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# When Do Women Get a Voice? Explaining the Presence of Female News Sources in Belgian News Broadcasts (2003–5)

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## Abstract

For more than a decade now, it has been demonstrated that female news sources receive little attention in television news. Usually women account for no more than 20–25 percent of total time devoted to people speaking in the news. This article assesses when exactly female news sources are depicted in the news, using a dataset of 25,896 news items and 1600 hours of television, covering public broadcasting and commercial television in Belgium (Flanders) for the years 2003–5. The analysis shows that female news sources are strongly stereotyped and limited to traditional ‘female’ topics. The impact of the gender of the reporter was limited. Contrary to expectations, the broadcasting corporation with a long-standing gender diversity policy actually scored worse than its counterpart without such a policy. The article concludes with a discussion of the apparently difficult relation between traditional news standards and the depiction of gender diversity.

## Keywords

Belgium, broadcast news, gender diversity, gender representation, public broadcasting, reporters

## Introduction

The mass media, and television broadcast in particular, are often accused of contributing to the reproduction of cultural stereotypes within society. The media tend to depict women

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and members of minority groups in a limited and stereotyped manner. This is especially the case for news broadcasts, which enjoy a high status as they allegedly portray a reliable picture of what happens in the real world. As such, news broadcasts should allow for a fair and unbiased representation of all groups within the population. Reality, however, often falls short of these high expectations. Research indicates that the selection of news sources, i.e. actors appearing in a news broadcast and delivering a statement, remains heavily biased. In 1995, the Global Media Monitoring Project conducted a study simultaneously in 71 countries, demonstrating that women account for no more than 21 percent of all news sources in television news broadcasts. Five and 10 years later, the study was repeated with almost identical results: the percentage of female news sources remained at 22 percent (Gallagher, 2006: 22; Spears and Seydegart, 2000). Although this global project certainly could be criticized on methodological grounds,<sup>1</sup> the stability of the results remains remarkable. Since 1995, women all over the world have gradually acquired more leading positions in the political, cultural and scientific domains. Yet despite these trends, television news still seems to depict the same gender representation as it did several decades ago. This systematic and apparently very persistent underrepresentation of women in television news poses serious problems for the way news media report on reality. In Tuchman's (1978) words, this could even be considered as a 'symbolic annihilation' of the female perspective, and of women in society in general. Current figures suggest that female presence remains as low as ever, despite the fact that gradually women have made progress towards gender equality in society as a whole.

To add injury to insult, the problem is not just quantitative. If women get a voice in the news, this often still happens in a stereotypical manner, despite various efforts to increase the number of female experts being interviewed (Carroll and Schreiber, 1997; van Zoonen, 1998). Other studies show that women in news broadcasts are often associated with traditionally 'feminine' topics, like childcare, health, family matters, while they are largely absent in topics like law, finance, economy or foreign affairs (Craft and Wanta, 2004). And finally, studies on newspapers and television news also show that when women are interviewed, the average amount of the time or space they are allotted is significantly smaller than for male interviewees (Lefever, 2004; Len-Rios et al., 2005; Mills, 1990; van Zoonen, 1994).

In this article we want to go beyond the conventional approach of just *measuring* the percentage of female news sources. Based on a multivariate regression model, we want to determine when women are selected as news sources. We define a news source as any actor appearing in a news item and delivering a text of at least one sentence. We use this definition because we can assume that visibility in broadcast news has a stronger impact on stereotyping than a mere mentioning of actors. Our case study uses all news broadcasts over a three-year period (2003, 2004 and 2005), broadcast by the two major television stations in Flanders (Belgium).

We use a multivariate approach because we can assume that gender stereotyping can be caused by a number of elements. Shoemaker and Reese (1996) list five environmental influences on news content: the individual level of the journalist's background, institutional pressure at the organizational level, newsgathering routines (media routines level), the relationship with news sources in the extra-media level and finally the influence of ideological values. Possible barriers to the access of female news sources to the news can

be situated in each of these fields. In this study, we mainly check for influences at the individual level of the journalist (male vs female), institutional pressure (gender policy or not) and the media routines level (bias in the editing process, presence of traditionally 'female' topics in the news). It is important to identify in a more precise manner, how and where, exactly, these various forms of bias operate. Determining the exact bias is a crucial first step for any policy designed to counter the underrepresentation of women.

## Literature and hypotheses

Since the 1960s, media content has been an important research topic in gender research. A first generation of researchers developed the concept of 'symbolic annihilation', implying that powerful groups suppress less powerful groups (in this case women) by marginalizing them. This can happen by way of eradicating women's presence, denying them humanity, trivializing or mocking them, or by reducing them to a single 'feminine' characteristic (Tuchman, 1978). In this line of research, Gerbner (1978) concluded that the mass media were 'cultivating resistance' to the process towards gender equality: despite the fact that throughout society gender roles had changed dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s, the media still employed stereotyped gender images which were gradually becoming outdated (Carter and Steiner, 2004; Fraser, 1995; van Zoonen, 1994: 17; 2000). The fact that this major social change did not result in an equally important change in media representation suggests that there are more complex processes responsible for this immutability than the mere reproduction of the values of dominant (i.e. male) groups in society (Carter and Steiner, 2004: 15).

In the literature, we find three main reasons why female news sources are selected to be heard in the news: this might have to do with the topic ('female topics'), with the gender of the reporter, but also with an editorial policy towards 'soft' items (Price and Wulff, 2005; Smith and Wright, 1998; van Zoonen, 1994). Our first three hypotheses are developed from these suggested reasons. Subsequently, we also investigate whether real-life conditions and network policy make a difference.

First, topics can make a difference. Some issues are traditionally associated with women, or are even labelled 'female' issues or 'feminine' topics. These involve issues such as consumer news, health or family matters, education, culture or social policy (Craft and Wanta, 2004; Lobel et al., 1999; van Zoonen, 1994, 1998: 36). Female news sources are often assigned to one of these topics and this phenomenon is even present in political reporting: female politicians receive significantly more media coverage on their issue positions on topics like education than on their positions with regard to economic or foreign policy (Kahn, 1994; Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991). Given this well-established segregation, we can safely come to the hypothesis that women will be heard more often if the news contains more of these 'female' news items. Therefore, our first hypothesis is:

*H1:* Female news sources are associated with traditionally 'female' topics.

A second factor explaining the presence of female news sources in the news is the gender of the reporter who produces the news story. Over recent decades, the percentage of female reporters has increased substantially (Carter et al., 1998: 2–3; Sebba, 1995). There is some

debate, however, on what the impact of this process has been (Lachover, 2005). Some authors clearly believe that the increased presence of female reporters has changed the values and routines of news production (Armstrong et al., 2006; Delano, 2003: 275). Female reporters could have an impact both on the topics that are being covered and on the way they are portrayed. Price and Wulff (2005), among others, have argued that female reporters, because of their gender socialization, bring with them a different value pattern, resulting in a more diverse pattern of sources in the news and of topics receiving attention (Murphy, 1999; Price and Wulff, 2005; Rodgers and Thorson, 2003).

Other authors, however, are much less sanguine about the impact the higher percentage of female reporters might have had on newsroom values and routines. Weaver and Wilhoit (1992) do not find any evidence of female reporters having different professional values than their male colleagues or that they preferred different topics. While the *gender model* stresses that women bring with them a specific value pattern into the newsroom, the *job model* rather predicts that all new reporters will be socialized into the predominant value pattern that is present in the newsroom (Rodgers and Thorson, 2003; Ross, 2007).

According to Delano (2003), the hierarchy in the newsroom has been evolving significantly over the last two decades, moving towards a more equal gender division of power positions within journalism. In such cases we should indeed observe a more positive coverage and a heightened attention to traditionally 'female' topics (Craft and Wanta, 2004). However, empirical studies do not provide us with a final answer to the question of whether the presence of female reporters actually makes a difference (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996). While some studies see clear differences between female and male reporters with regard to the selection of news sources (Armstrong, 2004; Liebler and Smith, 1997; Zoch and VanSlycke Turk, 1998), other studies do not find any evidence for such a straightforward relation between gender and operating practices (Creedon, 1993; Gallagher, 2006; Mills, 1997).

Given this ongoing debate in the literature, we think it is useful to formulate our second hypothesis:

*H2: Female reporters will choose female news sources more often than male reporters do.*

It will be clear that our second and first hypothesis might interact. It has been shown that reporters get assigned stories or topics based on their gender (Craft and Wanta, 2004; Liebler and Smith, 1997; Singleton and Cook, 1982; Smith and Wright, 1998). The result of this process will be that senior male colleagues are responsible for the 'hard' news (politics, foreign affairs), while female reporters are restricted to the 'softer' topics. This interaction implies that simply presenting a bivariate analysis will not suffice. If female reporters report more often on 'female' topics, the result will almost automatically be that they indeed interview more female news sources. If we enter both the topic and the gender of the reporter simultaneously in our analysis, however, we can arrive at a more qualified view on whether female reporters have a preference for female interviewees, even controlling for the kind of topics that are being covered.

A third element is the editing process and resulting institutional pressure (Craft and Wanta, 2004). The output of reporters is subjected to the normal editing process. If we

assume that female news sources are more often being interviewed on 'female' and therefore 'soft' topics, this will almost automatically mean that the news item itself will be considered as less important. The gender of those who are responsible for the news management process, therefore, clearly could also have an impact (Smith and Wright, 1998). News reporters are embedded in a specific desk, where decisions are being taken at various levels, and where professional norms will be prevalent that are not necessarily those of the female reporters. The impact of this process would be that female news sources will be sidelined to some extent, and the news items on which they figure will be deemed as less important, and therefore they will be programmed later on in the news broadcast. To account for the possible impact of this editing process, we formulate our third hypothesis:

*H3:* When compared to their male counterparts, female news sources will appear more frequently in news stories that come later in the newscast.

While our first three hypotheses are derived from the general literature on gender and news, our final two hypotheses are tied more clearly to our specific dataset of Belgian news broadcasts. First, we assume that things change over time (Cunningham et al., 2004). Bringing in the time dimension allows us to ascertain more fully the impact of real-life indicators. A clear example here would be politics. In a very short period of time, the percentage of women being elected to the Belgian parliament has increased substantially. While in 1991, women accounted for only 20 percent of all members of parliament, this had increased to 35.3 percent in 2003 (IPU, 2006). In 2003 and in 2004, elections were being held in Belgium, first for the federal and subsequently for the regional parliaments. Both of these elections resulted in a considerable rise in the number of female members of parliament (after the regional elections, the proportion of female regional MPs went up from 20.3 to 32.3 percent). Therefore, twice during our observation period, the number of potential female interviewees (and we assume that members of parliament are a prime source of news) has risen substantially. If news coverage indeed follows real-life indicators, we should see an increase in the number of female news sources. This leads to our fourth hypothesis:

*H4:* The percentage of women should rise in correspondence to the growing presence of women in higher positions in society. This implies that the percentage of female news sources should rise over time.

A final reason why women are selected as news sources could be formal legislation, charters and agreements. The discrepancies in gender representation in news broadcasts have been challenged for decades now and various broadcasting organizations have responded to this critique by adopting an explicit policy towards gender equality. In Belgium, this is the case for the public broadcasting corporation (VRT), which has been under intense political and social pressure to adopt a socially responsible role. With regard to gender equality, this resulted in an action plan (for journalistic practice) as early as 1988 (Spee, 1997: 24). The public channel also adopted a diversity charter, pledging to devote more attention to the existing diversity in Belgian society (VRT, 2003). It is

interesting to observe that while diversity is an explicit policy goal for the public broadcasting corporation, VRT, its main commercial competitor, VTM, has never formulated any interest in this topic at all. In addition to that, only VRT has an active diversity unit, facilitating diversity both within its personnel and in (news) content. It seems a reasonable expectation, therefore, that we will find more gender equality in the public channel's news broadcasts than in the commercial channel's news broadcasts:

*H5: A broadcasting corporation with a gender equality policy will present more women than a broadcasting corporation without a clear policy on this matter.*

## Data and methods

To ascertain what exactly determines the likelihood that a female news source will receive airplay, we rely on the analysis of a comprehensive dataset, covering 41,000 news items, accounting for the entire news production of the Flemish public broadcasting corporation, VRT, and the main commercial station, VTM, between 1 January 2003 and 31 December 2005. These 41,000 items were collected by the Belgian Electronic News Archive ([www.nieuwsarchief.be](http://www.nieuwsarchief.be)) and they represent one of the largest digital news archives available for scientific research (Hooghe et al., 2005). For every news item, there was a thematic coding as well as a news source coding, involving the registration of the name, function, gender, language and speaking time of all people who got to say at least one sentence on camera. Coding of items and news sources was performed by a team of professional coders who were trained and controlled by the academic staff of the News Archive. Inter-coder reliability was tested frequently and the mean Cohen's kappa values for the variables used in this article vary from .79 to .96.

One of the main advantages of working with this dataset is obviously its large size, and the fact that it covers all news broadcasts over a three-year period. This implies that incidental variations in the representation of gender diversity are cancelled out by the large number of observations. This offers an important advantage compared to the results of the Global Media Monitoring Report, which is limited to the news output of one single day. The disadvantage of the News Archive dataset is that it is limited to Flanders, the Dutch-speaking autonomous region in Belgium (6,000,000 inhabitants). The Flemish television market is split almost evenly between the public broadcasting corporation, VRT, and the commercial station, VTM. Together, they serve almost 80 percent of the television audience in Flanders, especially with their flagship news broadcasts (35 percent market share for VTM throughout the research period, 41 percent for VRT). Other commercial stations are present in Belgium, but they tend to reach a niche audience and their market share is very limited (Hooghe, 2002).

Our main research question is to determine when female news sources receive airplay, i.e. get to speak at least one full sentence. In the Electronic News Archive, every single news source that utters at least one sentence is coded, whether or not this news source is identified or not (e.g. an anonymous bystander). It is only when the news source actually speaks, that the public can see and hear the news source, thus contributing to gender stereotypes more strongly than just a quick reference would do. Therefore, we included

in our analysis only those news items in which at least one news source received airplay in this manner. This means that from the original 41,000 news items, some 26,000 including at least one news source could be used for further analysis. For every quote in the news, we have information on length, gender of the news source, role of the news source in that specific news item (politician, expert, civil society representative, eye-witness, bystanders and so on), language and (if provided in the broadcast) name and professional status (Hooghe et al., 2007).

We have already mentioned that previous research has shown that female news sources on average receive shorter quotes than male news sources. To take this effect into account, we use two dependent variables in the analysis:

1. The likelihood that a female news source is being included in news items where news sources are present ('Is there at least one female news source?');
2. The percentage of the total news source speaking time that is allotted to female news sources ('How much of the total time for news sources is devoted to women?').

For the dichotomous dependent variable (1) we apply binary logistic regression; for the continuous variable (2) we use linear regression techniques.

To account for the effect of the topic as an independent variable, we developed a list of what might be considered gendered topics. This list was developed based on theoretical considerations (Lobel et al., 1999; van Zoonen, 1998) and further corroborated based on real-life data about the gender balance in various fields of society (Seager, 2008). Traditionally, 'male' topics include institutional politics, defence, international relations, finance, economy and justice (policy). Topics such as culture, family, education, celebrity, royalty and health care are considered as traditionally 'female' topics. In Belgium too, the gender division of the labour market implies that potential news sources on these topics will be either predominantly male or predominantly female.

All other items (disasters, weather, climate, agriculture, traffic accidents, crime, etc.) are considered gender neutral. Relying on this list, we could code whether a news item covers a 'male', 'female' or 'neutral' topic. It is important to note that the dataset provides up to three topic codes for each news item, so it is possible that one and the same news item covers a male and a female topic at the same time. In these cases, the item counts as both male and female topic.

The impact of the reporter's gender can be measured by including information on the reporter who produced the item. The Electronic News Archive contains the name of every journalist who was acknowledged as the reporter responsible for the news item. This leads to the independent variable 'News item produced by a female reporter'. While it is common practice in Belgium to list the name of the reporter at the start of the news item, this practice is not always adhered to for short items. This lack of information reduces our dataset from 25,896 to 15,812 news items. For this variable, we introduce a distinction between items produced by female reporters (36 percent of all items), by male reporters (61 percent) and by a mixed female/male team (3 percent of the items).

Hypothesis 3 states that news items in which female news sources appear are considered less important than those in which male news sources appear. Given the conventional



**Table 1.** Presence of female news sources in news items

	Presence of news sources	
	At least one female news source present	Only male news sources present
'Male' topic	29.8	70.2
'Gender-neutral' topic	35.6	64.4
'Female' topic	49.9	50.1
Items produced by female reporter	39.7	60.3
Items produced by male reporter	36.7	63.3
Items produced by male/female team	40.4	59.6
Rank order in the news		
1st–5th item	36.7	63.3
6th–10th item	34.4	65.6
11th–15th item	36.6	63.4
16th–20th item	40.5	59.5
21+ item	45.6	54.4
Average rank order in the news	11th	10th

Notes: Entries are percentage of news items ( $N = 25,896$ ) including (1) at least one female news source; (2) covering only male news sources.

Source: Belgian News Archive ENA, 2003–5.

structure of news broadcasts (starting with the headlines, and finishing with less important items), we operationalized this variable by including the rank order of the item in which the news source appears. This ordinal variable ranges from 1 (the first item in the news, and we can assume this is the most important one) to 25 (an item closing the news broadcast). For hypothesis 4 (progress over time), we can simply include the observation period (2003–5), and our fifth hypothesis leads to a dichotomy between networks with a diversity policy (i.e. VRT) and the one without (i.e. VTM).

## Bivariate presentation

The first question we need to address is whether there is indeed a strong relation between the topic of the news item and the representation of female news sources. The figures in Table 1 indeed show that topics tend to be gender segregated. While in 50 percent of all the news items covering 'female' topics, we find at least one on-screen female news source, this is only the case in 30 percent of the news items covering 'male' topics.

At first sight, the impact of female reporters is not overwhelming. In items produced by female reporters, female news sources are portrayed more often but the difference is very limited (40 vs 37 percent). The thesis that female news source are chosen in items that receive less priority in the news is confirmed but partially. We do observe that women are less often portrayed in the most important items of the news (items 1–10), and they tend to be more clearly present in the final topics of a news broadcast (items 15+). But when we compare the average rank order in the newscast, differences tend to

**Table 2.** Variations across time, 2003–5

	Public broadcasting			Commercial station			Combined		
	2003	2004	2005	2003	2004	2005	2003	2004	2005
N	(3970)	(3750)	(4490)	(4483)	(4312)	(4891)	(8453)	(8062)	(9381)
At least one female news source (% of all items)	31.4	33.3	37.4	36.3	38.9	45.6	34.0	36.2	41.7
Speaking time for female news sources (% of total news source time)	17.1	18.9	20.4	19.3	20.6	24.0	18.3	19.8	22.3
Items produced by female reporter (%)	37.0	41.2	35.7	41.7	34.8	33.4	59.4	59.4	62.8
Items produced by male reporter (%)	60.7	55.5	61.9	57.0	63.1	63.6	38.7	38.0	34.6
Items produced by male/female team (%)	2.3	3.3	2.3	1.3	2.1	3.0	1.9	2.7	2.6
'Male' topics (%)	43.2	42.1	33.4	34.8	32.0	21.1	38.8	36.7	31.9
'Female' topics (%)	23.2	24.3	31.0	26.8	28.8	32.7	25.1	26.7	27.0

Notes: Bivariate presentation of topics for public and commercial stations, and combined score, for 2003, 2004 and 2005. N = 25,896, except for figures on gender of reporter (N = 15,812).

be limited. While women appear on average in the 11th item of a news broadcast, for men this is the 10th item.

Hypothesis 4 suggests that the presence of women increases over time during our 36-month observation period. Indeed, one can observe that the percentage of items including at least one female news source tends to increase over this period, from 34 percent in 2003 to 42 percent in 2005. The time allotted to female news sources also slowly rises from 18 to 22 percent (Table 2). The trend towards increased gender equality in the selection of news sources clearly cannot be attributed to the increased presence of female reporters. The percentage of items produced by female reporters even tends to decrease over time, especially for the commercial station, VTM. We can observe, however, that both stations tend to devote more attention to 'female' topics during the 2003–5 period.

Hypothesis 5 suggests that the presence of a diversity policy programme will have an effect on the number of female news sources. The figures in Table 2 do not support this expectation. On the contrary, female news sources are less often depicted in the news broadcasts of the public television network than in those of VTM. We also see that male topics receive more attention in the news of the public station than in that of the commercial station. If affirmative action had any effect, it is on the gender composition of the news staff, as more news items are being produced by female reporters at the public station than at the commercial station.

## Multivariate analysis

In our multivariate effort to explain the presence of female news sources, we use two different methods. First, we rely on binary logistic regression to answer the question whether a female news source is present in the item (dichotomy: present/not present). Subsequently, linear regression techniques will be used to assess the determinants of the time allotted to female news sources.

With regard to the binary logistic regression (Table 3), we have to acknowledge that the explained variance (Nagelkerke's  $R^2$ ) remains rather low with a value of .04. This kind of low explained variance, however, is not exceptional given the large size of our dataset ( $N = 15,812$ ), and the huge variety of topics being covered. One needs to keep in mind that in an ideal situation, we would arrive at an explained variance of zero, since none of our independent variables should really make a difference. In the research period, though, the study shows that three independent variables remain clearly significant. We can observe that female news sources are being depicted much more often in items covering a 'female' topic. The odds that a female news source will be depicted in one of these items are about twice as high in comparison to other topics. The fact that the item has been produced by a female reporter has only a limited effect although the effect remains significant at the .01 level. The low value of the Wald statistic demonstrates that the influence of female reporters is relatively limited.

The hypothesis that female news sources are chosen for the least important news items is not confirmed at all, since the rank order of the item does not have any significant effect on the chances that a female news source will be depicted. The time hypothesis, on the other hand, does receive confirmation, as the presence of female news sources increases over time. The most surprising result of this analysis is the negative effect of

**Table 3.** Likelihood that an item includes a female news source

	Coefficient B	Wald	Likelihood
'Female' topic	.634***	296.97	1.885
Female reporter	.089**	6.72	1.093
Order in the news	.002	.38	1.002
Public broadcasting	-.279***	71.37	.756
Time period	.040***	8.10	1.041
Constant	-.784***		

Notes: Entries are the result of a binary logistic regression. Dependent variable: presence of at least one female news source in that item. Nagelkerke's  $R^2 = .04$ .  $N = 15,812$  news items.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ . Odds ratio  $> 1$  = female news source is more likely.

**Table 4.** Time for female news sources

	B	(SE)	B
(Constant)	16.096	1.208	
'Female' topic	9.430	.584	.13***
Female reporter	2.645	.533	.04***
Order in the news	.128	.040	.03**
Time period	-.272	.216	-.01
Public channel	-2.531	.513	-.04***

Notes: Entries are results of an ordinary least squares regression. Dependent variable: percentage of total time for news sources devoted to female news sources.  $R^2 = .03$ .  $N = 15,812$  news items.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

public broadcasting. The fact that a news item has been broadcast on public television has a strong and significant impact on the likelihood that a female news source will be included. It is important to repeat here that this is a controlled effect, since we also included the other variables in the analysis. Even controlling for the gender segregation of the topics, VRT news systematically depicts fewer women, despite its gender diversity policy. This result is completely counterintuitive. In evaluation research it is not uncommon that a gender diversity policy does not have any effect (Stout and Stevens, 2000). It is quite exceptional, however, that the relation is significant, but negative, implying that a gender diversity policy is associated with less gender diversity.

The results in Table 3 reveal whether a female news source is present or not in the item. A more fine-tuned analysis also takes into account how much time the female news sources receive (Table 4).

This linear regression largely confirms the previous analysis. The most powerful determinant of the length of time allotted to female news sources is the topic of the item. Women are overwhelmingly depicted in items associated with traditionally 'female' topics like health, family or education. The impact of a female reporter is a bit more powerful in this analysis and the gender of the reporter has a highly significant effect here. Order in the news broadcast becomes somewhat significant, but there is no confirmation of a period effect. The finding that the public broadcasting corporation devotes less attention to female news sources than the commercial station is confirmed.

If we combine both analyses, we can conclude that not all of our initial hypotheses are supported. Female news sources are predominantly present in news items associated with traditionally 'female' topics. This effect is by far the largest of the five relations we tested, showing that this form of segregation and inequality remains just as powerful as in some of the earlier research. Second, we do find some evidence that female reporters tend to interview more women, and that they will grant them more time to express themselves. This effect, however, is rather limited. The third hypothesis is confirmed but partially. Although the bivariate figures suggest that we do find more female news sources in the items that are situated at the end of the news broadcast, this effect is but weakly significant. The most likely explanation is that the topic of the item determines the rank order in the news broadcast. Military, political and international events tend to gain headline status most often, and women are less often depicted in these items. So, controlling for the topic, we do find that the effect of rank order in the news becomes but weakly significant.

Our time hypothesis was largely confirmed: in 2005 more female news sources were present than in 2003. Furthermore, the time allotted to female news sources increased from 18 percent in 2003 to 22 percent in 2005. Maintaining this trend means that gender equality will only be reached around the year 2020.

We encountered a real surprise with our fifth hypothesis. We assumed here that the fact that the public broadcasting corporation has a policy towards gender equality would make a difference. Contrary to our expectations, the public broadcasting corporation depicted significantly fewer female news sources.

## **Discussion**

For more than a decade now, several studies have shown that women tend to be largely absent in broadcast news worldwide. While gender diversity has been gaining ground very rapidly in Belgian society (especially visible in politics, both in legislation and in practice), the gender balance of the main news broadcasts is changing rather slowly. Obviously, the television news is not always in sync with real changes in society.

From our multivariate analysis, the main determinant of the presence of female news sources proved to be the gendered nature of the topic of the news item. If women are depicted as news sources, this is usually in the context of traditionally female topics like family, education and health care. This means that if one is interested in simply increasing the percentage of female news sources, a quick and easy solution would be to increase the attention devoted to 'soft' topics like these. However, in that case too the problem of gender segregation and stereotyping would remain just as strong. Speaking in a purely quantitative way, the presence of female news sources would increase but this would not change anything about the problem of stereotyping. This could serve as a warning that simply setting quantitative goals will not be sufficient. If one wants to reduce gender stereotyping in news content, it is important that the presence of female news sources rises just as much in traditionally 'male' topics.

Increasing the number of female reporters on the news desk, by itself, is clearly not sufficient as a solution either. While we did observe a significant relation between the

gender of the reporter and the time allotted to female news sources, this effect was limited: there does not seem to be all that much of a difference between female and male reporters. Female and male reporters alike share the same working methods and selection criteria, and our findings support the job model rather than the gender model.

Given the various calls for an explicit gender equality policy in newsrooms, our final finding might be the most problematic one. Our multivariate analysis shows that the public network, which has implemented a diversity policy for almost two decades, scores worse than the private channel, which has no such policy initiative.

It is not the first time this phenomenon has been highlighted (van Zoonen, 1995), but a satisfactory and conclusive explanation is still lacking. Could it be that reporters in general tend to be so independently minded that any outside initiative to prescribe whom they should interview can actually lead to exactly the opposite effect? In that case, any effort to develop a gender diversity policy for news desks should take extreme care not to be perceived as an outside intervention limiting editorial autonomy. But this is probably not the main factor. Gender diversity seems to be linked to several editorial choices, of which topic selection is just one (important) aspect, but this does not offer sufficient explanation for the skewed gender representation between public and private broadcasting. Other factors, not included in our study, could be at play. A specific study of actor selection could be interesting in this perspective. It could well be the case that the preference of commercial stations for non-institutional news sources – regardless of the topic – is a key element in unravelling this puzzling difference in gender representation. In Flanders, at least, the commercial station has a preference for bringing news ‘close to home’, featuring common people (where possible) almost as a mission statement and this might have a direct effect on the gender balance of the news sources. But even if this did prove to be the case, it is not reassuring. If one strives to depict gender diversity in society in a realistic manner, showing more women in non-institutional or non-representative roles is not the main target, as we assume that female news sources should be represented in various social roles and settings. How exactly this goal of gender equality can be reached within the framework of more traditional, and therefore more institutionally oriented news norms, remains a topic for further in-depth investigation.

## Note

1. The main methodological problem with the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is that it is based on a sample of a single day, which is simply too small. It is not uncommon that certain news events, both national and international, occupy a large part of the newscast of the day. News events are not necessarily gender neutral, and the gender division of the main actors featuring that event would have a large impact on the results of the Monitor for that country. Moreover, we find relatively large day-to-day differences in the gender portrayal in Belgian news broadcasts over hundreds of news days. From a methodological perspective, GMMP calculations should use an error of margin larger than any potential tendency over a five-year period.

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