileen Gallagher. Finally, I would like to thank Emme for the incredible opportunity to work on #BodyBeaUtiful documentary, an experience that inspired my body-image passions and this project.

Advice to Future Honors Students

Take your inspiration, whether that's from an experience, internship, or paradigm shift in a classroom and make something with it. Put your brain on the page and your heart into the work. Take breaks and continue to learn. This is a process.

Critical Statement

In Bold is a millennial-targeted digital publication that discusses and critiques body positivity, fat activism, and how mainstream media presents and talks about bodies. When you pick up a glossy women's magazine on a shelf or from your mailbox, you're immediately faced with a conventionally beautiful celebrity or model. She is perfectly lit, perfectly groomed, and perfectly edited to appear front-cover worthy, necessitating the erasure of any bump, wrinkle or bulge. Front-cover worthy means thin, though when fat/plus-size women—or even average-sized women—occasionally grace the cover, they are praised as *brave* or even *liberated*. This thinly veiled, passive aggressive praise only informs the reader that these body types that stray from the thin and white norm are only valuable and acceptable when they are making a statement.

That story is repeated as you flip through the pages. You'll find a fashion spread with thin, picturesque models in editorial garb, Shakira's trainer's workout routine for a flat stomach, an article about loving yourself, and a recipe for buttery pasta—for cheat day, of course. Critique of these conflicting and problematic messages isn't new, but despite the growing outrage, body representation still hasn't changed.

My response to this problem in mainstream media, which relies on my academic interests of women's and gender studies, marketing, and magazine journalism, was to build a website where resources are housed for inspiration and entertainment for women who don't see themselves represented, celebrated, and respected in society or media. While there are fat-activists who maintain blogs, I found that there is no one destination for information and inspiration. For someone who is just starting to learn about fat stigma and learning to love herself despite the messages around her, a one-stop shop of learning material, inspiration, and discussion

is necessary. A study by the Journal of Communication, *The Elastic Body Image: The Effect of Television Advertising and Programming on Body Image Distortions in Young Women*, observed how women's body image diminished even after 30 minutes of exposure to mainstream media representations of women's bodies. Often, the critique of media is focused on race and gender, not fat or body diversity. In my own classes like Race, Gender and the Media and Beauty Diversity in Fashion Media, we talked extensively about race and representation of women, but we never discussed body-size diversity or the portrayal of fat in magazines and digital publications. While I understand the importance of discussing race and gender in relation to beauty and representation, excluding fat or plus-size bodies from the conversations of conventional beauty is a disservice. This oversight in an academic space and in society contributes to the intense dissatisfaction and contempt women have for their bodies.

Developing *In Bold*

To supplement what I've learned and in an attempt to share information with others I created *In Bold*. In our society, body representation issues are not just limited to the pages of fashion magazines. They are discussed and covered on the news, in newspapers, and on reality TV. We are bombarded by very urgent messages that "obesity will kill you," that fat is a terrible thing and should be avoided at all costs—even if it takes stapling your stomach or literally cutting fat off your body.

In contrast to these overt media messages and subtle suggestions that condemn fat, *In Bold* takes a political stance, embraces fat, and works to normalize seeing women of all sizes, races, and identities in media. Instead of dictating that there is a singular conventional beauty

standard (thin, white, modelesque), *In Bold* delivers articles and stories that highlight diversity and reject the messages that say “fat is bad, thin is good.”

The desire to create a body-accepting experience began my sophomore year after working on the Fashion Without Limits fashion show and meeting Emme, the first plus-size supermodel. She hired me as an intern for the summer and my perspectives on fat and body image changed irreversibly. While interning with her, I had to reach out to plus-size icons, body-image and fat activists, and bloggers while working on growing her following by 10,000 in one summer. In addition to working on her online presence as the first plus-sized model and an activist, I was the production intern for the filming of #BodyBeaUtiful—a documentary about fat and body image. While filming, I worked with the National Eating Disorders Association, Timberline Knolls, and Sierra Tucson to interview people about their body image and then distribute crisis and post-interview materials. I talked to hundreds of people and listened to their stories and their views on body image. In addition to my other internship opportunities and classes, I’ve been inspired and challenged to create space on a college campus and beyond for women to see themselves as respected, intersectional people worthy of representation.

Journey to Fat & Body Image Activism, *In Bold*

Working with Emme on growing her following and executing the #BodyBeaUtiful documentary completely changed how I viewed body image. While lugging camera equipment and release forms up and down 58th Street—in a shirt spray painted with #BodyBeaUtiful in Columbus Circle just the night before—I realized how much body image, fat-phobia, weight, and stigma touch everyone. I knew what it felt like first hand to have my body critiqued—by myself and others—but what I’d never fully accepted was how much anxiety everyone possesses about

their body. In two days, our team interviewed thin women, muscular men, fat men and women, a trans woman (who reversed her transition twice because of the body stigma she faced), models, a mother and daughter, a father and his 3-year-old daughter. Despite the differences in ages, races, genders, sexualities, and identities, each and every person felt some sort of negativity about their body. While it wasn't always their weight that prompted their dissatisfaction, it was always *something*. That realization has stayed with me and has helped guide the way I think about body image and fat positivity. Knowing how body image and fear of being fat rules how people live their lives, I wanted to help in some way—that mission turned into *In Bold*.

Over a year later, I started interning at *Bustle*. Now a senior, I'd be in New York City for five months while taking classes in fulfillment of the Newhouse in NYC program. I'd been an avid reader of *Bustle* and was familiar with the 'inherently feminist' and inclusive content they produced. Throughout my internship, I learned a lot about digital media platforms. I wrote every day, I worked on Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook content, and I met interesting and inspiring women. I learned how to write and think fast to produce stories such as "What You Need To Consider To Know Your Worth And Get The Salary You Deserve" and "9 Dating Tips For Introverts, According To Experts." While I was getting faster at researching and reporting, I also learned how to incorporate Search Engine Optimization (SEO) into my work. For example, my post-election night story about how to talk to people who supported Trump showed up on the first page of Google when searching "how to talk to trump supporters." This experience allowed me to incorporate similar SEO practices to make my site more visible to search engines like Google.

While interning at *Bustle*, I was also given the opportunity to help with a new project: taking original stock photos unique to *Bustle* and its audience. So, instead of writing in the office one day, I helped with hair and makeup, clothing, and planning what kinds of photos we would need. I carried photo props across the Lower East Side and worked with the beauty and fashion team, lifestyle team, and the illustrators on dozens and dozens of shots. I've carried this experience over to *In Bold*, working with a photographer on capturing body diversity for the site.

But more than the skills I learned writing and assisting in making digital content, I learned from the amazing people who work at *Bustle*. The writers, section editors, video team, social media editors, and design team were some of the most creative and socially-aware people I have ever met—they inspired me to think about stories always and not to shy away from being personal. In the past, I've often abstained from putting myself in my work, but at *Bustle* (and *In Bold*), the personal and conversational component of a story attracts readers. People like to read other people's voices and opinions and be able to identify with (or vehemently disagree with) a writer. So, while it makes you vulnerable to criticism, it connects you with people. In creating *In Bold*, I wanted the content to be serviceable to readers, but I also wanted it to connect people to writers and to fat activism.

I also found comfort in my body and an appreciation for fat-positivity during my *Bustle* internship. In a crowded city, space is a luxury, and I observed that when you take up more space than what people think is acceptable, it creates a problem. I'm not talking about "man-spreading" on the subway. I'm referring to how people treat fat people in a world where nothing is designed for people larger than a size 12: subway seats, tiny restaurant bathrooms, airplanes, and office chairs. I wanted to share that realization and learn more about how our world is constructed for one type of person: a thin, able-bodied individual.

Influence of Campus Publications

I brought these lessons and self-awareness back to campus in the spring and returned to contributing to campus publications and into my own venture with *In Bold*. At *Equal Time*, a campus magazine, I served as beauty editor for two non-consecutive semesters. During my first semester I focused on layout, heds/deks for stories, and story assignments, which have greatly influenced how I selected and titled the stories on my site. My second semester as an editor, I focused on flipping the beauty section on its head by rejecting beauty standards and reflecting on the idea of beauty routines as self-care and as a political act. While some people might laugh at this idea, thinking, “lipstick is just *not* political,” beauty is a form of self-expression, of self-care. It documents societal norms and culture shifts; building bodily autonomy and choosing how you want to present yourself day-to-day not only gives people a sense of identity, it sends a message. When women dressed in red and wore red lipstick on International Women’s Day, they made their political message loud and clear—just with a swipe of lipstick. When women stop shaving in protest of the societal norms that demand that women have smooth skin, it’s a political statement. So when *Equal Time* decided it would focus this issue on surviving post-election, I assigned stories about body hair as a rejection of beauty standards and how ingredients in beauty and skin products are slowly poisoning our oceans and our bodies with widely used chemicals. From this experience as an editor, I was able to apply the editing skills I’ve learned and curate content that challenged and inspired instead of being white noise in an endless regurgitation of cultural norms for *In Bold*.

As the Digital Director for two SU student publications—Zipped and Baked—I’ve managed writers, copy editors, photographers, and social media editors while maintaining

consistent content on the publications' websites. This was my first introduction to WordPress publishing; working on site customization, I gained digital publishing skills and learned how to increase readership. I transferred these skills to my own site with *In Bold*, where I not only publish stories and curate content, but also design the layout of the site and how users interact with it.

In addition to campus publications, I've sought out other experiences to expand my skill set and work on projects that align with my passions. In four years at Syracuse University, I've attended more Women's Leadership Initiative (WLI) events than not—and when the organization was looking for an intern my junior year, I jumped at the chance to get involved. WLI works to connect SU women with professionals and resources to lead. I assumed a role as a marketing intern, and in addition to planning events and hosting a salary negotiation seminar, I was tasked with growing our audience. Using design skills I picked up from graphic design and some trial-and-error social-media strategy, I helped increase the diversity in our panelist groups, improve the marketing and branding of the organization, and grow an audience who attended WLI events. While *In Bold* doesn't yet hold luncheons or workshops for fat activism and self-love, my marketing and design skills from this internship shaped how I positioned and designed *In Bold's* logo and site.

Influence of Coursework and Mentors

Along with the many publications and organizations I worked on intensely, I learned so much from my coursework, too. Without courses, I would not have gotten the internships and opportunities that shaped my goals and *In Bold* project—much less succeed at them. The most influential classes I've taken at Syracuse University such as magazine writing and editing, fat

and feminism, and my women's and gender studies minor courses have shaped how I think, theorize, and execute—especially for *In Bold*.

Magazine Writing taught me how to craft and change a sentence over and over until it was concise and informative. In addition to my years writing for other classes and for campus publications, I've learned how to write for print and for digital—and the very distinct differences between the two. In Magazine Editing, I learned how to take that writing and make it sharper and make it serve the publication's voice and message. *In Bold* includes content I've written and other writers' work. Knowing when to be the writer and when to be the editor is not an easy thing, but my magazine courses have prepared me for both and I've applied them to *In Bold*.

My last semester on campus, I enrolled in Web Design and Management to learn HTML, CSS, and JS. I applied the weekly lessons to select and customize the theme and design on WordPress to make my content work effectively. Not only are these technical skills helpful in building the site, but talking in class about different websites and how the user interacts helped me make decisions about responsive design, mobile compatibility, grids, and layout for *In Bold*.

And the class that has had the most impact on *In Bold* was an elective I did not need to take to graduate: Fat and Feminism. This class taught me how to reject the medicalized ideas of fat and BMI (because they aren't based off any scientific evidence) and introduced me several voices such as Marilyn Wann and Ragen Chastain who inspire my content and help define the voice I want for *In Bold*. But, I think the most significant impact Professor Harriet Brown's Fat and Feminism class had on my final project was keeping me motivated, excited, and yes, angry about fat, society's arbitrary notions of health and weight, and fat stigma. When I was tired of writing about fat or felt like I was shouting into a void, this class and its readings and discussions made me keep going.

My advisor Melissa Chessher helped me step back and see how much progress I made from meeting to meeting and helped me simplify and execute some larger ideas like original photography and long-form storytelling. My reader Harriet Brown—whose class on Fat and Feminism helped by giving me an endless supply of readings and ideas that fueled my excitement and passion for this venture—even when I was burnt out, tired, and ready to stop working—also played a critical role.

Finally, I credit my mentor Emme, who didn't let anyone put her into a box, with serving as my role model and primary inspiration for this website. After graduating Syracuse University, she wanted to work in broadcast journalism, but was told over and over that her broad shoulders were just “too masculine” and big for TV. She moved to New York City and out of necessity for income, she became a model—the first plus-size model. Today, she advocates for body image and for designers to extend the sizes of their clothing to include an undeniable and important piece of the market—women over size 16. Her unwavering passion and energy to just go for things and patience for people to catch up to her have inspired me to keep writing—to keep working on what you love, even when people don't listen. Her insatiable drive has also inspired me to keep writing and working on *In Bold* in the future.

Writing Process

As a fat-positive woman about to graduate who aspires to work in journalism, I think it is crucial to be aware and critical of the current body representation climate and to understand where and how there is room for growth. *In Bold* allowed me the time and resources to learn and strategize how to change body representation, and my time at Syracuse University gave me the

inspiration and resources to make it possible. I'm endlessly inspired by the people around me, and the people who have helped me along the way: my professors, mentors, advisors, and colleagues. My course work, internships, mentors and advisors helped me see the urgent need to respond to the lack of body diversity and create a space where it's acceptable and wonderful to stray from beauty standards.

I've spent hours and hours in front of my computer looking out the fourth-story window in Newhouse 3 or across Cafe Kubal working on *In Bold*, coffee in hand, writing stories, emailing other writers, coding and formatting the site, publishing. The time escapes me, and I have a hard time pulling away from it, even when I'm sitting in classes. However unrelated the topic of class may be, I'm thinking about norms and how I can apply to my project. I have to think and think before I put pen to paper—or rather fingertips to keyboard—and let things happen. I create mood boards and bookmark articles that inspire me, make me think, or make me angry. This solo process is intense, and more often than not, I get so wrapped up in it that I don't notice much of what's going on around me. This creative process (while not linear or time-efficient) made it so I could bounce from thing to thing and not get stuck. I could take a step back from writing to work on web design. It was important for me to work at my speed and not squash ideas before I fully recognized them in my head.

During this whole process, I was challenged by fat. More specifically, I was challenged in how to translate ideas about fat while also being helpful and serviceable to readers. There were times when I doubted my work and nearly wrote a paper about media instead of delving in and giving everything I possess to create something tangible and new, rather than just a derivative critique of the same race and gender issues I've learned about, read about, wrote about before.

Looking back, I honor those moments of challenge. Without them I would not have the “final” product that I do now. I say “final” because I hope that *In Bold* continues to grow and evolve as things change industry-wide. Looking forward I recognize *In Bold* may not be the fat-activism destination, but I hope that my musings and ideas help at least one person begin to question and also embrace and love themselves and feel happy seeing themselves reflected in a publication. If this site were to take off, it would offer people an opportunity to engage with the site on a regular basis via social media. Through sharing articles and images, *In Bold* could play a bigger role in changing how women’s bodies are viewed, at least in certain spaces, by representing body diversity in a positive, non-exploitative way.

As this project grows or earns recognition, I’m prepared for negativity. The perception of fat-positivity is usually received negatively and violently. This publication directly threatens ruling paradigms, including the notions that women’s interest publications aren’t political and that fat is bad. Fortunately, many fat-activists have blogs, and there is a growing fat-positive community online. Thankfully, a support network and resources for dealing with negative backlash already exists.

In Bold is a piece of me in that I took everything I’ve learned about body image, body diversity, fat, fat activism, intersectionality, feminism, and myself in the past four years (and the past 22 years) and carefully stitched together a website for millennial women to learn and laugh and find comfort. *In Bold* is one step towards seeing body diversity in media and changing how we view and respect women’s bodies, in all their glorious forms.

Works Cited

Myers, P. N. and Biocca, F. A. (1992), The Elastic Body Image: The Effect of Television Advertising and Programming on Body Image Distortions in Young Women. *Journal of Communication*, 42: 108–133. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1992.tb00802.x

Appendices

In Bold Style Guide

AP Style is followed for *In Bold*, except regarding the following style guidelines:

Fat: preferred over words like obese, overweight, heavy, large, etc.

LGBT in reference to community, not individuals

Identify people with the identities they use themselves: bi, genderqueer, queer, trans, cisgender (cis for short), Latinx, Black (or African American if individual prefers), etc.