

A Long Way to Equality: Women on Television News

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“Where can you find a morning news anchor who’s provocative, super smart and just a little sexy?” asked the voiceover in an ad about Paula Zahn, the then host of CNN’s *American Morning*. The ad, released in 2002, was quickly pulled from television, but its opening line echoes a major problem in the broadcast news industry. News channels, without stating it as explicitly as CNN, still often portray their female anchors and reporters as “just a little sexy.” These channels rarely portray men this way. Hiring women in broadcast news is still a relatively new practice, and these women face various obstacles, including stations’ sexualization of them, that men do not face. Barbara Walters, the first female host of a late-night news program, wasn’t awarded her position until 1976. “The so-called hard news, a woman couldn’t do it. The audience wouldn’t accept her voice,” Walters told Oprah Winfrey. “She couldn’t go into the war zones; she couldn’t ask the tough questions” (Capretto). Many researchers have addressed the topic of barriers for women in broadcast news, but my research examines several different ways that these women face sexism at once, drawing a conclusion from several studies about the effect that these combined aspects have on the audience. This paper argues that the underrepresentation of female reporters overall and in certain types of stories, the lack of women as expert sources and the value that employers and the audience place on the appearance of female reporters on American television news convey to the audience that women are not as authoritative as men. This portrayal could be limiting the job opportunities for women, both in broadcast news and other fields, by reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes.

On average, networks choose fewer women than men to report on their stories. A study done by the Women’s Media Cen-

ter revealed that from October to December 2013 on ABC, NBC, CBS and PBS, men anchored on average 60 percent of nightly stories overall and 66 percent of the broadcasts from the field (Chancellor 8). The center found that CBS had the lowest proportion of women at 28 percent (Chancellor 8). While anchors introduce the story and give information, modern broadcast news will also bring on commentators and analysts to interpret news. The Women's Media Center the same year looked at the proportion of analysts on news programs broadcast on Sunday, during the day and at night. For this study, the center used three of the same networks (ABC, NBC and CBS) but omitted PBS and looked at FOX instead. The center's results showed that white males made up 64 percent of analysts on these programs even though they were only 34 percent of the population that year (Chancellor 27). Looking at both commentators and analysts, the Women & Politics Institute in 2014 determined the proportion of females to males on five different national Sunday news programs for that year – ABC's *This Week*, CBS's *Face the Nation*, *Fox News Sunday*, NBC's *Meet the Press* and CNN's *State of the Union*. Overall, 26 percent were women and 74 percent were men. The best show was NBC's *Meet the Press*, with 29 percent women, and the worst was *Fox News Sunday*, with 23 percent (Gray 25). Because reporters, far more than anyone else, explain current affairs and give the American public a basis for forming educated opinions about the modern world, the fact that there are far more male reporters on television news gives the public fewer opportunities to see women in an authoritative position.

Female television reporters cover fewer hard news stories, and are far more likely to cover soft news. Hard news, such as politics or war, is characterized as affecting large groups of people and having heavy subject matter, whereas soft news affects fewer people or has lighter subject matter, such as art or travel stories. Cory Armstrong in 2003 did a study of 60 different programs on NBC, ABC and CBS and compared national programs to local programs, examining what stories the networks assigned to women. He recorded the shows in February 2003, right before the United States' first bombing of Baghdad which commenced the war in Iraq (85). Armstrong compared

his results from local versus national news programs. Armstrong found that on local news there was not a significant difference between men and women regarding what types of stories they covered. On national news, however, he found that women were much less likely to cover stories about the war, covering about five percent of these stories (87). They were also much less likely to cover politics, covering 51 percent of politics on local news, but only five percent on national news (88). Armstrong found a similar disparity with other hard-hitting topics. Women covered only nine percent of business and eight percent of crime stories on national news, whereas on local news they covered 48 percent of those stories (88). Gender biases might not have as much of an effect on local programs because of the way viewers think of local news. "National news is often deemed more important than local news because it has a broader audience base and potentially affects more people," Armstrong notes (83). Because local news is often deemed as less important, women might have an easier time getting these stories because while still hard news, the stories are not as large-scale, so a reporter considered less authoritative might suffice. Additionally, local stations generally have fewer resources and must hire fewer reporters, and ones who are less prominent and have less experience. Therefore, managers might be more likely to assign women hard news stories because the station has fewer options. Studying the same networks as Armstrong (NBC, ABC and CBS), Roger Desmond and Anna Danilewicz examined each top local news program on the three stations in 2004. While Armstrong did not find significant differences on local news regarding reporters' genders and the types of stories they covered, Desmond and Danilewicz did. They found that women covered human interest and health stories more often than men, whereas men reported on more political stories (826). A possible explanation for their difference in results could be that Desmond and Danielwicz only looked at the top local program on each channel, while Armstrong looked at several local programs. On more prominent programs, women might have a more difficult time being assigned hard news. Soft news is often seen as more feminine than hard news. Hard news topics like

politics and war are traditionally seen as male pursuits and as having male qualities – competition, strategy, courage and anger. Soft news has more traditionally feminine qualities, being usually more pleasant and unassuming. It also has lighter and less potentially disturbing topics. Women are often seen as more delicate, so broadcast news employees and viewers could see women as less able to handle hard news and more fit to report on soft news. Of course, it is possible there could have been negotiating; these women could have preferred soft news stories and tried to get them. If this is true, though, it could still mean that gender biases are a factor. Women going into broadcast news could have seen soft news as more feminine and therefore see themselves as better fit to report on it. This problem could be self-perpetuating. Young women who want to go into broadcast news see women report on soft news more often than hard news, so they never have this view challenged. Desmond and Danilewicz commented on the idea of self-perpetuation in their paper, also mentioning that young women might want to emulate the female reporters they see growing up: “Identification with female newscasters among young women may reproduce the belief that certain stories are the type reported by women, and limit the expectations and foci of what constitutes professionalism among news professionals, according to their gender” (Desmond and Danilewicz 822). In other words, the continuation of women reporting specific types of stories may be a result of the influence these reporters received from viewing earlier reporters covering the same types of stories. Internalized sexism allows these women to feel most comfortable reporting on soft news stories because growing up, they wouldn’t have seen women reporting on hard news as often. Audience members trust reporters of hard news to bring them through hard times and walk them through difficult issues, so young women watching television news are learning to see themselves incapable of doing so.

The masculine and feminine perceptions of hard and soft news, as well as the continuing reinforcement of those ideas by television news leads to the harmful belief by the public that men are more fit to report on hard news than women. A 2003

study suggests that the public does have this belief. The author had his participants each watch a male or female reporter read a hard or soft news story, and then asked participants to choose which kind of story they would assign to which reporter if they were the station manager (16). The author found that participants were far more likely to say they would assign hard news to men and soft news to women (17). Station managers and female reporters alike are affected by this bias, leading the managers to push female reporters in the direction of soft news, and reporters to gravitate towards soft news. The bias also translates to hiring in other fields. Seeing fewer women speak about important and difficult subjects as reporters do when working with hard news leads to a belief that women are less able to deal with these subjects. Women who have this internalized bias are less likely to seek out high-powered jobs or jobs dealing with heavy subjects, such as business or law enforcement. Hiring managers who are affected by this bias are less likely to hire women for these positions.

No matter what type of stories female reporters cover, news networks and audiences alike place reporters' worth in the way that they look, which means that their work as journalists is undervalued. Michael Nitz, et. al did a study in 2004 examining how networks sexualize female reporters to increase views. For two weeks, the researchers examined a sample of 306 segments on MSNBC, Fox News, CNN, Univision's *Primer Impacto* and a North Dakota affiliate of NBC (19). They determined different ways in which both male and female reporters are portrayed or seen as sexually attractive on television, such as being conventionally attractive or dressing suggestively. They then went through each of these different aspects and assigned each a rating in their coding for how much it was used to sexualize each reporter. For instance, with dress, the researchers assigned each reporter a rating from "demure dress" (business attire), to "suggestive dress" (clothing that accentuates the figure or is traditionally associated with sexual suggestiveness, such as partially open blouses, evening gowns or fishnet stockings), to "partially clad dress" (like swimsuits or men with no shirt) (20). After coding how much each aspect sexualized the reporter, the coders

determined the overall “sex appeal” of each journalist, based on their combined scores for each category. For instance, a female reporter who the coders determined to be dressed suggestively, had camera angles zooming in on her breasts and face and exhibited sexual behavior such as banter would be coded as having a high sex appeal. The researchers found that 80 percent of female journalists appearing in segments had a “high” sex appeal ranking based on their coding, compared with 13 percent of male journalists (23). Ninety-three percent of the journalists that the researchers ranked “high” for physical attractiveness were women, leaving men at seven percent (24). Twenty-five percent of female journalists displayed sexual behavior, compared with five percent of male journalists (24). For production elements like camera angles, women reported on 98.5 percent of stories that researchers ranked “high” for production elements that sexualized the reporter. For example, MSNBC presented a female reporter in a chair while cameras got close-up views of her back and legs. *Primer Impacto* had cameras zooming in on breasts and legs, while they suited male journalists in professional attire with cameras pointing at their faces (24). The authors of the study said that there is an increasing emphasis on the entertainment value of journalism, possibly due to networks seeking more ad revenue, and that the sexualization of female news personalities is increasing with it (15). The sexualization of broadcast reporters limits the job prospects of women who are not conventionally attractive or who are unwilling to use their sexuality for the television station’s benefit.

Unfortunately, there is good reason for networks to sexualize female journalists, as Daniel Cochee Davis and Janielle Krawczyk’s 2003 study suggests that the audience actually prefers it. The researchers conducted their study at a small liberal arts college, where they generated five different tapes by having five women who did not attend the college read copy from a professional newscast about football (11). They played these tapes to a focus group and gave the group a questionnaire about each anchor’s attractiveness, and from these five anchors the members of the focus group chose three – one that they ranked “high” for attractiveness, one they ranked “medium” and one they ranked

“low”. The researchers then played the tapes of the three anchors to a total of 112 students, both male and female, and had the students rank these anchors on various aspects of their credibility, such as competence and expertise, and also on their attractiveness (14). The researchers found a positive correlation for the anchors’ attractiveness and their perceived expertise ratings by the students. They also found that for two of the three anchors, as their rankings of attractiveness increased, their rankings for dynamism and trustworthiness also increased. This means that ultimately, less attractive anchors are seen as worse at their jobs by the audience, and employers are not immune to these biases either.

Although no study can prove that female anchors are hired because of their attractiveness, anecdotal evidence shows that it does happen. An opinion piece in *American Journalism Review* spoke of the reason former CNN president Jon Klein hired reporters John Roberts and Kiran Chetry. Klein said of Roberts, “a kick-ass reporter,” but of Chetry, “One look at her tells you why she deserves the slot. She’s a fantastic anchor. She lights up the screen” (Potter 1). As Nitz, et. al’s study of stations’ sexualization of reporters suggests, men are not met with this same emphasis on appearance. Television news has socialized both employers and the audience to believe that attractiveness is the most important quality for female reporters, and this means that these reporters’ authoritativeness goes unnoticed or unappreciated. Young women watching broadcast news learn that male reporters are authoritative whereas female ones must be attractive. This causes young women who want to go into broadcast news to overemphasize this quality in themselves, or to rule out the possibility of being a television news anchor or reporter because they deem themselves not attractive enough.

Surveys have shown that reporters are definitely feeling the pressure to be attractive. Dottie Barnes in 2005 put out a survey that asked female anchors about the emphasis on appearance in their careers. She sent out the questionnaire to anchors who worked for ABC, NBC or Fox affiliates in the western Michigan area. Seventeen anchors responded, 58.8 percent of whom agreed that there is too much value placed on female anchors’

appearance (35). The respondents said that they had received comments about their appearance from both their employers and their viewers. 82.4 percent of respondents said they had received comments from viewers. Slightly less said that their employers had made these comments, with 76.5 percent of respondents saying they had and 11.8 percent saying that they hadn't. The last two respondents were undecided about whether or not this had happened. (34). Over half of respondents, 58.8 percent, also said their employers had asked them to change an aspect of their appearance. One anchor wrote that her employers mandated that she consult them before dyeing her hair or styling it differently (38). 82.4 percent of respondents agreed that employers place more emphasis on female reporters' weight, or that female anchors face more age discrimination than men (38). One anchor commented that men are able to retain the position longer because networks do not want their female anchors to look old, but they do not mind retaining male anchors that are older (36). Recently, in June 2017, a former anchor for a local Kansas City station filed an age and gender discrimination lawsuit about this issue. Karen Fuller, the plaintiff, said she was fired in 2015 because the station wanted a younger face on camera, and said she had never received any warnings about her performance at work. The lawsuit alleges that the station had created an "age ceiling" for female anchors that they did not have for male anchors (Rizzo). The last question in Barnes's survey asked whether or not the reporters agreed that networks and viewers value a female reporter's appearance less than they did 10 years ago. Twelve anchors in the survey disagreed with this statement (39).

Another survey, done in 1997, eight years before Barnes, has similar results. The authors of this survey also compared their results to a survey they did earlier, in 1986. The comparison of results of these three surveys from three different decades suggests that little progress has been made, at the very least in the way female reporters feel about discrimination. In 1997, Anthony Ferri and Erika Engstrom did a survey similar to Barnes' in which they asked reporters about the biggest barriers in their careers. Engstrom and Ferri chose television news stations from a

random sample of those listed in the 1996 *Broadcasting and Cable Yearbook*, eliminated college stations and distributed a survey to female anchors of those stations. The survey listed various possible barriers to the anchors' careers, and asked the participants if they agreed that they had personally experienced those barriers. One hundred and twenty-eight reporters sent surveys back (792). "Overemphasis on physical appearance" was the barrier that most respondents said they had experienced. Seventy-five percent said they strongly agreed; seven percent neither agreed nor disagreed, and 18 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. This was followed by "conflicts between roles of wife/mother and newscaster" which had 62 percent strongly agreeing (794). Ferri and Engstrom compared their results to a survey Ferri and another author sent out in 1986, eleven years before, and found that slightly more respondents said that appearance was a barrier, but the difference was not statistically significant (798). One anchor wrote on the 1997 survey, "A male anchor can age, gray, gain weight, wear glasses, and he's considered seasoned, where women must be young, pretty, and perky." Another wrote, "A bad hair day negates what I'm saying on the news. I get more comments on my clothing and makeup than on stories" (794). This reporter's sentiment shows the problems with overvaluing appearance. When both employers and the audience are wrapped up in superficial qualities of reporters, they equate those qualities with their excellence as journalists.

Female reporters face obstacles in broadcast news due to gender stereotypes, but these gender stereotypes also affect the industry's selection of sources. Women are vastly underrepresented as expert sources. Expert sources are professionals whose purpose is to give specialized information about a topic, whereas non-expert sources are people usually directly involved in the story who give their opinions and observations from personal experience. Roger Desmond and Anna Danilowicz in 2009 also studied women's representation as sources, and found that women were significantly less likely to be chosen as expert sources. Women were equally as likely to be chosen as non-expert sources (826). Similar studies exist with only political guests. The Women's Media Center studied political candi-

dates, elected officials and guest journalists, all considered to be expert sources, who appeared on the political round-ups that ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox and NBC broadcasted each week in 2013. The center found that that year, 74 percent of these sources were men (Chancellor 30). Media Matters for America in a 2014 study of Sunday morning talk shows about politics found that 75 percent of expert guests on these programs were men, and only 25 percent were women (Gray 26). Media Matters for America also found that minority women were disproportionately underrepresented. White men accounted for 61 percent of expert sources, and white women accounted for 20 percent. Fourteen percent were non-white men, leaving non-white women at only five percent (Gray 26). Also looking at political expert sources, Gail Baitinger did a study for which she examined five Sunday news programs – *This Week*, *Face the Nation*, *Fox News Sunday*, *Meet the Press* and *State of the Union*. From January 2009 to each program’s last broadcast in 2011, she counted all of the politicians, activists, journalists and candidates for office who appeared on the programs. 1007 individuals appeared on the programs, but only 228 or approximately 23 percent were women (582). There was an even greater disparity when Baitinger turned to opening segments specifically. Opening segments, she said, give guests the most time to express their opinions, gain credibility on political issues and gain notability to appear on other programs. She found that only 21 percent of guests on opening segments were women (582).

The underrepresentation of women as political guests is in part due to the fact that women hold fewer positions of power. In the second part of her research, Baitinger did an analysis of how many women have the professions that she examined as sources. Her findings suggest that gender is not a significant factor in choice of political guests. She found that the amount of women who appeared as these guests was proportional to the amount of women in political professions overall. For instance, women account for about 20 percent of the members of congress, so it makes sense that there would be fewer congresswomen than congressmen represented. This suggests that networks and journalists were not at fault in the circumstances she

examined, but it does not change the fact that television news does not present to viewers as many female experts as men. This disparity is caused by gender stereotypes that make women less likely to have these professions, some of the same that cause there to be fewer female reporters. Underrepresentation of women as expert sources makes audience members less accustomed to seeing women in influential positions on the news, and could cause or reinforce biases that women are less fit for these positions. Baitinger, however, did find that networks or journalists are at fault when it comes to repeated appearances by sources. She found that networks disproportionately chose male experts who appeared on the program once already to appear again (582).

Although Baitinger's findings suggest that journalists are not at fault in their choice of political expert sources, Mariah Irvin's 2012 study suggests that male journalists specifically are at fault when other types of expert sources are concerned. For two weeks during 2012, Irvin examined CBS's *Evening News with Scott Pelley*, ABC's *World News with Diane Sawyer* and NBC's *Nightly News with Brian Williams* (41). She found that in soft news male reporters were more likely to use male sources than female reporters were, although she surprisingly did not find this result for hard news, which may be because she chose to eliminate political figures from the study. When men reported on soft news, 73 percent of expert sources were male, while when women reported, 50 percent were male (43). Male reporters also used more non-expert sources who were women than female reporters did. In soft news when men were reporting, 69 percent of non-expert sources were women, compared to 45 percent when women were reporting (44). This is particularly problematic because networks use expert sources for their knowledge and professionalism, and they do not use non-expert sources for that reason. The fact that women are used less often as expert sources but equally or more often as non-expert sources means that women are portrayed more as reactors, and less as knowledgeable or influential like men often are.

The negative portrayal of women on television news is particularly problematic because television news influences the

ways people see the world. Right now networks have fewer female reporters in the industry, exclude them from hard news, overemphasize their appearance and have fewer women as expert sources. These actions reinforce to the audience that women are less authoritative and therefore less fit to do their jobs as men are. This is because authoritativeness is an important quality for professionals in many fields, not just in broadcast news. Discrimination in television news not only affects employers' views of women, but also influences young women who are choosing their career paths, reinforcing the idea to both groups of people that women are less fit for influential or information-driven careers such as politics or academia. Broadcast news also teaches these people that sexual attractiveness is an important quality for certain professionals like broadcast journalists, for whom appearance has nothing to do with their ability to do their job well. Children and teenagers are particularly vulnerable to having their ideas about women sculpted by television news. Despite the rapid growth of internet news, television news is still the most popular medium, and with that comes a lot of power ("How Americans Get Their News"). Television news stations need to be proactive, modeling the change that hard-hitting journalism aims to foster. They must realize that they have power to teach people about women, and use that power to foster equality. These stations should aim to hire more female reporters and assign them to more hard news stories. Stations and female reporters themselves should make an effort to focus less on how the reporter looks. Journalists when choosing sources should make an effort to include more women as expert sources whenever appropriate. Outside of the news industry, journalism professors should educate themselves on the unique barriers that female broadcast journalists face, so they can be more aware of their own biases and make sure that they do not treat female students differently. Journalism professors should also educate their students about these barriers, so that the future generation of news station managers and reporters is aware of any biases they might have, and can try to make sure sexism does not affect the way they do their job. Lastly, women both in broadcast news and other fields who suspect they are

being discriminated against should consider bringing legal action against their employers. Equality on television news will help contribute to the equality of the sexes and will show young women that they can be just as successful as men in their careers.

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