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The Blokeyness Index: blokes win the gender war in Australia’s 4th Estate

Written by Chrys Stevenson

You might think that, certain politicians and radio “personalities” aside, women’s fight for equality has pretty much achieved its aim. Think again. Chrys Stevenson has trawled front pages and crunched numbers and the fight doesn’t even appear to have started.

If you don’t look too closely, it’s almost possible to see Australia as a post-feminist culture. “The assumption prevails,” says feminist writer, Anne Summers, “that the so-called ‘women stuff’ has all been taken care of.”

Of course, if you take a clear-eyed look at Australian society, you will see that, despite the breaking of the glass ceiling, most women are still on the ground floor sweeping up the shards.

But acknowledging this means things might have to change — status quo might have to go — and, for some, that’s all rather inconvenient.

The truth is, the professional and political success of some women does not mean gender equity has been achieved — and I found the evidence cleverly secreted on the front pages of our daily newspapers.

Following similar studies in Britain and the United States, I spent the last two weeks conducting a byline count and content analysis of the front pages of eight of our nation’s leading newspapers: The Australian, The Age, the Sydney Morning Herald, the Canberra Times, the Australian Financial Review, the Courier-Mail, the Daily Telegraph and the Herald Sun.

My aim was to take a snapshot of how women are represented in Australian newspapers. How many female journalists get their stories published on the front page? How many women are quoted or mentioned in front page stories — and in what capacity? How many women feature in front page photographs?
I worked with real newspapers – not their digital versions – drawing my data from weekday editions published between Thursday, 25 October to Wednesday, 7 November.*

This project was inspired by a study undertaken by English organisation, Women in Journalism (WJ). Released in October 2012, WJ’s report, *Seen but not heard: how women make front page news*, painted a bleak picture of women’s representation in the British media. I wondered if women were faring any better in our post-feminist Australian culture.

But why look only at the front pages? From a practical perspective, it made the project manageable. But, also, as the WJ team explain, “The front page is the face that a newspaper chooses to present to the world; it is its shop window, if you like, and what its editors choose to display there gives a powerful insight into the paper’s priorities and preoccupations.”

Numerous domestic and international studies suggest that women’s representation in the news media hovers between a completely unacceptable 20 to 30 per cent. Sadly, my research confirms rather than challenges these results.

In the 80 front pages analysed for this project, I counted 287 bylines: 70 per cent were male and 30 per cent were female.

It’s a result that accords with Strong and Hannis’ 2007 analysis of more than 15,000 articles from major Australasian newspapers. Their count found that only 34 per cent of bylined articles in Australian newspapers were written by women.

And it’s not only newspapers which are failing women. Dr Angela Romano’s analysis of 374 news stories published or broadcast on 10 November 2009, found just 32 per cent were written or presented by female reporters and news readers.

These figures are also consistent with international trends. The Global Media Monitoring Project’s extensive 2005 study into ‘Who Makes the News’ found that only 32 per cent of hard news stories were either written or covered by female journalists. Women in Journalism’s research found women accounted for just 22 per cent of the bylines on the front pages of Britain’s major daily newspapers.

There is no official list that measures the gender split in Australian newsrooms. But I was curious to discover more about that elite cohort of journalists whose stories make the front pages of our daily newspapers. From their bylines, I compiled a list of 158 individual journalists. In keeping with the persistent 80/20 – 70/30 pattern which tends to emerge from this kind of study, 68 per cent were men and only 32 per cent were women.

Taking a closer look at the content of the front page articles, I tried to identify who the story was about or, alternatively, who was the major source of information for the story. Of the 231 people I identified as the ‘focus’ of front page articles, 72 per cent were male and 28 per cent were female.

718 people were either quoted or mentioned on the front pages I studied – three-quarters of them were men. Disaggregating these results, females comprised just 24 per cent of those quoted in front page stories and only 27 per cent of those mentioned.

Although it’s a fairly subjective exercise, I tried to determine the context in which these individuals made their front-page appearances: as experts, activists, benefactors, celebrities, perpetrators, victims, family members or others? It was clear that the experts and activists categories best illustrate the extent to which women are being valued for their expertise or acknowledged for the actions, so this became a key component of the research.

I defined an expert as someone sought out for their expertise or inside knowledge on a particular subject – not necessarily a professional. If someone was lobbying for social change, trying to bring down a board, erect a building or change a flight path, I identified them as an

figures in Canberra over the next 3 years. Despite his claim that he is only interested in...

Bail and acceptable risk

There is always a conflict between the interests of impartial justice, tabloid journalism and the very real pain experienced by victims of crime. Stuck...

The Hot and the Dead – Noor Inayat Khan

When I was 16, I would spend many school lunch-times on the Science steps, huddled over the latest Cosmo magazine with my girlfriends, flicking over pages...

Safe spaces in the LGBTQIA alphabet

Sexuality is not binary, it’s not defined by others and it’s not yours to judge. Like any good lesbian (or person in general with excellent taste
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http://www.kingstribune.com/index.php/magazines/december-2012/item...

activist.

My research classified 217 ‘experts’: 78 per cent males and 22 per cent females.

Women in Journalism’s results were similar (although my definitions and methodology differed slightly to theirs). Of those categorised in the WJ study as ‘experts’, only 16 per cent were women.

The 2005 Global Media Monitoring Project repeats the same story. It found 79 per cent of experts quoted in the global news media are men and a paltry 21 per cent are women.

Of the 77 activists identified in my research, 84 per cent were men and only 16 per cent women.

In the (2008) movie Sense and Sensibility, an irritable Margaret Dashwood complains, “Girls can never do anything. Men can ride about the countryside and do things. Girls have to sit and wait for things to happen.” How curious that this out-dated view of female passivity still prevails on the front pages of our daily newspapers.

Newspapers are not just about text. Images play a major role. Particularly on the front page, images not only tell stories, they help sell the papers.

439 people were featured in the front page photos and cartoons of the 80 pages analysed in this project; of these, only 36 per cent were females.

Despite our slightly different methodologies, WJ’s results were identical.

Without the slew of Melbourne Cup glamour shots it’s likely this result would have been much worse. Images of business women were notably absent from the front pages.

I rated photos from A to C – largely according to their prominence and placement on the page. An A rated photo was the largest on the page, featuring a single, named subject. In the papers I analysed, 48 people were honoured with A rated photos: 79 per cent males and 21 per cent females.

I found one A rated photo of Katie Gallagher, chief minister of the ACT, particularly irksome. Dressed casually in jeans and a flowery top, this powerful woman was infantilised by posing her on a child’s garden swing. Try as I might, I could not locate a similar photo of Tony Abbott on a slippery slide or Wayne Swan happily hanging upside-down on the monkey bars.

With the research completed, I averaged the results from the main components: bylines; front page journalists; story focus; quotes and mentions; experts and activists and photos. The aggregated figures provide what I like to think of as the Blokeyness Index or, perhaps, the Testosterone Tally.

The Sydney Morning Herald achieved the highest score for Blokeyness with an average male representation score of 82 per cent based on the six key indicators (see table below). But it was a close race, with the Daily Telegraph scoring a whopping 80 per cent on the Blokeyness barometer. Neither paper yielded a female front-page byline in any of the ten editions I reviewed.

To be fair, in true tabloid style, the Tele tends to feature only one story on their front page, so the sample size of articles was not as large as it was for broadsheets like The Australian. But it’s no excuse. The Herald-Sun and the Courier-Mail follow much the same front page format as the Tele and (along with The Australian) these were the least blokey of all the newspapers studied, with a testosterone tally of 62 and 68 per cent respectively. It’s not a result to be proud of, but at least women were given a little more exposure in these papers. And kudos to the Courier-Mail, the only paper in which women contributed more front page stories than
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their male colleagues: 38 per cent males to 62 per cent females.

Of the more serious broadsheets, The Australian scored best with 32 per cent female representation across the board. There was a Gillard factor however, with The Australian’s front page focusing far more on our female PM than the other papers. Taking the Prime Minister out of the equation brought female representation in The Australian down to just 28 per cent and changed their equitable 50/50 result for story focus, back to the now predictable 70/30 male/female split.

Overall, the Blokeyness Index shows that in six categories in eight papers over 10 business days women’s representation – either as journalists, news providers or photographic subjects – fell just below 30 per cent. No matter how many different ways I looked at the data, the results consistently showed women’s representation hovering between 20 and 30 per cent.

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It has been argued that women’s poor representation in news stories is what’s know as the reflection hypothesis – that it simply reflects the gender inequity of society in general. To some extent, that’s true. Women comprise only 30 per cent of all parliamentarians in our state and federal parliaments. Women account for just 23 per cent of Commonwealth ministers. In the Commonwealth Public Service, women hold only 35 per cent of government board appointments and, in the private sector, only 8 per cent of board directorships are held by women. Although over 61 per cent of all law graduates are female, women hold only about 22 per cent of the most senior positions in law firms.

Dr Louise North, a former journalist, now Australia’s leading expert on gender equity in the
media, rejects the 'reflection hypothesis' as an easy excuse for male editors to ignore the problem in the newsrooms and in their papers. There are plenty of women in business, politics, academia and the law who could provide comment for news stories, North insists. What is missing is a serious commitment to address the institutional problems that underlie the appalling lack of gender balance in our media.

Certainly, women are poorly represented in many areas of public and corporate life, but the papers don’t just reflect that – they reinforce it. Newspapers are not just an information source, says North, they are a socialising force.

The crux of the problem, she says, is the overwhelming blokeyness of Australian newsrooms. It’s an adjective that keeps cropping up in discussions like this.

“Pretty blokey business this, isn’t it?” observed Sally Warhaft, editor of The Monthly, and host of The Wheeler Centre’s recent discussion on the media. “Media is meant to be at the forefront of change and social debate and so on and I know there are incredibly brilliant female journalists all over the shop but they’re not in the kind of roles that are actually making the big decisions — decisions about who hires and fires — How can the media be so far behind everyone else?”

North points out that, currently, not one of Australia’s 21 major metropolitan newspapers has a female editor.

North’s research suggests the problem lies in the deeply entrenched, male-centric, often misogynistic culture of newsrooms. But, in the opinion of Richard Desmond, owner of the UK’s Express newspapers, it’s the “profound, unresolved ambiguity” of women’s attitudes towards motherhood which impedes their advance to equal status in the media.

“... the desire to have and nurture children is not merely a function of social conditioning,” says Desmond, “... the maternal instinct will often prove stronger than mere testosterone-fuelled ambition.”

Andrew Jaspan, currently the editor of The Conversation, but formerly editor-in-chief of The Age, made a similar argument when Sally Warhaft quizzed him on the absence of women in decision-making roles:

“In terms of newspapers ... I think particularly when it comes to newspapers — these are incredibly demanding jobs and I’m not sure that people necessarily [pause] ... these are the kind of jobs which I think ought to be more family friendly but they are not very family friendly.”

The argument seems to go that, unfortunate as it may be, the newsroom is just not a good environment for women — especially women with family responsibilities — so, “Sayonara, ladies!”

The inconvenient idea that newsrooms might change to accommodate the needs of female journalists is completely overlooked.

And, according to Dr North, institutional and cultural change is long overdue. North has recently completed the nation’s largest survey of female journalists in Australian newsrooms. The 577 women who responded to her survey report significant gender discrimination, saying they are rarely chosen for promotion and are frequently the victims of sexual harassment — most often by a male colleague or senior male manager. Even though the majority of respondents have worked for their current employer for between 4 – 20 years, the top ranked response to the question, “How many times have you received a promotion from your current employer?” was, “Never”.

While male editors insist the newsroom is a meritocracy, North points out there are no established merit-based protocols for promoting journalists in Australia.

According to a 2009 study by Mark Pearson of Bond University, female students have outnumbered males in journalism courses at Australian universities for over 20 years —
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sometimes by as much as 4:1. Yet, (basing her calculation on figures from Carolyn Byerly's 2011 Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media), North estimates that only 34 per cent of working journalists are females. Clearly, something has to change.

This isn't about beating up on individual male journalists or editors for being sexists or misogynists — although this may well be true of some of them. The problem is systemic. The whole culture of the industry works to privilege male values, preferences, perspectives and agendas. No wonder the product of this 'blokey' environment so heavily favours men's stories, men's opinions, men's images and men's activities; the evidence is on the front pages of almost all our newspapers.

As newspapers struggle to survive in the digital age, there is a growing recognition that traditional media must change to survive. Many newspapers have identified the need to target a female audience, but the strategy seems to be to faff around at the edges rather than acknowledge the very large, very macho, bull elephant in the middle of the newsroom.


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Notes:

*Due to a technical glitch at Fairfax, the 29/10/12 edition of *The Age* didn't make it as far north as Queensland. When all efforts to obtain a copy failed, I substituted the front page of the 24/10/12 edition.

*To avoid unfairly skewing the results, in photographs that featured large groups of people, I counted only those in the main, foreground, focus group. I did not count photos which appeared as part of paid advertisements.

Data:

An Excel workbook, containing the all the data for the six key indicators of this research is available for download in the attachments box below.

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