



Gendered news?

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Introduction

Journalism plays a central role in shaping our perceptions of gender relations, sometimes conferring – and sometimes denying – public recognition to people purely on the basis of sexual difference.

This observation hardly constitutes breaking news, of course. Just as female reporters have long drawn attention to the ways in which gender dynamics shape life in the newsroom, feminist academics have been recasting the patriarchal underpinnings of much news and journalism research. And yet, despite their concerted efforts over the years, these sorts of contributions still tend to be regarded as being marginal to ‘mainstream’ scholarship, if they are acknowledged at all.

Accordingly, this special issue of *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism* represents an intervention. Taken together, the articles to follow explore a range of pertinent issues considered to be central to feminist and gender-sensitive analyses of news production, texts and audiences. Each of the articles seeks to disrupt the typical sorts of assumptions informing conventional approaches to conceptualizing the relationship between gender and journalism so as to help spark, in turn, an array of fresh insights into familiar challenges.

This issue begins with Monika Djerf-Pierre’s essay, ‘Lonely at the Top: Gendered Media Elites in Sweden’. The Nordic countries’ emphasis on gender equality, she notes, is reflected in their news media. In Sweden, for example, almost 50 percent of journalists are female, yet most are found in entry or middle levels of journalism production and management. Very few have reached senior levels in their organizations. To analyse this situation, Djerf-Pierre surveyed 3000 top-level managers in Sweden, asking them about career patterns, recruitment, social background, education, mentors, networks, as well as their opinions on gender equality and gender policy. Theoretically, the

article draws upon Bourdieu's theories on habitus, capital and field, claiming that social institutions and organizations in all social fields of society are gendered in a range of ways. To substantiate this claim, Djerf-Pierre analyses differences and similarities between men and women in the Swedish media elite, examining such things as social background and the amount and type of capital they have accumulated when reaching the top. She employs this gender comparison in order to discuss the mechanisms that exclude or include certain groups from positions of power, and to generate an understanding of how gender shapes power relations in the news media. The acquisition of social capital is needed to reach senior management positions in journalism, she concludes, to counterbalance the 'negative capital of femaleness'. Extensive informal networks, mentors, support from family, friends, colleagues and superiors are crucial if a woman is to be able to reach the top.

Turning from a consideration of news elites to individual journalists engaged in everyday newswork, Einat Lachover's article, 'The Gendered and Sexualized Relationship between Israeli Women Journalists and Their Male News Sources', investigates the gendered and sexualized interactions between female Israeli journalists and their male news sources. Drawing insights from feminist research in the fields of journalism as well as in organizational and work studies, she examines the career narratives of 32 female journalists working for 10 Israeli newspapers in order to illustrate the extent to which gender influences journalist-source relations. In her interviews with these women, she explores how they respond to the sexist attitudes of some male sources and the gendered journalistic practices that such sexism forces female reporters to adopt. Most of the women indicated that they try to challenge sexism by acknowledging its presence and then taking control of the situation. In this context, 'taking control' usually means using feminine (sexual) tactics in their interactions with male sources in order to get the information they need to write their story. While using sexuality in this way may help to advance individual careers, Lachover argues, it does nothing to challenge the gendered status quo. As she concludes the essay, 'such skirmishes have minimal impact on changing wider social perceptions of how gendered power is or "ought to be" distributed in society'.

Linda Steiner's 'The Feminist Cable Collective as Public Sphere Activity' considers the efforts of a group that operates under the aegis of the National Organization for Women (NOW) to produce a feminist public affairs series on cable television public access channels in the US state of New Jersey. The main question that Steiner asks is whether this series, 'New Directions for Women' (NDW), represents a particular form of gendered agency that encourages women to participate more actively in democratic politics. Steiner asserts that public access cable television does provide viable opportunities for feminist

'content', for activist-minded news, discussion and criticism of the economic sphere, the state, and family. Yet, she insists, a sense of 'publicness' sometimes conflicts with feminist principles, at least in the sense that they have been practised in feminist journalism. The reason for this, claims Steiner, is that the technology used to produce and distribute the programme constrains enactment of feminist modes of news production. Steiner concludes her essay by arguing that the series NDW 'provides news through which women can exchange and develop ideas, learn about their own lives, including how they can take action even with respect to conditions that are not of their own making'. As such, she suggests, it also 'provides a space in which to oppose the definitions of both the private and the public that are otherwise privileged by mainstream news. As such, it is worth the effort.'

Moving from examinations of how gender shapes news production, attention turns to analyses of the construction of gender difference in news texts. The first article, Elisabeth Klaus and Susanne Kassel's 'The Veil as a Means of Legitimization: An Analysis of the Interconnectedness of Gender, Media and War', raises the important question of how news narratives centring on the liberation of Afghan women from the Taliban regime might have been linked to the legitimization of military intervention. To address this question, the article's theoretical framework draws upon the notion of media logic delineated by Altheide and Snow (1979), which the authors extend and link to the notion of gender logic (the symbolic construction of male–female dichotomy) and the logic of war (the legitimization of war through the construction of self and other). The interconnectedness of these three logics in German news magazine coverage of Afghanistan, argue Klaus and Kassel, led to a specific presentation of Afghan women that served as proof of their improved gender circumstances after the defeat of the Taliban. To support this claim, the authors undertook a discourse analysis of Germany's leading news magazines, *Der Spiegel* and *Focus*, to confirm that the veiling and unveiling of women was the most prominent feature in their reports about Afghanistan. The veiled woman became a highly symbolic representation that marked the 'other' culture as both 'foreign' and 'irrational'. As such, Klaus and Kassel conclude, the war could be justified as a necessary action needed to bring democratic political and gendered structures to that country.

News texts are also under scrutiny in Mervi Pantti's 'Mourning Olof Palme and Anna Lindh in Finnish Newspapers', where she examines historical shifts in the gendered representation of public grief. More specifically, Pantti argues that the news media make significant contributions to changing perceptions around masculine identity and the parameters of 'acceptable' masculine behaviour. To contextualize this line of reasoning, Pantti begins her article by noting that widely held views that the public sphere is becoming increasingly

'emotionalized' have led to a great deal of hostile public commentary from certain media critics and academics. To feed what news organizations view as the public's growing hunger for emotional news, there has been a considerable expansion in the amount of news space devoted, for example, to representations of mourning in the coverage of major disasters or extraordinary deaths. In order to substantiate this claim, Pantti examined news coverage of the display of public grief in Finnish newspapers following the murders of two politicians – Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986 and Swedish Foreign Minister Anna Lindh in 2003. The similarities as well as differences between the ways in which the Finnish news media reported the Palme and Lindh cases provides journalism researchers with a unique opportunity to consider how representations of mourning might have changed over time. Are we witnessing the beginning of the end of the persistent sex stereotype of the 'emotional woman', she asks, and accordingly, the 'unemotional man'?

The final article in this issue is Kevin Dolan's 'Blinded by "Objectivity": How News Conventions Caused Journalists to Miss the Real Story in the "Our Lady" Controversy in Santa Fe'. Broadly speaking, his work examines relations between journalists and particular (usually male) members of the news audience so as to discern how their interaction might contribute to the construction and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. More specially, he considers how a photomontage by Los Angeles artist Alma López called *Our Lady* created a firestorm in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 2001. Conventional journalistic practices in the USA tend to dictate that journalists need to wait for officials or 'major players' to raise issues before doing stories on them, Dolan remarks, so that the ideals of 'objectivity' can be upheld. As such, newspaper coverage of *Our Lady* left many underlying issues surrounding the controversy it generated largely unexamined. This reliance on 'reliable' and 'legitimate' news sources, he argues, led to the privileging of an almost exclusively male group of protesters – their attacks were consistently and repeatedly given the most news space. Moreover, Dolan concludes, how the different sides of the *Our Lady* story were condensed in ongoing news accounts forced López and her mostly female supporters to take the defensive without their best defence: the Sandra Cisneros essay that inspired the work and its feminist critique of the macho nature of Chicano culture and its effect on Latinas' self-image.

All in all, then, it is my hope that this special issue will help to provide the basis for a lively set of debates about the (en)gendering of news and journalism in the years to come. My sincere thanks to the journal's editors for providing this opportunity to highlight some of the exciting contributions being made by feminist and gender-sensitive researchers to current scholarship in the field.

Biographical note

Cynthia Carter lectures in the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Cardiff University. She is co-author of *Violence and the Media* (Open University Press, 2003), and co-editor of *News, Gender and Power* (Routledge, 1998), *Environmental Risks and the Media* (Routledge, 2000), and *Critical Readings: Media and Gender* (Open University Press, 2004). She is a founding co-editor of the journal *Feminist Media Studies*.

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