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Conceptualizing Strategies for Research and Activism: A Media Sociology Approach

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It is no secret that across the world, women continue to be ignored and stereotyped by mainstream news media. Indeed, more than 25 years ago, Gallagher wrote that the most important image of women in the media across the world is a non-image: "It is the absence of women in the media output which becomes most striking, once it has been highlighted" (1981, p. 72). Similarly, Tuchman argued that the mass media subject women to "symbolic annihilation" through exclusion and trivialization (1978, p. 8). The most recent Global Media Monitoring Project, which included 76 countries and is of itself a result of media activism, found that women still constitute only 21 percent of news subjects --- those interviewed or whom the news is about (WACC, 2005).

Not only do the media commit sins of omission, they also commit sins of commission (Made, Lowe Morna & Kwaramba, 2003). The first comprehensive study of representations of women in the mass media, including the news media, across the world found that the media define women within their domestic roles and sexual appeal to men (Ceulemans & Fauconnier, 1979). This study held "the male-dominated, male-oriented and male-biased structure of the mass communication industry" responsible for the perpetuation of female stereotypes (p. 67). Gallagher (1981) found that women were most often represented as wives and mothers, sex objects and glamour girls, virgins or whores, and as passive, dependent and indecisive. Today, women are more than twice as likely as men to be portrayed as victims and are mostly shown as celebrities, royalty, or ordinary people (WACC, 2005). Unfortunately, Byerly and Ross (2006) argue that these negative representations of women in the news media occur worldwide and across media forms.

As these sins of the media have been well documented, feminist scholars have argued that our attention should shift from issues of representation to strategies for bringing about media reform (Byerly and Ross, 2006). This, of

course, has been happening for some years, especially through the work of Gallagher on media monitoring, advocacy, and policy development (2001). Also, at the United Nation's Fourth Conference on Women in Beijing, two strategic objectives set forth in Section J of the Platform of Action were to increase the participation and access of women in the media and to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women. Governments and other groups were urged to "promote an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective in policies and programs" (Beijing Declaration, 2005, p. 96).

The aim of this article is to consider reasons for the continuing exclusion and stereotyping of women in the news media and to suggest productive avenues for future research and media activism. Instead of looking at media content, I will use a media sociology approach to consider the various factors that influence the production of news. The field of media sociology is concerned with how news is socially constructed, typically resulting in the inclusion of some issues and events and the exclusion of others. This field experienced a boom when several newsmaking studies were conducted in the 1970s to show influences on the production of news and the ensuing construction of reality. Here, I will use Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy-of-influences approach to illuminate the reasons for problematic news coverage of women and to help organize future research and activism. This is by no means intended to be an exhaustive review of literature on women and news, and examples are merely given to illustrate issues related to each level of analysis.

The Hierarchy of Influences Approach

Shoemaker and Reese (1996) developed a theoretical framework for analyzing media that makes it possible to classify influences on the media both separately and in conjunction with each other. The five levels --- individual, routines, organizational, extra-media, and ideological level --- range from micro to macro and each higher level subsumes the lower levels. As Reese points out, the "hierarchy of influences framework is presented not as a complete theoretical explanation, but as a model that helps sort out the crucial concepts and identify connections that research questions may address" (2001, p. 186). In an application of this framework to news media coverage of popular-culture culpability, Sharrer, Weidman and Bissell (2003) argue that the levels should not be seen individually, but as having an overlapping and multidirectional relationship with content. These levels will now be used to discuss influences on news production as they relate to women's representation in the news.

Individual level of analysis. On the most basic level, Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchy-of-influences model suggests that the individual characteristics of journalists have an influence on the content of news. Some aspects included in this level are the characteristics of communicators; their personal and

professional background and experiences; personal attitudes, values, and beliefs; professional roles and ethics; and power within the organization.

A common line of thought here is that adding more women to the newsroom will somehow increase and improve the coverage of women in the news media. However, as we will see later, the solution is not that simple. It is true that men continue to dominate newsrooms across the world. According to the GMMP, men wrote 63 percent of news stories in the study's one-day sample, compared to 37 percent of stories written by women (WACC, 2005). Women tend to report more often for radio (45 percent) and television (42 percent) than for newspapers (29 percent). Women, though, dominate as television presenters (57 percent). But if gender is socially constructed, would men and women necessarily report in different ways?

Some believe we do. According to Beasley and Gibbons (2003), much research suggests that "many, though not all, women journalists bring a different approach to news gathering, reporting, and editing, including an alertness to themes and events likely to be of interest to women" (p. 270). A survey of women journalists by the International Women's Media Foundation found that 92 percent of respondents believed women bring a different and a more human perspective to news ("Leading in a Different Language," 2000). A study by Rodgers and Thorson found that female reporters "drew upon a greater diversity of sources, stereotyped less, and wrote more positive stories than did male reporters" (2003, p. 658). Some studies confirm that female reporters quote women more often and use more female sources (Zoch and VanSlyke Turk, 1998). The GMMP shows female reporters indeed use more female sources (25 percent) than male reporters (20 percent) (WACC, 2005). Researchers found that male and female editors of women's pages/lifestyle sections have different goals, content, and coverage (Merritt and Gross, 1978). This study also found that male editors were more likely to cover subjects concerning men, such as homosexuality and men's consciousness raising, as well as entertainment, leisure and recreation. Female editors used more space for news about clubs, the women's movement and social change.

Yet, several scholars and professionals insist that women and men do not have different news values. In a replication of White's original gatekeeping study, Bleske (1997) found that gender did not change the way stories were selected for publication (1997). A study of British journalists found that that "women journalists had become so completely assimilated into the journalistic workforce that they need no longer be regarded as a separate group – save for the factor delicately referred to by one authority as the 'gendered restraints of reproductive responsibilities'" (Delano, 2003, p. 274). Sebba (1994) also argues that the way men and women report news has become similar, and that differences between reporters are more based on temperament than on gender.

A clear distinction has been found between the topics covered by male and female reporters. In an Australian study, Cann and Mohr (2001) found that despite the increased participation of women in journalism, male reporters

continue to be associated with higher-status stories, source authority, sports, and "hard news." The GMMP seems to confirm this. The study found that female reporters were least likely to report on non-violent crime, economic policies, foreign politics, science and technology, agriculture, national defense, development issues, and sports (WACC, 2005). On the other hand, female reporters more typically covered topics such as the weather, poverty and housing, celebrity news, consumer issues, arts and entertainment, transport and traffic, medicine and health, and labor issues. As the report points out, men continue to report so-called "hard news" stories that news organizations consider to be more important. Some of the new story topics that Marzolf (1993) believes women have introduced to the news (stories of homeless women, single mothers and poverty, spousal, sexual and child abuse, abortion, AIDS and women, sexual harassment and breast implant dangers) seem to fall right into these categories. But are women now confined to only reporting on these issues?

It appears as if the possible lack of influence on the individual level of analysis needs to be explained by influences on higher levels (Van Zoonen, 1996). The limited influence of an individual requires that we do more than agitate for more women in newsrooms. Fundamental changes, for example in the culture of newsrooms, are needed. As Rakow and Kranich (1991) point out: "Any improvements in women's treatment in the news will require not simply more coverage of women or more women journalists ... but a fundamental change in news as a narrative genre" (p. 9).

Routines level of analysis. The routines level of analysis recognizes that individuals do not work alone and that they cannot make their own rules in the newsroom. As Reese (2001) points out, individuals do not have complete freedom but have to operate within the limits imposed on them. Routines refer to "patterned practices that work to organize how we perceive and function within the social world" (Reese, 2001, p. 180). On this level, one might consider news values, objectivity, story structure, newsgathering processes, reliance on other media, pack journalism, and the reliance on official sources as aspects influencing news content (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996).

Routines and norms in newsrooms typically require reporters to conform to dominant values. This often happens in subtle ways, as Breed (1955) showed in his study on social control in the newsroom. Journalists value their autonomy but have to internalize the expectations and requirements of their work, which often reaffirm the conservative status quo (Van Zoonen, 1996). Especially young reporters, setting out to prove themselves, often adapt to standard workplace norms and learn to adhere to these norms (Creedon, 1993). The problem is, though, that newsrooms are often male dominated, as can be seen in references to a "macho" or "locker room" culture (Byerly and Ross, 2006; Lumby, 1994). Since newsrooms have traditionally been quite hierarchical and bureaucratic, individuals really do not have that much agency to bring about change (Steiner, 1993).

Conventional news values of sensationalism, conflict, controversy, prominence, proximity, and timeliness limit what is considered to be newsworthy. In fact, Rakow and Kranich (1991) argue that news values such as excitement and seriousness are masculine and discourage women from participating in news production. Rakow argues that traditional definitions of news “ensure that men and their activities will be made known and defined as normal and that women and their activities and concerns will be invisible or denigrated if outside the boundaries of [male] acceptability for women” (1992, p. 193). Carter, Branston and Allan (1998) also consider news discourse and structure to be a masculine narrative form. In particular, scholars have criticized objectivity as a masculine value. As Creedon points out: “objectivity is a standpoint --- white and male” (1993, p. 15). Steiner (1993) argues that objectivity as a news value disempowers reporters because they have to deny their own identities and personal experiences, aspects that are usually highly valued in feminist scholarship. Some feminist activists have argued that the only solution for women is to create separate media that would focus on harmony, interconnectedness, and wholesomeness (Allen, 1991).

Finally, on the routines level, a reliance on official sources also marginalizes women in the news. Journalists still prefer to favor official sources, and these sources continue to be mostly men (Zoch and VanSlyke Turk, 1998). Even when several official female sources exist, reporters still regard male sources as superior.

Organizational level of analysis. On the organizational level of analysis, the focus is on how organizational policies, goals, structures, and roles influence the content of news. This level has several layers, including the news organization, the larger company it belongs to, and the ownership network that may subsume both (Reese, 2001).

The increasing centralization, concentration, and conglomeration of media ownership clearly threaten the diversity of ideas, as documented by Bagdikian (2000) and McChesney (1997, 2000). Yet, as Byerly and Ross (2006) point out, media conglomeration is typically studied through a “gender-neutral lens” (p. 76). When gender is considered, one can see that ownership is restricted to “an even smaller number of (white male) hands” (Carter et. al., 1998, p. 3), and that news is becoming more commercialized to reach maximum profits. Media concentration contributes to a homogenization of news and to a restriction of dissent, which in turn leads to a perpetuation of the status quo. The drive toward profit also changes news into fluffy pieces of entertainment, as can be seen in the media’s “preoccupation with the lives and times, interests and concerns of the bold and the beautiful, the rich and the famous, the pampered and the powerful” (Joseph, 2006, p. 41).

Employment policies of news organizations vary widely, and female journalists often have to search for an organization that is committed to promoting women. As Albers (2003) points out, women used to face a lot of

resistance from media companies that were reluctant to promote women, or from companies that would only allow women to work on the women's pages. In an example of British and German women journalists, Van Zoonen (1996) shows that traditional concepts of femininity are reconstituted in an organizational context by assigning women to those areas of the paper that involve helping, educating and entertaining, such as education, human interest, women's and consumer pages, fashion, and cosmetics. Indeed, as Lafky (1993) points out, progress for women in the journalism industry will depend largely on the commitment of employers to give both men and women the opportunity to balance the demands of career and family responsibilities.

Editorial policies, or more often the lack thereof, can also influence news coverage. Some news organizations have adopted guidelines for fair coverage of women in their stylebooks (Beasley and Gibbons, 2003). The global news agency Inter Press Service implemented a wide-ranging gender-mainstreaming project in the 1990s (Made and Samhungu, 2001; Made, 2000, 2005). Currently, the non-governmental organization Gender Links in South Africa is working to ensure that 80 percent of news organizations across Southern Africa have HIV/AIDS and gender policies in place by 2008. While these guidelines and policies provide good direction for reporters, the actual adherence to suggestions needs to be monitored continually to ensure implementation.

Extramedia level of analysis. On the extramedia level of analysis, influences from outside the news organization are considered, including pressure from influential news sources, the impact of advertisers and audiences, government controls, interest groups, and media competition. This level of analysis indicates the media are subordinated by the interests of elites despite efforts by individual journalists to avoid conflicts of interests. While these relationships might be coercive at times, they are mostly "voluntary and collusive" (Reese, 2001, p. 182).

Perhaps the strongest influence on this level comes from advertisers, who base their decision to spend money on readership/viewership figures as well as the expendable income and desirability of the target audience reached by the medium. As such, women are treated as consumers, not as citizens (Harp, 2007). This goes back to the introduction of women's sections to newspapers in the 1890s to reach more women readers (Steiner, 1993). Today, research on women as newspaper audiences continues to be done almost exclusively by a concerned newspaper industry that is losing readers and therefore advertisers (Hansen, 1992; Marzolf, 1993; Miller, 1998; Schmidt and Collins, 1993). For example, Newspaper Association of America Readership Reports over the last 22 years show a drastic decrease in the percentage of both men and women who read newspapers, with women continuing to lag behind men. In 1964, 79.9 percent of women and 81.8 percent of men read weekday newspapers. By 2006, this figure has dropped to 47.6 percent for women and 52.3 percent for men.

In response to dwindling readership figures, Miller recommended that newspapers pay more attention to community quality, provide in-depth analyses of issues facing communities, write about solutions and expand coverage of topics such as health and fitness, the environment, weather, aspects of daily life, and entertainment news. In addition, the study suggested making the newspaper easier to handle and designing promotions around issues that women value. A Knight-Ridder study (1991) showed similar results: "Women want more on education, social welfare, safety and health, personal finance, parenting and family, and ethical issues; profiles on successful women; and shorter and more useful stories throughout the paper" (Hansen, 1992, p. 28). Marzolf (1993) put it this way: "When women sit down to read, they want something that speaks to them and interests them -- in-depth stories and explanations about the problems and possibilities of every day life for women in their personal, work and family roles" (p. 35). While market-oriented research findings may be helpful in determining what women want, they continue to only address women as consumers.

However, media activist groups can also conduct audience studies to determine what women want. For example, Gender Links completed an audience study on news preferences in Southern Africa. The executive director, Colleen Lowe Morna, writes: "Among the most clearcut findings in this study are those that relate to what audiences, especially women, would like to see more of, such as women in more diverse roles, as leaders, experts, in business etc; and men, as parents, care givers and in non-traditional roles" (2005, p. 12).

On the extra-media level of analysis, we also consider who tend to be news sources. Research has shown that the demands of delivering a constant flow of timely news make journalists rely on powerful official sources that are easily accessible. As Gans (1979) points out, sources with economic and political power are more likely to influence news than those without power. This reliance on official sources prohibits the news media from fulfilling their democratic role, according to which they would offer a variety of viewpoints and opinions so that citizens can make informed decisions (Schudson, 2003). These official news sources continue to be predominantly male (Beasley, 1993; Sanders, 1993; WACC, 2005; Zoch & VanSlyke Turk, 1998). Just as the availability of some sources can make a story possible, the absence of sources willing to discuss issues can make writing a story very challenging. For example, in her research on genital female mutilation in Africa and the Middle East, Hosken (1996) found that nobody was willing to discuss the issue with her. Hosken finally found reliable sources in midwives at maternity wards. The IPS Style Manual (2003) addresses the importance of including women as sources, even if they are uncomfortable with being interviewed. The manual states that reporters should consider adapting their interview techniques to make potential sources more comfortable.

In terms of government controls, Lafky (1993) points out that even though the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 prohibits employers from

discriminating against people on the basis of race or sex, these efforts are often limited to a line at the bottom of job announcements. A continuing commitment to anti-discrimination policies is needed to ensure the advancement of women in news organizations.

A final influence on the extra-media level is that of interest groups and social movements. For example, the media watch group Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) keeps the media accountable by monitoring and reporting on sexism in the news. Organizations such as the National Organization for Women, Women in Media & News, and Gender Links put pressure on the news media to cover women's issues in a more responsible way. While the women's movement has tried to influence the media, they often ended up being stereotyped and trivialized themselves (Ashley & Olson, 1998; Barker-Plummer, 2000; Douglas, 1994). Of course, not only feminist groups try to influence the news media, but anti-feminist and conservative organizations also exert an influence, for example the Media Research Center and Accuracy in Media.

Ideological level of analysis. The highest level of analysis, encompassing all the previous levels, deals with the impact of broader values and belief systems on the content of news: "At this level we ask how a system of meanings and common-sense understandings is made to appear natural through the structured relationship of the media to society" (Reese, 2001, p. 183). Such worldviews, perceived as "natural" or "common sense," work in hegemonic ways to manufacture our consent to dominant values (Gramsci, 1971).

Several factors can influence newsmaking at this level. Within nationalist discourse, women are often considered to be "carriers of the cultural purity" of a group (Bunch, 2001, p. 134). Therefore, news coverage of women becomes closely linked with nationalist or imperialistic goals, as Mishra points out in her study of representations of women in the American and Saudi press:

Each newspaper held its own country's woman as the ideal, often referring pejoratively to the Other woman. Whereas the American press portrayed veiled Saudi woman as oppressed victims in need of Western liberation, the Saudi response emphasized that the covering of the woman's body signified appropriate female modesty, national pride, and an oppositional identity vis-à-vis the West. (2007, p. 271)

Religious ideologies also can influence how the news media portray women and gender issues. In the United States, issues such as abortion and homosexuality often are presented as part of the broader theme of culture wars, which Mason describes as "the ideologically driven confrontations of public culture and politics that emerged in the 1980s after the creation of Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority" (2007, p. 183). Patriarchal values that consider women as subordinate to men would similarly impact how the news media cover women. The dominant political ideology, whether democracy, theocracy or autocracy,

typically has a close correspondence with the press system in countries, and whether the news media are considered to be free or (more openly) controlled. Finally, the dominant economic ideology, for example the pervasive commercial logic of capitalism in the United States, can limit the diversity of ideas and challenges to the status quo.

Conclusion

This article used the hierarchy-of-influences model to show the various factors that influence the production of news about women. It considered the impact of individual male and female journalists; the restrictions of conventional news values and male-dominated newsrooms; media concentration of ownership and organizational policies; the role of advertisers, influential news sources, and interest groups; and finally the influence of ideological values such as nationalism, religion, patriarchy, politics, and economics.

From this analysis, it becomes clear that these levels do not exist in isolation, but that higher levels indeed subsume lower levels. For example, a female journalist could not easily bring about change in a male-dominated newsroom that adheres to traditional news values. Similarly, progressive journalists working in an organization mostly concerned with profit and not with public service would have a hard time defending their story choices and angles. When newsroom employment and editorial policies are lacking, journalists cannot justify their choices. Even when the first three levels of analysis might be conducive to producing fair and balanced news about women, extra-media influences might hinder this task. For example, advertisers could insist on complementary copy before they spend their money. Influential sources could hijack the news agenda. Conservative interest groups could pressure news organizations to subscribe to their ideas. All of this happens under the umbrella of strong, often conservative, ideological convictions.

While all these factors limit the way women are represented in the news media, they also provide avenues for organizing future research and activism. As for research, it appears as if empirical research is mostly doable on the lower levels of analysis. However, that leaves the higher levels of analysis unexplored. When planning a research project, scholars need to consider on which level they will make a contribution. In terms of activism, organizations need to devise ways of addressing the various levels in their programs. Individual journalists can be reached through a training session, but the impact of training will be limited if higher levels are not addressed. The profession of journalism needs to be made friendlier to women, who often struggle balancing work and family responsibilities. Organizations can be helped in adopting progressive editorial and workplace policies, and media activism groups can continue to put pressure on the media as an extra-media influence. Dominant ideologies in societies are clearly hard to challenge, but just as they work to influence all the lower levels of analysis, the best way to resist might be to work from the grassroots up.

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