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Women's Struggle for Top Jobs in the News Media

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Abstract: This chapter provides an overview of the rise of women and women leaders in the Australian news media and outlines aspects of newsroom culture that continue to hamper women's career progression. The chapter draws on a recent global survey and literature on the status of women in the news media. The most recent and wide ranging global data shows that while women's position in the news media workforce (including reporting roles) has changed little in fifteen years, women have made small inroads into key editorial leadership positions. Nevertheless, the relative absence of women in these senior roles remains glaring, particularly in the print media, and points to a hegemonically masculine newsroom culture that works to undermine women's progress in the industry.

Keywords: gender and journalism, female journalists, print media, workforce

Women have long been thwarted from key editorial leadership roles in news organisations around the world, and this continues today. Indeed, feminist scholars and some journalists suggest that the most common obstacle to career progress (and therefore attaining leadership positions) reported by women journalists is the problem of male attitudes.¹ Even in Nordic countries where gender empowerment is rated high, patriarchal conservatism is noted as a central impediment to women's career advancement in journalism.²

In the news media those in editorial leadership positions decide on editorial direction and content, and staffing – among other things – and therefore determine the newsroom makeup and what the consumer understands as news. Those leadership roles in news journalism have been categorised most recently by US scholar Carolyn Byerly as incorporating four areas: governance (boards of directors); top-level management (publishers, CEOs); senior management (news directors, managing editors, bureau chiefs etc); and middle management (chief correspondents, senior editors).³ Leadership has been understood within most news media organisations (and other male-dominated occupations) as an attribute that 'naturally' belongs to men.⁴ The idea that men's 'innate' traits and capabilities make men better equipped for journalism than women is often noted in interviews conducted by feminist researchers as one reason why women succeed less than men in acquiring jobs in positions of authority. According to Patricia Yancey Martin,

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when such essentialist frames are evoked 'they depict men's talents and capacities as more *consonant with more valued* jobs and opportunities' (emphasis in original).⁵

In the mainstream news media in Australia, it is predominantly men who determine content. Women journalists are typically located *en masse* in low-paid, low-status positions, struggling to attain real influence in editorial decision-making roles across all media platforms. While many women find jobs in reporting and some become well known for their work, few break through the glass ceiling and reach influential leadership positions.⁶ A stark reminder of women's absence from decision-making roles in the Australian news media is found in the gender ratio of editors who lead the nation's twenty-one metropolitan newspapers. At the time of writing not one woman was entrusted with the editing role in a daily edition, although three currently edit weekend editions.⁷ In broadcasting, it was 2009 before the publicly funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) appointed its first female director of news, Kate Torney.

There is no doubt, however, that journalism in Australia has shifted considerably from the male bastion it was sixty years ago, when just a handful of women entered the fray. The equal opportunity policies that arose from the second wave feminist movement in the 1970s and beyond helped provide more opportunities for women to progress in careers, and the media industry was no exception. Ita Buttrose, for example, became the first female editor-in-chief of a metropolitan newspaper in Australia (*Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 1981–1984). There was a considerable time lag, however, from Buttrose's appointment to the next leadership milestone for female journalists: Michelle Grattan's selection as the first female editor of a major daily newspaper (*Canberra Times*, 1993–1995).

This chapter explores women's occupational and leadership status in Australian news organisations, drawing from the most current statistical data collated in Byerly's *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media*. I was fortunate to have the role of regional coordinator (Australia, New Zealand, Fiji) in this vast project that includes data from 522 news companies. The chapter also discusses some barriers women encounter in their career progression, particularly in the print news media which is underpinned by a 'blokey' newsroom culture.

To provide context to this discussion it is important to briefly note some significant past studies that locate women's status in the news media in Australia. Women's participation in journalism in Australia has been relatively static since the early 1990s, and is now indicating a downward trend. In 1992, 33 per cent of Australian journalists in Henningham's well-known 1998 study were female; in 2000 Brand and Pearson found 39 per cent

of journalists they surveyed were women; and in 2008 Hanusch noted 40 per cent of his survey participants were female.⁸ Byerly's most recent and thorough report finds that 34.4 per cent of Australian journalists are female compared to the global figure of 36.1 per cent.⁹ If all occupational categories are included (production, technical, administration, sales and finance) Byerly's 2011 *Global Report* shows that women overall represent only a third (33.3 per cent) of the full-time journalism workforce.¹⁰

Jobs in leadership roles remain elusive (and in some cases off limits) for women worldwide, with men occupying the vast majority of management jobs, although more women are now securing these positions. In 1995 just 3 per cent of media organisations worldwide were headed by women. If the figures were broadened to take in the top three levels of management, women's share of the jobs rose to 12 per cent.¹¹ Byerly's *Global Report* shows that women's participation in management roles has increased. Women now hold 26 per cent of governing roles and 27 per cent of top management jobs around the globe.¹² In Australia, however, the percentage of women in leadership categories is well below the global average.¹³ A total of 20 per cent of women are in governance (that is, boards of directors), and just 10 per cent secure top-level management roles (publishers, chief executive officers).¹⁴

Women's status in the Australian media

Six Australian news companies – two newspapers, two television stations and two radio stations – participated in the *Global Report*. Many more media companies were asked to provide data for the study, but their executives declined. Nevertheless, together these companies employ approximately two thousand staff.¹⁵ So, while this survey provides only a snapshot of the Australian media landscape, the data is a solid basis from which to build a current understanding of the gendered nature of journalism in Australia.

The glass ceiling for Australian women journalists is found at the senior professional level (senior writers, editors and anchors, among other experienced reporting staff), where women have inched toward parity with men at 40.4 per cent. Women's participation is higher (46 per cent) in the junior professional level. The numbers of women in senior management (22.2 per cent) and middle management (29.1 per cent) are also low. These occupational levels include roles like news directors, and executive editors who decide on news assignments and take part in other tasks associated with shaping news. Women dominate in only one occupational category in Australian newsrooms surveyed: support roles associated with sales, finance and administration (66 per cent).¹⁶

The report also surveyed the gender-related company policies and found:

- most Australian companies (83 per cent) allow women to reclaim their same jobs after maternity leave
- most (83 per cent) have both maternity and paternity leave policies
- only a third (33 per cent) offer child-care assistance
- all participating Australian news companies have policies on sexual harassment and gender equality.¹⁷

It is certainly positive that all participating Australian news companies have policies on sexual harassment and gender equality. That organisations have policies in no way correlates, however, to better outcomes for women. Despite federal legislation and the willingness of surveyed media companies to include equity and sexual harassment policies, these problems persist, according to empirical work, survey data and autobiographical accounts.¹⁸ A 1996 report by the industry union, the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), found that 51.6 per cent of the 368 female respondents from print, radio and television outlets had been sexually harassed in the workplace.¹⁹ Thirteen years later, interviews with Australian journalists found that women, particularly younger women, experience sexual harassment but choose not to use that term to describe it.²⁰ In 2012 I completed the largest ever survey of Australian women journalists in the news media. I found, among other things, that sexual harassment continues unabated with 57.3 per cent of women surveyed having endured it. Most said the harassment had occurred within the past five years and was perpetrated by a male colleague or a male manager in a senior newsroom position.²¹ ABC TV journalist Virginia Haussegger provides a telling account in her 2005 book *Wonder Woman* of how sexuality is used to degrade women who demand to be taken seriously. Haussegger had made complaints to her senior editor about an ongoing issue for women in journalism:

The men on the program were being assigned all the best stories – the overseas trips and the war jobs – while the women were stuck with the ‘colour’ stories. I was told to shut up and pull my head in. So off I went on yet another soft story, only to return hours later to find a present in my office. It was a very large, long, thick black rubber penis, sitting upright on my desk.²²

Pay inequity

Pay inequity is another issue that goes to the heart of why women might choose not to pursue leadership careers in news journalism. Accessing reliable salary data has proved difficult in most global studies of news workers, especially as it relates to men and women. In the early 1990s, however, Gallagher found that Australian women journalists earn on average 74 per cent of male journalists' average earnings.²³ That data was based on a relatively small sample, but does provide a starting point. More recent figures from the Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS) show there continues to be a

glaring gender disparity in average weekly earnings of journalists in all age groups and that it worsens with age. The pay gap is least when young journalists enter the industry – women earn 2.5 per cent less than men in the fifteen to twenty-four year age group. But as men and women rise up the ranks the pay gaps are more significant: women aged twenty-five to thirty-four earn 8 per cent less, thirty-five to forty-four 15 per cent less, forty-five to fifty-four 21 per cent less, and those female journalists aged fifty-five and over earn 20 per cent less than their male counterparts.²⁴

Many in the industry have argued that women earn less because they take time out of work to raise children and then return to work part-time or to less senior roles – but these statistics are for female journalists without children working full-time, suggesting this common presumption is misguided. With children or without, female journalists in Australia are paid less than their male counterparts. The fact that there is no formal merit-based system of promotion in Australian journalism clearly privileges men over women. The MEAA suggests that women's pay is affected by a lack of objective criteria for upgrading, the promotion of 'like by like', and bias in the allocation of news assignments (that is, the soft versus hard news binary).²⁵ Yet media managers are reluctant to acknowledge pay inequity exists. The former chief executive of News Limited, which dominates the print news media landscape – and increasingly the online landscape, with fifteen of Australia's top twenty-two metropolitan news websites²⁶ – was reported as saying 'We have seen an explosion of women entering [newspaper] journalism ... and I would seriously question if women were worse off than men in remuneration.'²⁷

Strategies

To move beyond the statistics, it is pertinent to ask how do women thrive (or survive) and rise to leadership positions when news organisations clearly privilege men's abilities over women's? Margareta Melin-Higgins and Monika Djerf-Pierre have documented the types of strategies that female journalists develop, depending on the type of organisation in which they are employed.²⁸ How women deal with a hegemonically masculine newsroom depends on any number of personal, professional and experiential factors, but they did identify three strategies, including incorporation (or one of the boys), which requires women to take on so-called masculine approaches and values such as objectivity; feminist, where journalists make a conscious decision to provide an alternative voice; and retreat, where women choose to work as freelancers rather than continue to fight battles in the newsroom. Melin-Higgins later reassesses, and while 'one of the boys' is still there, two new 'tactics' emerge. She identifies woman journalist (non-threatening to the

dominant culture and covering 'soft news' and 'kept' in lower status ghettos), and one of the girls (a tactic that attempts to make journalism more feminine, for example, by raising the status of feminine subjects).²⁹ These tactics or strategies have also been reflected in empirical work with Australian women journalists.³⁰

Why women don't make it to the top in numbers

Male journalists do demonstrate an awareness of the privileged status and numerical dominance of men in leadership positions, but say that it is a 'problem' nearly impossible to address to the satisfaction of both men and women in the industry.³¹ Most male journalists I interviewed for a small qualitative project offered rational reasons why men dominate in positions of authority. Some suggest that femininity is at odds with the necessary rational, unemotional behaviour needed to succeed in the industry, and that because of the long hours a 'journalist' needs to be free from family responsibilities. This perspective assumes and naturalises men's freedom from family responsibilities. While there is an acceptance of a level of inequality, this doesn't extend to an acceptance of women in positions of authority. There was also the suggestion, in those interviews, that the women who did make it to the top were tokens and a product of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) policy, rather than promoted on merit. One senior journalist said that the newspaper he worked for had to:

actually create positions to elevate women to get some sort of gender balance at the top. We had, until late last year, two deputy editors who were female. The women they chose for those jobs hadn't got the respect of not only the blokes, but their own gender. One of these people has moved on, but the other one is there and is just a pain in the arse to everybody and literally just gives the idea of that [EEO] approach.³²

'Gender balance', according to this male journalist, is about getting women to the top rather than calling into question the practices that infer superiority of the male body for these positions of authority. He also fails to elaborate that there are no established merit-based protocols in place for promoting journalists in Australia, as I have noted previously. Consequently, promotion is ad hoc, at best, and jockeying for leadership positions is part of journalists' (unwritten) job description. Under this scheme, favourites win.

The narrative around women in journalism, the number of women working in the field and the positions they hold is almost always understood through a liberal framework. A senior metropolitan section editor details management's attempt at addressing the issue of the lack of women in positions of authority:

I must say in fairness, management has been, over the years, piling on extra money for women, they have been trying to rectify it [numerical gender inequity]. They have been looking in a genuine half-hearted sort of way making really genuine half-hearted efforts. They see it as an issue and something that must be addressed, but they perhaps don't see it as the number one issue, but it's still something that they are trying to back. There are women in seriously senior positions, but not, to my knowledge at a Deputy Editor level.³³

Management, here, is understood as male, although not explicitly stated, and because management is 'fair' it has been '*piling on extra money*' to rectify the problem. Again, women's lack of representation in positions of authority is viewed as a problem for and about women, rather than a problem of entrenched masculine norms that work to exclude women as authoritative knowers. Consequently, it is women's disadvantage that is understood as the problem and requires research and money to address, rather than men's advantage being seen as the problem that warrants research and money. Money is understood as the key to solving the problem or, perhaps, it is believed the act of spending can absolve men of their entrenched and acknowledged numerical and hierarchical dominance.

Conclusion

The lack of debate within the industry and absence of scholarly attention in journalism studies about the ongoing and systemic gender inequity in newsrooms hides a secret – some say a 'dirty little secret' – that few women in Australia are in influential editorial decision-making roles.³⁴ During the past twenty to twenty-five years, female journalism students have outnumbered males in Australia's tertiary journalism courses by between two-to-one and four-to-one.³⁵ Yet, even with almost three decades of numerical female domination in journalism education, little has changed in the location of women in newsrooms. Women still predominantly fill low-paid, low-status positions in news journalism, are paid less than their male counterparts, and most encounter sexual harassment and lack of promotion opportunities. It is well known within the industry, and beyond, that newsrooms embody, even embrace, a blokey culture.³⁶

It's important to conclude by suggesting three groups that could work towards change: media managers, the industry union and university educators. This chapter has provided examples that indicate media managers are aware of gender inequity, but little, if anything, has been done to address it. The industry union, the MEAA, also is aware of gender discrimination after publishing its revealing 1996 *Women in the Media* report. Yet it too has accomplished nothing to address the ongoing masculine advantage in journalism. Educating journalism undergraduates would certainly provide a more direct, long-term approach, although in Australian journalism education

resistance is rife. Research has found that no Australian undergraduate journalism program offers a study unit that specifically addresses the portrayal of women in the media or, importantly, the gendered production of news and gendered newsroom culture, clearly acknowledging that feminist and other critical pedagogies are largely rejected in journalism education in Australia.³⁷ The exception is my own introduction of a specific unit in the Bachelor of Arts (Journalism) program at Monash University in 2011 titled 'Gender, Race and Journalism'. Nevertheless, the rejection of such education overall tacitly approves of, and facilitates, an ongoing and systemic gender inequality in the industry.

¹ Margaret Gallagher, *An Unfinished Story: Gender Patterns in Media Employment* (Paris: UNESCO, 1995), 63; Desiree Savage, 'Our Dirty Secret', *The Walkley Magazine* no. 20 (2003): 20.

² Sinikka Torkkola and Iris Ruoho, 'Looking for Gender Equality in Journalism' in *Gendered Transformations: Theory and Practices on Gender and Media*, ed. Tony Krijnen, Claudia Alvares and Sophie Van Bauwel (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), 209.

³ Carolyn Byerly, *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media* (Washington: International Women's Media Foundation, 2011).

⁴ Torkkol and Ruoho, 209.

⁵ Patricia Yancey Martin, 'Gendering and Evaluating Dynamics: Men, Masculinities, and Management' in *Men as Managers, Managers as Men: Critical Perspectives on Men, Masculinities and Managements*, ed. David Collinson and Jeff Hearn (London: Sage, 1996), 201.

⁶ Gallagher; Byerly.

⁷ Megan Lloyd, *Sunday Mail*, Adelaide; Judith Whelan the Saturday edition of the *Sydney Morning Herald*; and Margaret Easterbrook, the *Saturday Age*, Melbourne.

⁸ John Henningham, 'Australian Journalists' in *The Global Journalist*, ed. David Weaver (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1998); Jeffrey Brand and Mark Pearson, 'The Newsroom vs. the Lounge Room: Journalists' and Audiences' Views on News', *Australian Journalism Review* 23, no. 2 (2001); Folker Hanusch, 'Mapping Australian Journalism Culture: Results From a Survey of Journalists Role Perceptions', *Australian Journalism Review* 30, no. 2 (2008): 101.

⁹ Byerly, 219. This figure was arrived at by averaging the statistics for workers in the following four journalistic categories of Byerly's study: senior management, middle management, senior level and junior level professions.

¹⁰ Byerly, 8.

¹¹ Gallagher, 47.

¹² Byerly, 9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁷ Ibid., 219.

¹⁸ Louise North, *The Gendered Newsroom: How Journalists Experience the Changing World of Media* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2009); Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance and International Federation of Journalists (MEAA and IFJ), *Women in the Media in Asia: Participation and Portrayal* (Sydney: MEAA, 1996); Louise North quoted in Sally Jackson, 'Coming Clean on Sex Pests in the Newsroom', *Australian*, 27 February 2012, 26; Virginia Haussegger, *Wonder Woman: The Myth of Having it All* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2005) and Virginia Trioli, *Generation F: Sex, Power and the Young Feminist* (Melbourne: Minerva, 1996).

¹⁹ MEAA and IFJ, 'Women in the Media in Asia', 14.

²⁰ North, *The Gendered Newsroom*.

²¹ North in Jackson, 'Coming Clean on Sex Pests', 26; Louise North, 'A Profile of Female Journalists in the Australian News Media', *Australian Journalism Review* 34, no. 2 (forthcoming, December 2012).

²² Haussegger, 49.

²³ Gallagher, 55.

²⁴ Sally Jackson, 'Equal Work but Women Journalists Get Less Pay Than Their Male Counterparts', *Australian*, 22 May 2003, B3.

²⁵ Jackson, 'Equal Work', B3.

²⁶ Andrew Cook, 'Forget New Media Diversity, the Internet has Tightened News' Squirrel Grip', *Crikey.com*, 8 November 2011, <http://www.crikey.com.au/2011/11/08/forget-new-media-diversity-the-internet-has-tightened-news-squirrel-grip/>.

²⁷ John Hartigan, quoted in Jackson, 'Equal Work', B3.

²⁸ Margareta Melin-Higgins and Monika Djerf-Pierre, 'Networking in Newsrooms: Journalists and Gender Cultures', paper presented at the International Association for Media and Communication Research conference, Glasgow, Scotland, 26–30 July 1998.

²⁹ Margareta Melin-Higgins, 'Coping With Journalism: Gendered Newsroom Culture' in *Gender and Newsroom Culture: Identities at Work*, ed. Marjan de Bruin and Karen Ross (Cresskill NJ: Hampton Press, 2004), 199.

³⁰ North, *The Gendered Newsroom*.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 66.

³³ Ibid., 68.

³⁴ Savage, 20.

³⁵ Mark Pearson, 'A Comparison of Teenage Views on Journalism as a Career in Australia and New Zealand', *Pacific Journalism Review* 15, no. 2 (2009).

³⁶ Louise North, 'Blokey Newsroom Culture', *Media International Australia* no. 132 (2009); Tom Hyland, 'Newsmen Behaving Badly', *Age*, 9 May 2010, <http://www.theage.com.au/executesearch.html?text=bruce+guthrie&keywords=News&ss=theage.com.au&view=media>.

³⁷ Louise North, 'The Gender "Problem" in Australian Journalism Education', *Australian Journalism Review* 32, no. 2 (2010): 103–15.