

Women in TV Broadcast News: Reporters and Sources in Hard News Stories

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Abstract

This study, conducted during a two-week period leading up to the 2012 Presidential Election, analyzed three prime time news broadcasts to determine whether male journalists reported more hard news stories than female journalists throughout a segment of increased political activity and whether male and female sources were used equally in said stories. The results showed that male reporters were assigned more hard news than female reporters, and males were a little more likely to assigned to hard news than soft news. Male sources were used more as experts in hard news by both male and female reporters. Actually female reporters relied on males as expert sources more than male reporters. The implications of the results of this study include female underrepresentation as reporters and sources, probably continuing a perception of women as being in a lower social status than men.

I. Introduction

Women journalists initially had difficulty breaking into the broadcast news field and did not begin to make real strides towards equality until the 1960s and 1970s (Hosley & Yamada, 1987). However, today women still struggle to earn the same advantages men are granted in the newsroom. Women reporters are frequently relegated to soft news stories, like health and entertainment news, whereas their male counterparts are given stories of political and international importance. Supposedly, this is because “the nature of the genre . . . allows for a masculine or feminine style of journalism,” but that should not be a permitted excuse to prevent women from being assigned the same, important stories that men are assigned (Carter, 1998, p. 14).

Women have also been underrepresented as sources on news programs. Most news stories need to feature an interview with a person discussing the topic of the story, and reporters contact expert sources for their opinions on that topic. Traditionally, male experts are used as sources more often than female experts, and female experts are used less in hard news stories than men. A study of 159 stories broadcast on major news networks showed that female sources were more likely to appear in stories reported by women and that women reported on 53% of social issues. Male reporters, on the other hand, had five and a half male sources for every one female source and they reported on 86% of the foreign policy stories (Liebler & Smith, 1997). If women sources are unable to be considered professionals or experts in stories of national or international importance, viewers could be led to believe that women do not deserve leadership roles. As women reporters continue to be assigned soft news stories, women sources will continue to be inadequately utilized in hard news stories (Armstrong, 2004).

One of the biggest hard news stories of this year has been and will continue to be the 2012 Presiden-

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tial Election. The news cycles on most big news channels continue to be politically heavy, which, in theory, could give women journalists ample opportunity to work on hard news stories if there are more to report. What this study aimed to find was whether, with so many hard news stories to go around, women are still being pushed into the traditionally “feminine” human-interest stories, or if the political climate will give them a greater opportunity to match their male counterparts. Although the political field provides fewer female than male pundits, not to mention fewer females in government positions, will female sources be portrayed professionally in news stories as male sources usually are?

II. Literature Review

A majority of studies showed that women are generally considered less capable of relaying news and events than their male colleagues, which could be seen as backward considering that today more females consume news than males. Personal views are continually shaped through consumption of mass media, which could lead one to assume that society will reinforce a “lower public status for women relative to men” (Armstrong, 2004, p. 140) as fewer women journalists or sources are shown in news coverage.

Women have been fairly successful in breaking into the news business. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, only 13% of reporters were women, whereas today about half of reporters are women. However, women are still far from equality as they face professional barriers of appearance and age. One study found that although female reporters presenting news stories were perceived as being more credible than male reporters presenting similar stories, male reporters were seen as being more credible persons overall. However, the gender of the news viewer also has to be considered; generally, recipients find reporters of his or her same gender to be credible. Another noticeable finding from this study was that although young reporters’ credibility was not influenced by age, the older, male reporters were considered to be the most credible reporters (Weibel, Wissmath, & Groner, 2008). Other research found that age impacts the length of news segments: younger women are often in shorter news segments than other, more experienced female journalists. When comparing older women reporters to males in the same age range, one can see the trend that men are able to have longer careers because women become “too old, too unattractive . . . not sufficiently deferential to men” (Armstrong, 2010, p. 83).

Another disparity between male and female journalists is the level of sexuality they must display in order to be a featured newscaster. A study of cable news programs found that 62% of segments analyzed contained predominately female journalists with high sex appeal. “Specifically, these journalists were physically attractive, suggestively dressed (e.g., open blouses, tight-fitting skirts), and filmed in ways that accentuated these features” (Nitz, Reichert, Aune, & Velde, 2007, p. 14). The fact that news networks use these tactics to appeal to viewers suggested that said networks are more interested in entertaining and marketing than news. Another result from the study showed that, despite being overtly sexualized for viewer entertainment, female journalists still reported hard news stories, proving that “sexualization was present in all types of news, regardless of the topic’s seriousness” (Nitz et al., 2007, p. 23). But, again, this study showed that women are unequal to men. Out of all of the news stories considered to have a sexually appealing reporter, 94% of those reporters were female. When studied through an audience perspective, these journalists had the potential to influence attitudes about sexuality and gender, but it shouldn’t be that a woman’s value is reliant on her sexual appeal (Nitz et al., 2007).

These obstacles are partially to blame for the mindset that female journalists should be relegated to reporting on soft news only. Another determinant of the type of news a female journalist covers is whether she works for a local or network news program; female journalists on local newscasts are able to cover hard and soft news stories more often than those on national broadcast programs (Armstrong, 2010). Although women are on air on local programs more often than women on network programs, they still are responsible for 48% of soft stories and only 28% of hard stories. Comparatively, at networks, women present 16% of hard stories and 14% of soft ones; overall, both percentages are still low compared to the amount and type of stories men report (Hosley & Yamada, 1987). A study in 1987 on network television news found that, out of 216 stories, males covered 191 of those stories and the remaining 25 went to females. During the same time period, males reported 369 stories regarding government officials, eight times as many stories as females on the same topic (Ziegler & White, 1990).

Roger Desmond and Anna Danilewicz (2010) identified another gender discrepancy in terms of news

sources. Female reporters were more likely to report on human interest and health stories, while males reported on politics. Within those stories, males were more often cited as experts and sourced more frequently than female experts, while there were no major differences between male and female non-experts. Reporters were often more likely to choose a source of their own gender, which therefore gave male sources more prominence as there were more male reporters addressing hard news issues (Craft & Wanta, 2004). It could also be said that female reporters seek out female sources because they are typically underrepresented, except for in human interest and similar soft news stories presumably written specifically for their gender.

For this research, the author established two hypotheses:

H1: During this season of increased political activity, male reporters will continue to be assigned more hard news stories than female reporters.

H2: Male reporters will rely on male sources more heavily during the political season and female reporters will seek out female sources.

III. Methods

Content analysis is the systematic, objective, and quantitative collection and analysis of messages taken from media, typically through category assignment. In mass communications research, content analysis has exploded over the past 20 years to become the fastest-growing technique, due to “the rapid advancement of content analysis software, with a corresponding proliferation of online archives and databases . . . it has never been easier to perform at least basic analyses with computer-provided speed and precision” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 1-2). Content analysis must be rigorous and systematic in nature (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). In any study, research techniques are expected to be reliable and replicable, meaning “researchers working at different points in time and perhaps under different circumstances should get the same results when applying the same technique to the same phenomena. Replicability is the most important form of reliability” (Krippendorff, 2012, p. 24). Content analysis should be able to support the validity of a study’s results.

This study has collected data on the association between the gender of broadcast reporters and the type of story they are assigned, as well as whether male sources are cited as experts and used more often than female sources. The purpose of this data is to confirm the theory that, during a season of increased political activity, male reporters will continue to be given more hard news stories than their female colleagues, and that male reporters will rely heavily on male sources.

This study has analyzed the evening newscasts of the “Big Three” commercial broadcast, non-cable networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC. Over a two-week period of weekday broadcasts, totaling to ten programs studied per network, this study analyzed three similar news programs broadcast from 6:30 to 7:00 P.M. These three news shows were ABC World News with Diane Sawyer, CBS Evening News with Scott Pelley, and NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams. All three shows cover a variety of international and domestic news, as well as hard and soft news, which made them optimal programs to evaluate in this study.

Between October 8 and October 19, 2012, all three shows were analyzed each weekday night, except for the October 8 broadcast of CBS Evening News with Scott Pelley, as no data was available. While coding for these news programs, this study focused the coding parameters to meet the specific research questions proposed. This study created precise rules to determine who qualified as a reporter: anchors did not count. Also, this study was concerned with the gender of a reporter and the type of story he or she was reporting, thus making it necessary to define what qualifies as a story. In this study, a full news package counted as a story. A news package is a pre-recorded, self-contained report in which a reporter is shown talking on camera, often filmed on location, that runs for about 1:15 to 2:00 minutes long. Defining a story as a news package ensured that the stories coded in this study were roughly the same length and that reporters had a similar level of involvement in delivering and developing the story. This eliminated news anchors from the coding process, as a news anchor typically read the short news pieces, while a reporter was afforded more time to cover a story in depth and refer to multiple sources.

The terms “hard news” and “soft news” also had to be defined more clearly. It was decided that hard news would include stories of political and international nature, especially stories that were time-sensitive, like the story about a would-be bomber in New York. Soft news included health and feature stories, or stories that could be reported at any time of the week without altering their message. The case of the meningitis out-

breaks were at first soft news stories, as not much time or many resources were dedicated to developing the stories, until multiple people began to die of meningitis, thus making the issue timely and concerning to the public, so hard news.

The second part of this study analyzed whether male or female sources were used more frequently, and whether those sources should be considered experts or non-experts. Experts were considered to be experts in the field of the news being reported, when their expertise was related to the type of news. Non-experts included men and women asked, largely out of context, his or her opinion on the topic of the news story. Children were not included as sources in this study, nor were political candidates, sources from press conferences or sources filmed for or broadcast on other networks.

IV. Findings

Table 1 shows that all three networks had a similar number of stories broadcast, 55 or 56, which helped to show the differences between the networks in terms of the gender of reporters and the type of stories they covered.

Table 1. Breakdown of Story Type By Gender Across Networks

News Network	Hard News Male Reporter	Soft News Male Reporter	Hard News Female Reporter	Soft News Female Reporter	Total Stories
ABC	50.0%(22)	50.0%(22)	9.1%(1)	90.9%(10)	55
CBS	58.3%(21)	41.7%(15)	85.0%(17)	15.0%(3)	56
NBC	66.7%(18)	33.3%(9)	51.7%(15)	48.3%(14)	56
	57.0%(61)	43.0%(46)	55.0%(33)	45.0%(27)	167

During this time of heightened political activity, as the United States prepared for the presidential elections, most of the broadcasts analyzed had a story relating to the candidates as the lead story, or even broke coverage into two stories. These stories were often considered to be hard news, except in the instances when the stories were presented with elements of soft news stories. Other hard news stories during this time period included the investigation into the Benghazi, Libya, terror attack and the recovery of a young girl, Malala Yousufzai, who was shot by the Taliban in Pakistan for demanding education for girls. As shown in Table 1, the number of hard news stories reported by men was almost double those stories reported by women (61 vs. 33 stories). When three networks were analyzed individually, CBS and NBC did not show much difference in terms of the assignments of female reporters to hard news. The difference was caused by ABC, which only had one hard news story reported by a woman during that study's time frame, compared to 17 and 15 for CBS and NBC, respectively. Considering that this study was over a short time period, the one female hard news reporter from ABC could be out of the norm; conceivably, there are more women working as reporters for ABC than were featured on the nightly news. In terms of coverage of soft stories, there were more male reporters than their female colleagues (46 vs. 27 stories). However, out of the stories the female journalists did cover, 55% were hard news stories, like male counterparts (57%). This shows that, although female reporters cover fewer hard news stories and stories in general compared to male reporters, they still report more hard than soft news stories. In terms of number of stories rather than percentages, the only category in which women reporters had a higher number of stories than men was in the soft news category for NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams. Overall, women covered 60 total stories while men covered 107, which came to 78% more stories for male reporters.

This study demonstrated that men were used as sources more frequently than women on the broadcast news programs during this short time frame characterized by heavy election coverage. Table 2 shows that, out of the 259 sources used over the specified time period, 136 sources were for hard news. Among them 93 sources were male sources (68%) and 43 were female sources (32%). When it comes to soft news, 72 out of 123 sources were male sources (59%) and 51 from females sources (41%). This suggests that depen-

gency on male sources is higher in hard news than soft news.

Table 2. Breakdown of sources by gender

Sources	Count
Total Male Sources Hard News	93
Total Male Sources Soft News	72
Total Female Sources Hard News	43
Total Female Sources Soft News	51
Total Number of Sources	259

To analyze how male and female reporters used the sources differently, Figure 1 was created. In hard news, female reporters relied on expert males in 66% of the cases while male reporters relied on expert males in 52%. This shows that females relied more heavily on male sources as expert sources (See the first two bars in Figure 1). Even in non-expert sources for hard news, female reporters relied on males far more than male reporters (60% vs. 29%).

When it comes to soft news, male reporters relied more heavily on male experts than female reporters did on male experts (73% vs. 50%). On the other hand, male reporters more heavily relied on female non-experts as sources in their soft news than female reporters (69% vs. 45%).

One hypothesis of this study was that women reporters would seek out and rely more heavily on female sources; on the other hand, men would do the same with male sources. A breakdown of a male reporter's sources by gender, news type, and expertise level in Figure 1 showed that both male and female reporters relied more on male sources than female sources in most categories. Even the female reporters relatively more heavily relied on male sources in three categories than their counterparts, except for when they covered soft news and used expert sources. Male reporters used male sources more heavily than female counterparts only when they covered soft news and used expert sources.

By network, ABC used a total of 78 news sources, CBS used 71, and NBC used the most, coming in at 110. Broken down by gender, female reporters from ABC World News with Diane Sawyer used the least number of sources, only 16. However, female reporters at NBC Nightly News with Brian Wil-

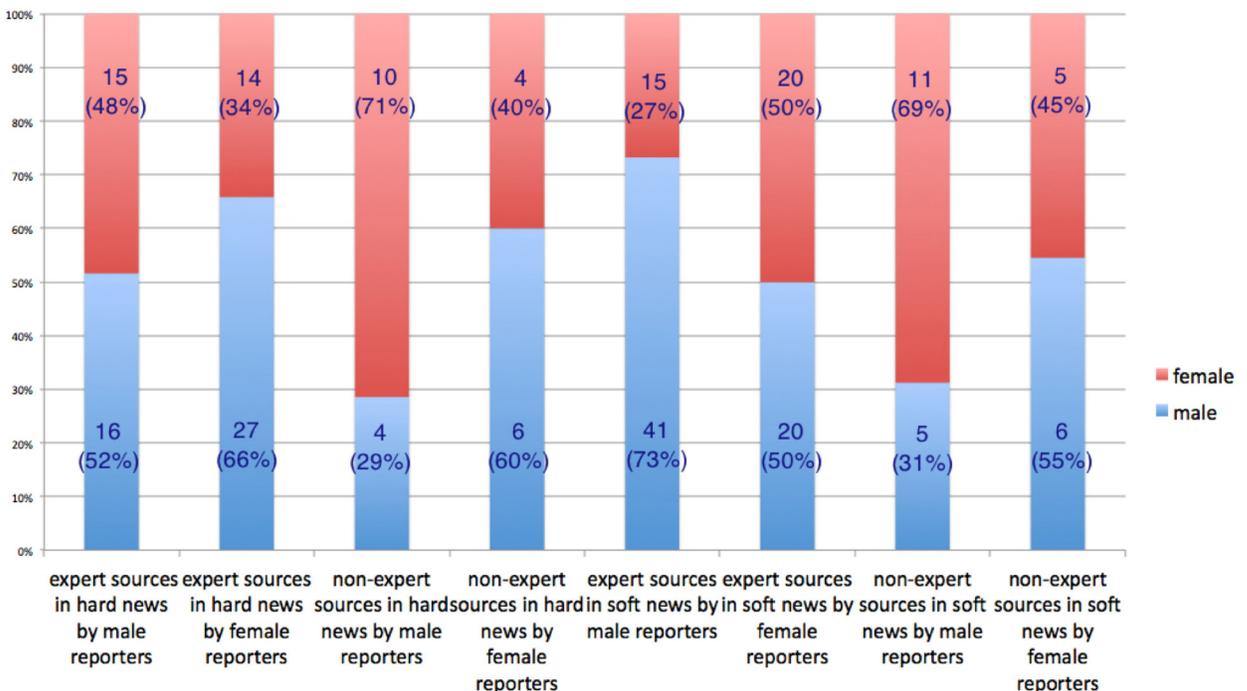


Figure 1. How male and female reporters used sources in different types of news

liams used the most sources for either gender at any news program, 64. The male reporters from ABC were a close second with 62 sources (See Appendix for more detail).

V. Analysis and Conclusion

This study aimed to determine whether male reporters were given more hard news stories than female reporters during a period preceding the 2012 presidential election. Male reporters covered more stories (107 stories) than female counterparts (60 stories). First, viewers would more likely to have viewed the hard news stories that were covered by male reporters than female counterparts.

At the same time, viewers' exposure to the gender of reporters was also determined by the relative number of stories each gender of reporters covered. While female reporters covered 33 stories out the 60 stories they covered (55% as shown in Table 1), male counterparts covered 61 hard news stories out of the 105 stories (57.0%). There were variations among the networks. For example, at CBS, hard news accounted for 58.3% of all the stories males reporters covered, while the percentage for female reporters reached as high as 85.0%. But On ABC World News with Diane Sawyer, only one female journalist reported a hard news story during the entire study. Excluding ABC Network, female reporters covered 65.3% out of all the stories assigned to them, while male reporters did 61.9%.

Less assignment of female reporters to glamorous hard news as well as the unequal ratio of male to female journalists featured on the news could discourage women interested in becoming broadcast news professionals from pursuing careers in the field. During this study, male journalists covered more hard and soft news stories than female journalists not necessarily because of the story content, but because there were more male journalists.

The second purpose of the study was to determine whether male reporters relied on male sources, and female reporters would behave otherwise. An underrepresentation of female sources the study found could hinder women from seeking important, expert positions and deprive society of the female perspective. Especially now, during an election season that hinges crucially on the female population, women involvement in news is more important than ever.

Every four years, presidential candidates and their messages dominate the news cycles of almost every news outlet. They claim to rely on the votes of every citizen of age. So why are women often not shown in the context of these stories? During the study period, each of the three news network shows analyzed for the presence of female reporters and sources had only one or two stories dedicated to female voting issues. Some of these stories focused more on the wives of the presidential candidates than the issues average women consider to be important in the 2012 election, like reproductive rights, for instance. One of the reasons is that there are more men currently holding and running for political offices, which leads networks to assume that women are not as interested in hearing hard news stories of political nature because they are not as politically involved.

Of the hard news stories examined, men reported 61 stories and women reported 33, but out of the stories women covered, 55% were hard news stories in comparison with 57% for male reporters, as seen in Table 1. These stories, mostly about politics or international news, also typically featured male sources as experts. Men were used as expert sources in hard news by male and female journalists more than women sources -- more so by female reporters than their counterparts-- showing that female journalists did not necessarily favor female sources as hypothesized.

Women are more likely to be used as non-experts than experts, except for when female reporters cover soft stories. The fact that more male sources were featured on television during this study raises the question: If men are more comfortable seeing themselves represented on television, wouldn't women be more comfortable seeing themselves represented as well? Women today consume news more than men, but if they are still not shown on television as often as men, will this trend continue? It could be predicted that, as long as women are kept out of the news as reporters and sources, women will continue to hold a lower status compared to men (Armstrong, 2004). This could continue to project the perception that men are more credible than women (Weibel et al., 2008), and that women need to be sexualized objects in order to gain male attention (Nitz et al., 2007). This study showed that men were used as expert sources more often than women on many subjects. When women are excluded from hard news stories as both reporters and sources, their

viewpoint is short changed and thus is easily ignored. To thoroughly understand a breaking hard news story, for instance, it could be beneficial for the audience to hear the female viewpoint and ultimately have a fuller, more complex perception of the story.

The argument that soft news stories are written for women is one that remains as a reason to relegate female reporters to said stories in the future (Carter, 1998). However, this old stereotype must be broken in order for women to feel that they deserve to hold leadership roles and feel equal to men. This study has followed in the path of many previous studies that aimed to pinpoint why men seem to have an advantage in the broadcast world. The implications of such studies, given the current, heightened political awareness in the United States, will bring to light other characteristics of female underrepresentation in broadcast news.

At the network level, most journalists are not working alone to cover news stories; research could be done to determine whether the producers and staff working on a news program affect not only who is assigned what story, but also the presentation of the story itself. A study that focused solely on ABC World News with Diane Sawyer to discover the ratio of female to male journalists could help explain why only one woman reported a hard news story during this study.

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**Appendix:
Sources Used by Reporters by Network, News Type and Source**

Sources of Male Reporters

News Network	Male Sources Hard News		Male Sources Soft News		Female Sources Hard News		Female Sources Soft News		Total
	<u>Expert</u>	<u>Non-Expert</u>	<u>Expert</u>	<u>Non-Expert</u>	<u>Expert</u>	<u>Non-Expert</u>	<u>Expert</u>	<u>Non-Expert</u>	
	ABC	25	2	17	2	6	6	4	
CBS	15	1	13	2	4	2	6	6	49
NBC	16	1	11	1	5	2	5	5	46
	56	4	41	5	15	10	15	11	157

Sources of Female Reporters

News Network	Male Sources Hard News		Male Sources Soft News		Female Sources Hard News		Female Sources Soft News		Total
	<u>Expert</u>	<u>Non-Expert</u>	<u>Expert</u>	<u>Non-Expert</u>	<u>Expert</u>	<u>Non-Expert</u>	<u>Expert</u>	<u>Non-Expert</u>	
	ABC			6				7	
CBS	10	3	1		5	2	1		22
NBC	17	3	13	6	9	2	12	2	64
	27	6	20	6	14	4	20	5	102