

Gender Model or Job Model?

Putting the Presence of Female News Sources in Belgian Television News Broadcasts (2003-2007) in Perspective

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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 to 25 per cent of all the time devoted to people speaking in the news. In this article we assess when exactly female news sources are depicted in the news. We use a 76,637 item and 2,500 hours of television news dataset, covering public broadcasting and commercial television in Belgium (Flanders) for the years 2003 to 2007. 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 longstanding gender diversity policy actually scored worse than its counterpart without such a policy. In the conclusion, we discuss the apparently difficult relation between traditional news standards and depicting gender diversity.

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

Introduction

Mass media, and television broadcast in particular are often being accused of contributing to the reproduction of cultural stereotypes within society. The media tend to depict women 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 strongly biased. In 1995, the Global Media Monitoring Project conducted a study simultaneously in 71 countries, demonstrating that women account for no more than 21 per cent of all news sources in television news broadcasts. Five and ten years later, the study was repeated with almost identical results: the percentage of female news sources was respectively 22 and 21 per cent (Spears & Seydegart 2000; Gallagher 2006, 22). Although this global project certainly could be criticized on methodological grounds, the stability of the results remains remarkable. Between 1995 and 2005, all over the world women have gradually acquired more leading positions in the political, cultural, scientific domain. Despite these upward 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. Tuchman, Daniels and Benét (1978) stated that when women represent less than a third of all news sources in the media, this

could be considered as a “symbolic annihilation” of the female perspective, and of women in society in general. More than a quarter century after their study, female presence remains as low as ever, despite the fact that gradually women have made progress toward 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 stereotyped manner, despite various efforts to increase the number of female experts being interviewed (Van Zoonen 1998b; Carroll & Schreiber 1997). Other studies show that women in news broadcasts are often associated with traditionally ‘feminine’ topics, like child care, health, family matters, while they are largely absent in topics like law, finance, economy or foreign affairs (Craft & Wanta 2004). And finally, studies also show that when women are interviewed, the average length of the time they are allotted is significantly shorter than the time allotted to male interviewees (Van Zoonen 1994; Van Zoonen 1999, 94; Mills 1990; Len-Rios et al. 2005).

In this article we want to determine which factors determine the selection of women 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 five year period (2003 - 2007), broadcast by the two major television stations in Flanders (Belgium).

Literature and Hypotheses

Already from the 1960s on, 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 et al. 1978). In this line of research, Gerbner (1978) concluded that mass media were “cultivating resistance” to the process toward gender equality: despite the fact that throughout society gender roles changed dramatically during the 1960s and 1970s, the media still employed stereotyped gender images that gradually became outdated (Carter & Steiner 2004; Fraser 1995; Van Zoonen 1994: 17; Van Zoonen 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 the observed stability than the mere reproduction of the values of dominant (i.e. male) groups in society (Carter & 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 of “soft” items (van Zoonen 1994; Price & Wulff 2005; Smith & Wright 1998). Each of these three suggested reasons will therefore lead to the development of one of our hypotheses. Subsequently we will 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 they are even called ‘female’ issues or ‘feminine’ topics. This involves issues like consumer news, health or family matters, education, culture or social policy (Van Zoonen 1994; 1998b, 36; Craft & Wanta 2004). Female news sources are often assigned to one of these topics and this phenomenon is even present in reporting on politics: female politicians receive significantly more media coverage on their issue positions on topics like education than on their positions with regard to economy or foreign policy (Kahn & Goldenberg 1991; Kahn 1994). 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 “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. During the past decades, the percentage of female reporters has increased substantially (Sebba 1994, 9; Carter et al. 1998, 2-3). 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 (van Zoonen 1994; Delano 2003, 275; Armstrong et al. 2006). Female reporters could have an impact both on the topics that are being covered as on the way they are portrayed. Price and Wulff (2005) and other authors 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 (Rogers & Thorson 2003; Murphy 1999; Price & Wulff 2005).

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 that female reporters would have different professional values than their male colleagues or that they would prefer different topics. While the *gender model* stresses that women bring with them a specific value pattern into the news room, the *job model* rather predicts that all new reporters will be socialized into the predominant value pattern that is present in the news room (Rodgers & Thorson 2003; Ross 2007).

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

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 (Singleton & Cook 1982; Smith & Wright 1998; Liebler & Smith 1997; Craft & Wanta 2004). 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 we cannot simply suffice with presenting a bivariate analysis. 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 & 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 & 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 are 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). We did not encounter this hypothesis in the literature for the simple reason that, as far as we know, this is the first time news broadcasts are being analyzed over a relatively long period of time (three full consecutive years). 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 per cent of all members of parliament, this was up to 36.7 per cent in 2007 (IPU 2006, Bailly & Nuyttens 2008). Both in 2003, 2004 and 2007 elections were held in Belgium,

first for the Federal and subsequently for the Regional and again for the Federal parliament. Each of these elections resulted in a considerable rise in the number of female members of parliament. Therefore, three times 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 toward 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 has resulted in an action plan as early as 1996 (Bossaerts 1996). 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 contender VTM has never formulated any interest

in this topic at all. 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 76,637 news items, accounting for the entire news production of the Flemish public broadcasting corporation VRT and the main commercial station VTM between January, 1 2003 and December, 31 2007. These 76,637 items were collected by the Electronic News Archive (ENA) (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 encoding as well as a news source encoding, 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 encoders that were trained and controlled by the academic staff of ENA. Inter-encoder reliability was tested frequently and the mean Cohen's Kappa values for the variables used in this article vary from 0.79 till 0.96.

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 five 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 per cent of the television audience in Flanders, especially with their flagship news broadcasts (35 per cent market share for VTM throughout the research period, 41 per cent for VRT). Other commercial stations are present in Belgium, but usually they reach only a niche audience and their market share is very limited (Hooghe 2002).

Our main research question is to determine when female news sources receive air play, i.e. get to say at least a full sentence. In the ENA coding, every single news source that utters at least one sentence is being 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 air play in this manner. This means that from the original 76,637 news items, 43,879 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, characteristics of the news source (expert, politician, eye-witness, victim...), language, and (if provided in the broadcast) name and professional status.

To account for the effect of the topic as an independent variable, we relied on the definition and the list developed by Van Zoonen (1998b), showing a clear gender segregation with regard to news topics. Male topics include institutional politics, defense, international relations, finance, economy and justice (policy). Van Zoonen considers culture, family, education, celebrity, royalty and health care as 'female' topics. All other items (disasters, weather, climate, agriculture, traffic accidents, crime etc.) are considered as gender neutral. Relying on this list, we could code whether a news item covers a 'male', 'female' or 'neutral' topic. The impact of the reporters' gender can be measured by including information on the reporter who made the item. The ENA 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 made by a female reporter'. Hypothesis three states that news items in which female news sources appear are considered as less important than those in which male news sources appear. Given the conventional structure of news broadcasts (starting with the headlines to finish with less important items), we operationalized this variable by including the rank order of the item in which the news source appears. For hypothesis four (progress over time), we can simply include the year (2003-2004-2005-2006-2007), and our fifth hypothesis leads to a dichotomy between networks with a diversity policy (i.e., VRT) and the one without (i.e., VTM).

Analysis

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 (column 2 & 3) indeed show that topics tend to be gender segregated. While in more than 50 per cent of all the news items covering ‘female’ topics, we find at least one on-screen female news source, this is only the case in a little over 30 per cent of the news items covering ‘male’ topics.

Table 1. Presence of at least one Female News sources in News Items

	<i>Presence of news sources</i>		<i>% of all sources</i>
	<i>At least one female news source present in the news item</i>	<i>Only male news sources present in the news item</i>	<i>% female news sources of all news sources</i>
‘Male’ topic	32.9	67.1	16.2
‘Gender neutral’ topic	36.7	63.3	20.0
‘Female’ topic	52.1	47.9	29.0
Items made by female reporter	43.3	56.7	23.7
Items made by male reporter	40.3	59.7	20.5
Items made by male/female team	42.7	57.3	20.9
2003	34.1	65.9	18.2
2004	36.5	63.5	20.0
2005	41.7	58.3	22.4
2006	42.1	57.9	22.7
2007	43.7	56.3	23.1
Public Channel (gender policy)	36.1	63.9	19.9
Commercial Channel (no gender policy)	42.8	57.2	22.5
Rank order in the news			
1 th -5 th item	38.7	61.3	19.3
6 th -10 th item	37.3	62.7	20.4
11 th -15 th item	39.4	41.6	21.9
16 th -20 th item	42.3	57.7	23.4
21+ item	46.0	54.0	25.9

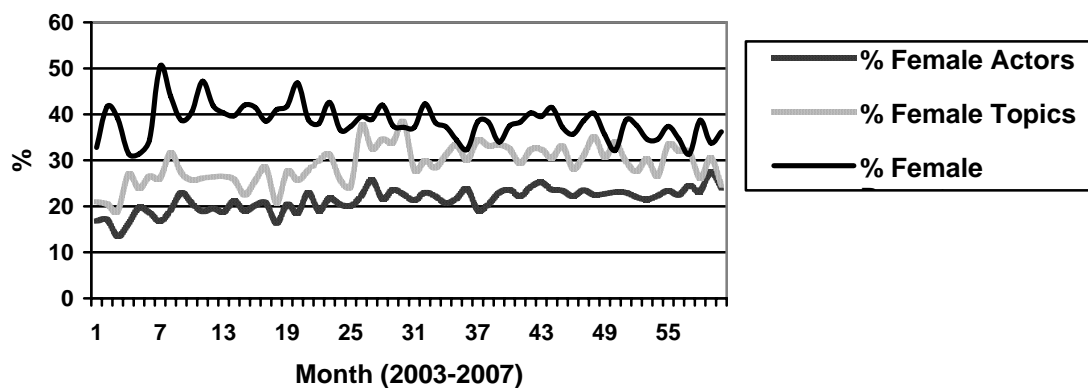
Entries are percentage of news items (n= 43,879) including a) at least one female news source; b) covering only male news sources. Source: Belgian News Archive ENA, 2003-2007.

At first sight, the impact of female reporters is not overwhelming. In items made by female reporters, female news sources are being portrayed more often but the difference is very limited (43 versus 40 per cent). 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 journal, differences tend to 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 60 months observations period. Indeed, one can observe that the percentage of items including at least one female news source tends to increase during our observation period, from 34 per cent in 2003 to 44 per cent in 2007. The time allotted to female news sources also rises considerably from 18 to 23 per cent (Column 4 in table 1).

The trend toward increased gender equality in the selection of news sources clearly cannot be attributed to the increased presence of female reporters. The percentage of items made 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 2003-2007 period (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Female Actors, Female Topics and Female Reporters by month



The fifth hypothesis suggests that the presence of a diversity policy program will have an effect on the number of female news sources. The figures in Table 1 do not support this expectation, on the contrary. Female news sources are a lot 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 would have 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.

When we put all these factors into one multivariate analysis, we get a grasp of their net effects on the odds for the presence of at least one female news source in a news item. This multivariate test is necessary, since e.g. the effect of female journalists we saw in the previous tables, could be due to the fact that they make more news items about female

subjects. In such a situation we could have concluded wrongfully that the factor female journalist has an independent effect.

We find that various elements have a net significant effect on the presence of women in a news item. The rank order of the news items is the weakest factor, followed by the reporter's gender. When a news item is made by one or more female journalists, there is only 10% more chance for this item to contain a female speaking news sources compared to news items that are made by men. More important factors are the time period (10% more chance for a female actor to appear in a news item every year) and the public status of the broadcasting corporation (25% less chance for female news sources in a news item on public television news), followed by the length of the news item (5% more chance for a female news source for every 10 seconds a news item is longer). The most important determinant, however, is the content of the news item itself: in a news item about a 'female topic', there is 92% more chance for a woman to appear as a news source than in other news items. The effect of this factor is twice as large as the effect of all other factors taken together.

Discussion

For more than a decade now, several studies have shown that women tend to be largely absent in broadcast news world wide. While gender diversity has been gaining ground very rapidly in Belgian society, the gender balance of the main news broadcasts has been changing rather slowly. Obviously, the television news is not always in sync with real changes in society. Over the recent research period of five years in this study however, the time evolution is positive and strong: more news items feature female news sources, more people on the news are women, and the amount rises year by year. If we would consider this trend to be predictive, we might expect a perfect gender balance in Belgian television news by the year 2035.

This is of course challenging as a conclusion. We need to be aware to draw the right conclusions from this study. Further analyses showed that the determining factor for the presence of female news sources is (by far) the topic of the news item. The relatively strong positive trend in the presence of female news sources is largely due to the positive trend in the attention for female news topics. This drives us to temper our initial enthusiasm. When women are depicted as news sources, this is obviously still mostly happening in the context of traditionally female topics like family, education and health care. The question is whether more female news sources, but in the same stereotyped context, should necessarily be seen as a positive evolution.

Our analyses show 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 health, family and education. However, in that case too the problem of stereotyping would remain just as strong. 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 well in traditionally ‘male’ and in neutral topics.

Increasing the number of female reporters on the news desk, by itself, is 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 over a decade now, scores structurally worse than the private channel which does not have such a policy initiative whatsoever. The most likely conclusion would be that the diversity policy of the Belgian public channel (VRT) has actually backfired, resulting in less female representation. One of the elements could be that reporters in general tend to be independent-minded, so that any outside initiative to prescribe whom they should interview can actually lead to exactly the opposite effect. Every effort to develop a gender diversity policy for news

desks, therefore, should take extreme care not to be perceived as an outside intervention limiting editorial autonomy.

We also know that the public broadcasting corporation tends to prefer traditionally male topics like institutional politics or military events. The most striking result from our analysis, however, is that even after controlling for these topics, reporters from the public broadcasting corporation still succeed in interviewing more men than their colleagues from the commercial station. Apparently, the male dominated values of that news desk also pervade the entire functioning of the reporters. It is not just the case that on the public station a (male) army general will be interviewed, while on the commercial station a (female) rock singer will be interviewed. Even more troubling is that even when interviewing rock singers, reporters working for the public station still prefer male interviewees. We do not wish to claim here that the public broadcasting corporation should change its editorial policy, devoting more time to health, education, movies or music. What we do want to point out is that apparently it is difficult to remain focused on traditional and institutional news topics, while still paying attention to depict gender diversity in society in a realistic manner.

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