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Why men still run newsrooms, defying the influx of women

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The proportion of women in the Australian news media has grown, but in general men still rule the newsrooms.

EPA/Yoon S. Byun

As I write this I can hear a clique of blokes guffawing at morning news conference. Not a woman at the table … We are marginalised and excluded by the blokes’ club because admitting women would change the blokey dynamic … It’s blind prejudice and they simply don’t see it.

– Participant in the Women in the Australian News Media Survey, 2012

In the last three decades there has been an influx of women working in the Australian news media, but numbers don’t necessarily mean power or influence. Most women remain clustered in low to middle editorial positions. Relatively few reach key decision-making roles.

Indeed, so few women have real influence that most people can quickly name those who have it – Fran Kelly, Michelle Grattan, Leigh Sales and Kate Torney are those most often raised when I talk about this issue.

Carolyn Byerly’s research suggests that women account for just over a third of journalists in the Australian news media.
Men still define and decide news

Today, news is mostly defined and decided upon by men, reflecting their interests and values.

In Australian news media, 78% of senior management positions and 71% of middle management positions are held by men. These include positions like news directors and executive editors who decide on news assignments and other tasks associated with shaping the news (see Byerly’s report).

Those in the industry often say it is just a matter of time until women share equal status with their male colleagues. Others I’ve interviewed have also suggested that because many women take time off to have babies and then do most of the child-caring, which interrupts their careers, women have less opportunity to reach top editorial positions.

Having childcare responsibilities alone, however, does not explain why women’s careers in journalism do not progress as well as men’s.

What do female journalists think?

To find out how female journalists experience their workplaces, and in part to explore what factors they think hamper their career progress, I undertook a survey in 2012 (detailed statistical data on the survey is available here). The Women in the Australian News Media Survey is the largest survey of female journalists in Australia with 577 women responding from all states, various levels of seniority and across all media platforms.

Despite a majority of respondents saying that women are not equally represented in decision-making roles (67%) in their organisation, an almost divided number (49%) think that women journalists have access and opportunity to be promoted to those top positions. One respondent summed up the dilemma this way:

> On the face of it, they [women] have equal opportunity. But a host of conscious and unconscious factors get in the way. For example, men still run most media groups and edit almost all papers. From years of experience, I know that men are more likely to try and poach other men from rival papers. They rarely try and poach women. And someone trying to poach you is the best and really the only way to get a pay rise.

The survey found a perceived pervasive blokey newsroom culture sits alongside a lack of organisational support for truly flexible work arrangements, as well as a lack of on-site childcare facilities that would enable mothers to work at their chosen capacity and progress in their occupation on par with their male colleagues.

For those reasons, respondents suggested that women often self-select away from advancement, not wanting positions of authority because of childcare responsibilities and the knowledge that the industry is inflexible in that area (although not all participants see this as a problem).

Traditional media hierarchies die hard

Many refer to their organisation’s management as a “boy’s club” where male managers tend to employ and privilege other men, even when equally skilled women are available. One participant wrote:
Men are traditionally seen as leaders in news and current affairs. A broader range of behaviour and managerial style is acceptable in male journalists – toughness, competitiveness, decisiveness. Women leaders are rare and scrutinised more closely. They are not afforded the latitude in behaviour and managerial style that men are, and finally childless women are more likely to succeed than women with children.

Other written comments paint a picture of an industry-wide culture (more prevalent in metropolitan newspapers) where respondents perceive women to be often “overlooked”, “ignored” or “not taken seriously” in relation to promotional opportunities – whether or not they have children.

This discrimination is understood as immutable and the culture as “very aggressive”, “a men’s club”, and “favours men” over women. Women’s sense of marginalisation regarding inequitable promotion opportunities is also very clearly articulated. One respondent (indicative of others) wrote that:

Women have to be much more talented to get into senior positions. Men are still given an easier ride, and looked after better in terms of pay and position.

The large number of women in journalism who do not have children under 15 (73% in this survey) remains a significant indicator that the industry is inflexible and incompatible with motherhood. This indicates a failure by many media organisations and the union to respond to the needs of the influx of women to the profession during the past three decades.

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