The long struggle of women in news

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Women’s ability to participate in their societies is bound up in their right to communicate publicly. Obtaining the right to communicate has been pursued on a number of fronts by feminists seeking women’s advancement, one of those being greater access to journalism and other media professions. This essay asks to what extent women’s entry to the first of these – journalism – has been successful by looking at women’s participation in newsrooms (i.e. as reporters, editors and managers) and in governance (i.e. policy-making roles) of news companies, as revealed in recent research. The discussion is presented within a feminist political economy framework of analysis which will help to reveal the gendered relations of power at work in news making.

Who/what is a journalist/journalism?

It bears noting at the outset that examining women’s public communication through their roles in traditional journalism may seem problematic. After all, news industries are going through profound transformations the world over as a result of digital convergence (i.e. the integration of online, cable, broadcast and other formats), concentration of ownership (i.e. the diminishing number of news outlets and jobs), the rise of online reporting through internet news sites and blogging. Thus, where does one look for women journalists?

Researchers still assess women’s employment in the traditional journalism venues of newspapers, television and radio for two reasons. The first is that these appear to still be the largest employers of journalists. The second is that these companies, for better or worse, remain the guardians of the profession as it has been traditionally practiced. Journalists themselves acknowledge that the definition of the profession is evolving with new technologies and kinds of people professing to be journalists; in addition, the practice of journalism differs somewhat from nation to nation. Even so, there is a thread of agreement that journalism as a practice involves the gathering and reporting of information by individuals who have been professionally trained, adhere to standards and/or professional codes of ethics and are accountable for what they publish or broadcast (Reuter Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2012).

Women’s difficult ascent into journalism

Women see journalism as a route toward empowerment. Their enrolment in university journalism programmes today surpasses men’s in many nations. In my own nation, the United States, for example, women are two-thirds of those enrolled in undergraduate journalism programmes (Becker et al., 2010). The same is true in other developed nations like Norway (Ovrebo, 2013), as well as in developing nations like Brazil and Chile (Higgins, Correa, Flores and Meraz, 2008, pp.240-245). These figures change, however, when looking at the actual numbers who find jobs in the field. The Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media, a 59-nation study of women’s employment in 522 newsrooms, found that overall women held only a third of the jobs in reporting and a fourth of the jobs in top management (Byerly, 2011). Women also held only a fifth of the jobs in governance (i.e. boards of directors) globally. The same study also found that women have access to few technical jobs (e.g. camera work, lighting and sound) associated with producing news.

There were some variations by region, however, and these are worth considering. In some nations of Eastern and Nordic Europe, for example, women were at parity with men or even surpassed men in the companies studied. In Finland, where women account for 70 per cent of those in the journalism field nationwide, women nearly equal to men in number. Women’s occupational roles, however, showed a substantial difference in power between men and women, with women.bunched up in the reporting ranks but stuck at the glass ceiling of middle management. As a result, women were only about a third of those in higher-ranking management jobs and in governance (Savolainen and Zilliacus-Tikkanen, 2013, p.55). There was a similar phenomenon at the nine Swedish companies surveyed, with women nearly at parity with men in reporting roles, but noticeably fewer (30-40 per cent) in management and governance (Edstrom, 2013).

Considering these findings, Finnish authors Savolainen and Zilliacus-Tikkanen (2013) and Swedish author Edstrom (2013) made almost identical remarks. They said that in spite of a national consensus for gender equality and ample laws supporting it (e.g. through generous parental leave policies and community-based child care), men continue to dominate in positions of authority in news organisations. Edstrom added, however, that some Swedish newsrooms have taken steps to involve women journalists in ‘redefining news’ so that it increases gender balance in content and expands the number of female sources. She said that some newsrooms ‘made a conscious effort to pursue women who were working in these areas through ‘a matter of choices’ (Edstrom, 2013, p.88). The success of these efforts will undoubtedly be the subject of future Swedish research.

In contrast to women journalists’ situation in the Nordic nations, women’s high standing in some Eastern European newsrooms comes about through historical circumstances that are not without an aspect of inequality. Under communism, women and men were both educated and moved into the workforce, in most cases with this state-sponsored egalitarianism framed as ‘women’s emancipation’ (Nastasia and Nastasia, 2013, p.28). This ‘emancipation’ has left women still to carry the triple burden of household, workplace and civic responsibilities (Nastasia and Nastasia, 2013, p.28). In the 10 Bulgarian companies surveyed for the Global Report (Byerly, 2011), there were more women than men both overall as well as in several occupational categories. Most noticeably, women filled two-thirds and three-fourths of the positions in reporting and management, respectively; and about half in both senior and top management. But women were just over a third of those in governance (Byerly, 2011, p.31). In nearby Estonia, Global Report findings from 10 companies showed nearly equal numbers of men and women overall, with women above or near parity with men in most occupational roles except for senior management and governance. The last of these, governance, found women with only 17 per cent of the seats (Nastasia, Pilvte and Tampere, 2013, p.41).

Byerly’s (2011) Global Report findings were, in most cases, similar to those of the only other large-scale global study of women’s employment in media, which had been conducted by Gallagher (1999) a decade and a half earlier. Surveying 143 companies in 39 nations, Gallagher (1995, p.11) found there to be a hierarchy of progress, with the Baltic States at the top, followed by Central, Eastern and Nordic Europe. Also similar to Gallagher, Byerly found women slower to gain ground in the newsrooms of Asia. In Japan, for example, the companies examined, elite to be considered ‘prestigious, elite corporations’, the Global Report found that women filled only 17 per cent of the 13,000 jobs at the eight news companies surveyed. While this was a slight improvement over the 9.2 per cent of women employed at Japanese news companies found by Gallagher, Ishiyama (2013, p.409) points out the obvious ‘astonishing gender gap’ remaining in ‘Japanese journalism’. To understand Japanese women journalists’ challenges requires a foray both into Japanese business culture and occupational understandings shaped by its post-World War II industrialisation privileged men in the paid sector with women remaining at home to raise families and care for the elderly. Moreover, men assumed what Ishiyama calls a ‘corporate warrior’ approach to work, pleading fidelity to an employer for life (and opening almost no positions for newcomers to the professions). These factors, together with what she characterises as an ‘androcentric workplace’ have served to stymie women’s entrance into newsrooms (Ishiyama, 2013, p.410).

Struggle and its future

Women’s advancement in journalism sits uneasily alongside the enduring barriers they continue to encounter in the field, evidence of a gendered dialectical process. Even in nations where they have progressed strongly into reporting and even lower level management, women remain cut out of the key decision-making levels of top management and governance where company policies are made and where, as good corporate citizens, they might advocate expanding the number of women staffing newsrooms and give more encouragement to gender balance in news content.

The collective lesson from these fragments is that in most nations, the issue for women journalists is not so much a total exclusion from the news profession but rather marginalisation and lack of mobility. As in other social institutions in most of the world’s nations, women experience marginalisation and lack of access to higher decision-making levels because of broader patterns of gendered relations characterised by men’s greater power that has been long institutionalised. The news industry remains a collection of enterprises largely funded and run by men, and men also control the policy and financial apparatuses that enable their domination in that industry. News enterprises all over the world have to one degree or another become part of global industries marked by both horizontal and vertical integration. In many cases, companies forming conglomerates are overseen by interlocking boards of directors. These complex profit-driven structures exist with the protection of national and international law, and they produce enormous revenues. They are overwhelmingly under the control of men, as research shows (Byerly, 2014).
Two lessons as to women’s future engagement with their rightful places in news organisations (and the profession they enable) emerge from the feminist research to date. The first is that women enjoy greater progress in the news profession in general when there are national laws in place that provide the statutory basis for gender equality and structural supports for the raising of children. The Nordic nations are particularly strong examples of this, as we have seen. Thus, both professional associations and feminist popular movements should continue to advocate for these state-level policies. The second lesson, though less obvious, is that women should enter media policymaking in a more determined way to advocate for their own interests. Gallagher (2011) and Byerly (2014) are among those who have commented on feminists’ slowness to address macro-level issues that shape the structure of media industries and their operations. In the broader political economy of neoliberalism that has emerged since the 1970s, men’s power has been consolidated in both the financial and political realms, serving to further marginalise women. If women are to gain the voice they seek through journalistic practice, the challenge is for them – for us – to seek organised ways to more actively engage the policies that allow this consolidation.

References


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Women in decision-making structures in media
Karen Ross

Introduction
As with so many other aspects of social, cultural and economic life in the 21st century, women’s occupation of decision-making positions in media industries is low relative to their proportion in the sector’s labour force. Despite increasing numbers of women graduating from professional and vocational programmes and entering the industry, most research suggests that they get stuck at middle management and rarely achieve the really top jobs. Given the dominance of US scholarship in this field, the research on which this short paper is based aimed to explore women’s penetration of top level management across a range of large media organisations, both public sector and privately-owned in the EU and Croatia. The work was funded by the European Institute for Gender Equality and the idea for it arose from the decision of the Council of the European Union’s Presidency in the first half of 2013 [Ireland] to prioritise Area J of the Beijing Platform for Action. Area J has two aspects, one relating to the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through media and new communication technologies, and the other to promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media. Whilst the project addressed both these elements, this paper is focused exclusively on the first element.

Women in decision-making in media organisations: policy context
The small number of women occupying senior positions in media organisations has been a cause for concern for several decades. Professional bodies such as the International (and European) Federation of Journalists and Women In Journalism, NGOs such as the European Women’s Lobby and the various Working Groups of the European Commission and the Council of Europe have undertaken a number of studies over the past few years to explore this issue and have suggested a range of practical measures to improve and enhance women’s career opportunities within the media sector. Actions to support the recruitment and promotion of women into senior roles within the media industry have been complemented by similar efforts to enable more women to take their seats around the boardroom table. The most recent initiative came in November 2012, when the European Commission formally proposed legislation to accelerate the number of women in the boardroom. The proposed Directive set out the objective of 40% presence of the under-represented sex among non-executive directors of publicly-listed companies by 2020, and by 2018 for publicly-funded organisations.

Research design and methods
The research aimed to explore the extent to which women are employed in decision-making positions in large-scale media organisations across Europe, including on boards, how senior women actually experience their media workplace and what kinds of gender-equality and/or women-focused policies are in place in those organisations. Once the resulting data had been analysed, the project intended to develop a set of indicators which would be adopted by the Council of the European Commission – see later. A total of 99 organisations were researched across the European Union Member States and Croatia, comprising 39 public sector organisations, 56 privately-funded companies and 4 companies with mixed-funding. The criteria for selecting the latter included size of organisation (in terms of workforce), popularity of service/product (for example, audience ratings for TV and radio; circulation for newspapers), and importance (for example, in terms of opinion-forming). In most countries, decisions had to be made using several criteria, for example, when a newspaper had a high circulation but a small workforce, or where several TV stations all claimed to be the ‘most popular’ but where verifiable data on ratings was impossible to obtain. Within the sample for any one country, the public service broadcaster was always included and then up to three private organisations, depending on media density. In most countries, the private media selected comprised at least one newspaper and at least one TV station: radio stations were included in countries where radio was particularly popular, or in high media density countries, or where the public service broadcaster split TV and radio into two separate operational structures.

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