

Has journalism
become feminized
over time media
essay



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Introduction

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, journalism was dominated by man. When advertising became the main source for the newspapers' profit, women journalists were hired in order to appeal to female audiences. However, they were assigned to 'soft' news topics, such as fashion, the arts and domestic issues, because of the lack of professional reporting skills assumed by their male editors. Even when dealing with the politics or social issues, women journalists were required to write from the 'human interest' angle and emphasize the events' effects on people (Chambers et al. 2004, p14).

In the past two centuries, studies have shown the influx of women into journalism. Feminists tend to focus on both the equality in the employment and the news representation of women in this progress. These two issues are of great importance when discussing the feminization of journalism over time.

This essay aims to examine has journalism become feminized over time and show whether the influx of women entering journalism could shape the news and newsroom structure. This essay is divided into two parts. The first part discusses female journalists and their work in the newsroom. The second part analyzes how women are portrayed in the news.

Women in the newsroom

With more women entering journalism, there have been significant differences in the proportion of female employment in the media industry and the level of their occupations. According to a study conducted by the <https://assignbuster.com/has-journalism-become-feminized-over-time-media-essay/>

London College of Printing (LCP) School of Media in 1995, there were approximately 30, 000 active journalists in the UK and 11, 130 of them, nearly 40 per cent, were women. The highest percentage of women journalists was in periodicals where women journalist accounted for 55. 6 per cent of the total. 40. 8 per cent of journalists in broadcasting were women. Newspapers (22. 6 per cent) had the lowest rate of women journalists.

Statistics have shown that women have become an important part of journalism. According to van Zoonen (1998), it is the transformation to market-driven journalism that provided an opportunity for women journalists to enter, or even dominate, journalism. The main reason is that ‘ human interest’ news, audience needs and desires, and emotional investment are three key elements in the consumer-oriented journalism. They coincide with the characters of feminine news values. The news values in market-driven journalism have changed and consequently given potential for more women to become professional journalists. “ News and journalism at present, with its increase of ‘ human interest’ topics and angles, is becoming more and more ‘ feminine’ despite the ongoing minority of women in journalism. Those changes may open up journalism as a profession for women”(van Zoonen 1998, p35). Van Zoonen highlights that the content and style of news are crucial factors that determining whether men or women are more suitable to work in journalism.

This is not the first time in the history that a large number of women entering journalism. Chambers et al. (2004) argue that this trend parallels the ‘ new journalism’ and the rise of ‘ sob sister’ journalism in Britain in the

late nineteenth century. Therefore, from a historical point, it is possible to predict some outcome of the transformation to market-driven journalism.

The rise of new journalism during the 1880s opened up the profession for women journalists. Chambers et al. (2004) point out that the new journalism was an 'emotional and sensational style' that employed to attract readerships and this style brought two major changes to women journalists. First, the needs for interviewing and reporting about women enabled women to become journalists. Second, women were treated as independent subjects as they could represent the social changes. Women journalists became 'sisters' to report about women movement or horrible conditions for women in order to advocate social reform. In addition, they were assigned to investigate stunts which would be regarded as extraordinarily daring for women. This can also be found in today's newsroom.

Consequently, both new journalism and contemporary market-driven journalism have two characteristics: "heavy criticism for abandoning objectivity and impartiality, and a trend of employing large numbers of women" (Chambers et al. 2004, p201). Although the emergence of a market-oriental journalism has resulted in the influx of women journalists, women remain marginalized to the topics of politics and public policies. Creedon argues the increasing number of women in the news industry "does not translate into superior power or influence for women; instead it has been translated to mean a decline in salaries and status for the field" (1993, p17). The rise of women journalists does not necessarily indicate the advancement of female status in the profession, as a glass ceiling still preventing women to promote to key decision-making positions (Chambers et al. 2004).
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Delano (2011) finds out that in the newspapers, more women were working as reporters, while more editors or deputy editors are men. More female senior executives, assistant editors, news directors appeared in the periodicals and broadcasting, with 12 per cent were women and 4 per cent were men. This provides some clues about the imbalanced gender division in the news industry. Delano (2011) contends that it reveals an insufficient representation of women in national daily newspapers that van Zoonen (1994) defines as “ high prestige”.

In radio and TV, whereas female reporters are less than their male colleagues, more women become newsreaders. As the market-driven journalism calls for the ‘ human interest’, emotional involvement and entertainment in news, anchoring has become a suitable profession for women (van Zoonen, 1998). Nevertheless, it does not necessarily mean a positive outcome for women.

Holland (1987) argues that the reason more women becoming news anchors in Britain is that the newsreader’s task has been regarded as a decorative performer rather than an originator of news. Female newsreaders have been constructed as pleasurable objects for men to look at and could not achieve the prestige as well as the political respect as their male counterparts. “ Hair that has not been done, lack of make-up, the less studied appearance associated with feminism, must be avoided” (Holland 1987, p148). They found themselves dressing as the stereotype for the ‘ post-feminism’ working young women in the 1980s which was built by advertisements and magazines targeted at businesswomen. Holland highlights that women newsreaders are stuck in “ the conflicting definitions of femininity and of the <https://assignbuster.com/has-journalism-become-feminized-over-time-media-essay/>

news – themselves trivialised, they can be blamed for trivialising” (1987, p148). Anchorwomen are required to speak with a universal voice, yet they are excluded from both the political consensus and the masculine structure of language. It represents the deeply rooted female subordination in newsreaders.

On the other hand, it is not always the same in Dutch television. The transformation of Dutch television news from 1985 enable female anchors become a majority. Van Zoonen (1998) points out that while they are of good-looking appearance, some of them are in their mid-forties and even fifties. They present a model of traditional female authority who acted as the caring and never-failing mother. Other anchorwomen, who are not old enough for motherly impact, are not ‘spectacularly beautiful’ and like the ordinary neighbor you can trust. They embodied another women stereotype: the neighbors’ wife: as van Zoonen defines, very plain and very ordinary, yet very desirable. However, van Zoonen (1998) admits that female news anchors are needed because they provide ‘women’s touch’ in the news. Therefore, while more women are working as news anchors, it was their capacity of communicating as women instead of professional skills that was valued by the news media.

The rise of women journalists has led to the question that whether the news values would be feminized when women become a significant part in journalism. Some researchers have long claimed that women are likely to have distinct news values and perspectives. It brings about the discussion that whether women making news different from men.

Van Zoonen (1998) summarizes the feminine values in journalism in terms of topics, angle, sources and ethics. Women journalists focus on topics like ‘human interest’ news, consumer news, culture and social policy, which are usually neglected or marginalized in the masculine news values. Female journalists also tend to emphasize the backgrounds and effects of news stories, rather than the accumulation of facts in male news writing. In addition, they pay more attention to audience needs than men. As for sources, while women are likely to look for female spokespersons, men overwhelmingly use male sources and spokespersons. This difference, however, can be regarded as “reflecting the personal networks of male journalists rather than being a representation of actual gender divisions among sources” (van Zoonen 1998, p36).

Nonetheless, van Zoonen (1994) points out that although studies show the differences between masculine and feminine values in journalism, these are in fact the reflections of self-perceptions and self-images, and do not necessarily lead to gender division in professional practice. This view is supported by Weaver (1997), who claims that few significant differences between women and men in journalism practices have been found, except that women use female spokespersons as sources. It may partly be due to the fact that women have to accept masculine news values in their struggles to be considered as professional.

On the other hand, some studies suggest that as a result of women’s incursion into journalism, the definition of what is newsworthy has been expanded (Christmas 1997, Mills 1997). It brings about a more diverse range of topics in news, especially issues that particularly attract female audiences. <https://assignbuster.com/has-journalism-become-feminized-over-time-media-essay/>

Furthermore, a shift in news sources can also be identified. “ Journalists, especially women, may be stepping out of the more conventional news beat systems and tapping ordinary people as sources more often” (Weaver 1997, p39).

As can be seen, the impact of women journalists in changing news values is complicated. As Ross describes, “ gender alone will not make a difference in changing the culture of newsrooms or in the type of news produced” (2001, p542). Factors such as socio-economic background and political values, rather than gender, are of more importance in shaping journalists’ attitudes and values. Likewise, ‘ newsroom and community environments’ are more influential factors in journalists’ professional conduct than gender (Weaver 1997).

Women in the news

Researchers have long been focus on how women are portrayed in the news content. Although more women have entered the newsroom, the changes they bring to the way issues are covered remain unclear, thus it is still hard to say that women have been more fairly treated in the news with more female journalists in the newsroom.

The representation of women in the news has been formed in the masculinized discourse and fell into stereotypes. Allan (2004) finds four codes when concerning with gender in the news analyzing the broadsheets in Britain. First, using generic pronouns, for instance ‘ he’, refers to both male and female news subjects. The views of ‘ men on the street’ are also used as the representation of public opinion. Second, the gender is explicitly

pointed out when the news subjects are women, such as using ‘ the female victim’ instead of ‘ the victim’. Third, the age, marital status and appearance of a female news subjects tend to be regarded as more relevant to the stories than for men. Finally, the news producers are more likely to employ male-centered naming, such as ‘ wife’, ‘ girlfriend’ and ‘ mistress’. By utilizing these codes, women are usually sexualized and related to male subjects.

In the popular press, the sexualization of women is even more obvious. Bingham (2009) defines three phrases of the popular press’s reporting of women and sex since 1918 and it could give a glimpse of how women were represented in the tabloids over time.

The first phase, roughly during the inter-war period, showed that the popular press gave cautious treatment to the topic of sex. Although some space was given to the topics such as birth control, there was little open discussion of sexual matters. Generally, popular newspapers preferred the topics such as titillating divorce reports, exposures of the horrors of ‘ white slavery’ and gossips about the love romance of cinema stars (Bingham 2009).

From the Second World War to the late 1960s was the second phase that a significant expansion of coverage of sex took place in the popular press. Sex began to be presented both as a source of entertainment and a subject that public required up-to-date information, thus received far more diverse-ranging, extensive and detailed reporting. For example, the Daily Mirror used more sexually explicit pin-ups and cartoons, and provocative content for titillation. Bingham (2009) argues that this tendency to employ female

images enhanced the stress on women to see themselves as sexual playthings and to behave in accordance with “ media ideals of attractiveness” that embodied masculine values.

During the third phase, from the late 1960s, the sexualization of popular press became much broader and the ‘ family values’ in editorial seemed to lost its potency. Sexual aspect of the news, however slight the connection is to the main story, was highlighted in the news reporting in the popular newspapers (Bingham 2009).

The ‘ Page Three’ girl in the Sun is one of the most controversial representations of women. As Holland (1998) claims, the display of topless women in the Page Three is the representation of male-oriented, sexual pleasure by which to attract a mass readership. The “ brashness, visual excitement and down-market appeal” of the Sun are gendered around heterosexual male privilege. According to Holland, in this context, the visual is associated with “ a masculine insistence on the inalienable right to a lustful gaze” (1998, p24).

Similarly, Bingham believes that “ the pin-up was a feature in which the tension between commercial ambition and moral respectability played out in a very visible way. However disguised, it was, fundamentally, erotic entertainment for heterosexual men that could not be justified according to any ordinary scale of news values” (2009, p227) .

Furthermore, Holland points out that The Sun’s construction of female sexuality reflects a gendered politics of social identity. By using the ‘ Page Three Principle’, The Sun associated sexuality with lifestyle. It is ‘
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intemperate abuse', as Holland characterizes, that to those whose sexuality do not accord with their lifestyle. In the news reporting, " the image of the sexy woman continues to be laid against female demons like single mothers, lesbian teachers and ugly women" (Holland 1998, p25).

This sexualization of gender difference has widened the gap between women and men and put constraint on women's public participation, because " by reinforcing the sexual difference, the nature of the democratic discursive space is brought into question" (Holland 1998, p28). The exposed women figures in popular press are regarded as a symbol of sexual pleasure, implying that women are linking with triviality, entertainment and public consumption.

The different treatment between men and women can also been found in the reporting of sexual violence. The daily reporting of male sexual violence against women is normalized in masculine preferred patterns (Carter 1998). News reports encourage readers to blame female victims for men's violence. In six British daily tabloid newspapers, Carter (1998) finds that murder and rape are the most frequently covered categories of sexual violence, despite the fact that they are the rarest form of violence. The reporting of murder, particularly when women are the victims, constitutes 42 per cent of sexual violence coverage, while in the reality male are much more likely to become victims of homicide, with 68 per cent of all victims are male. The over-representation of the murder towards women creates the impression among readers that the world outside is " highly dangerous places for women and girls, one in which sex crimes have become an ordinary, take-for-granted feature of everyday life" (Carter 1998, p231). Moreover, regarding of news <https://assignbuster.com/has-journalism-become-feminized-over-time-media-essay/>

sources, Carter points out that male sources significantly outnumber female in the reporting of sexual violence, especially in terms of sources as expert opinion. Female news sources are likely to be seen as 'unauthorized' voice and mostly been cited when an 'emotional' or 'familial' perspective are needed. Normalizing the sexual violence to women, even though the reverse is the reality, represents women as weak, trivial subjects that constantly suffer from violence.

Conclusion

This essay discusses has journalism become feminized over time from two aspects: women journalists in the news organizations and the representation of women in the news.

The market-oriented journalism has engaged more women into the professional journalists. While more women entering journalism, women in the newsroom are largely disproportionate in terms of the level of positions, with a majority of women end up in the lower-status media occupation. Men still dominate the senior level of news organizations, which reproduce the subordinate role of women. The fact that more women appeared on the screen as news anchors is largely because of their gorgeous appearance. Women journalists may add some feminine characters to the news values, but whether it can change the news values that have long been established by men remains vague.

Similarly, female subjects in news have not received equal and adequate treatment. Women are encoded in the male-centered news system. The

sexualization of the popular press has represented women as the entertainment for the public in order to appeal to the male audience.

An improvement of women as producers and subjects of news can be recognized in contemporary journalism, but to a limited scale. Gendered division still exists; masculine values continue to rule the news and newsroom. Journalism may still be far from being feminized.