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## Women in the Field: What Do You Know?

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Abstract

Although more women than ever work in Canadian media, their participation in journalism seems misunderstood or underexplored. That was the message emerging from *Women in the Field*, a symposium hosted by the Ryerson Journalism Research Centre in 2011. More than 200 journalists and journalism students gathered to discuss dilemmas facing women—from covering high-risk events to balancing parenthood with careers. Participants discussed equality in newsrooms, asking whether women are fairly represented and whether they cover news differently from men. This narrative literature review reports on what scholars know about the state of women in Canadian news by identifying common lines of inquiry, comparing conflicting findings, teasing out ambiguities arising from multidisciplinary approaches, and pointing to areas requiring further research.

### Bios

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## Introduction

Journalism offers a unique vantage point on gender equality. Women *appear* to have made strides in newsrooms, now forming a third of the world's full-time work force (Byerly, 2011), although still far from parity with men. Those gains seem less impressive when we consider the ratio of women in journalism post-secondary programs—72.5 percent in U.S. schools and there is no reason to think it's much different in Canada (Becker, Vlad, Kazragis, Toledo & Desnoes, 2011).

Scholars of all stripes have examined the status of women in journalism through the prisms of their own disciplines, from historians documenting the careers of pioneers to cultural studies experts theorizing about how women Tweet (McCluskey, 2011). Sociologists and communication scholars have measured the gender gap in newsrooms and investigated the media's reinforcement of stereotypes. Researchers have gathered data on content, extracting meaning from clippings and video by counting bylines or conducting interviews. As in so many areas, the multidisciplinary nature of journalism scholarship, while enriching, mixes methodologies and confounds efforts to summarize findings and generalize themes.

Yet this is exactly what we seek to do here. In 2011, the Ryerson Journalism Research Centre convened *Women in the Field*, a symposium attracting more than 200 current, former, and aspiring journalists, mostly women. Panels and roundtables generated spirited conversations about how women are doing in journalism. We realized that journalists are unfamiliar with scholarly research into their field, and hunger for more information. So we assigned student reporters to gather and synthesize the questions raised, unearthing recurring themes. Women in news want to know: Are women making genuine inroads in Canadian newsrooms? Do women perform journalism differently, and if so, how? Are women leaving news because of toxic workplaces, family obligations, or a sense of powerlessness? We aim here to give an overview of what scholars know about women in Canadian journalism, identify common lines of inquiry, compare conflicting findings, tease out ambiguities, and point to areas ripe for further research.

It is tempting to start with the counting of heads because it is deceptively simple and, at first glance, it may deliver some good news for women. In an international context, Canadian women are among those making strides, now generating more than 40 percent of news reports in this country (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010). More encouraging—maybe—were last year's findings by the International Women's Media Foundation, which found that in 11 Canadian news companies, women occupied 55.1 percent of senior management positions (Byerly, 2011).

And yet, as women seem to prosper in Canadian journalism, there are contradictory signs. For one, they may not have entirely escaped the confines of the "Women's Pages." They may no longer be assigned exclusively to "female" beats, such as fashion or lifestyle; however, influential beats such as politics and crime remain male-dominated, with women covering only a third of those stories (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010).

For another, the situation for women in decision-making roles is not much clearer; women remain underrepresented in top management positions and frequently encounter the glass ceiling – although as we will see later, the magnitude of the inequality depends on who is counting and how.

If women are not present in the numbers we might expect, where are they? Where are the people who could be assigning or reporting the major news of the day? Are they toiling in the ranks or did they leave newsrooms? Women have told researchers in the United States that a journalistic career is incompatible with raising a family, saying that managers frown upon journalists who place family first (Everbach & Flournoy, 2007). The majority of female reporters in Canada do not have children, whereas less than a third of male reporters are childless (Robinson, 2005). By the same token – or tokenism? – Canada's top female news decision-makers are much less likely than other working women to have children under 16 (Barber & Rauhala, 2008).

Most studies of women journalists assume that women cover news differently from men. However, the evidence is far from conclusive, raising contradictions about whether women perpetuate or challenge conventional news values. Perhaps that's no surprise because women are hardly a monolithic entity. Ambivalent themselves, women at Canadian newspapers see sexism in society, but do not acknowledge it in their newsrooms or in their own working lives (Aldridge, 2001). They may think they face a disadvantage when stories are assigned, but also say that gender has no impact on how assigning editors do their jobs (Djerf-Pierre, 2007). Some think female bosses would improve the hiring of women but also insist that news values are unlikely to be affected by the boss's gender (Ross, 2001). Some scholars have deduced that gender plays a scant role in news choices, either because journalists say it does not (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1994) or because women's attitudes are so colonized by male values that they cannot resist them (Van Zoonen, 1998).

But there are those who suggest there *is* a difference. Peiser (2000), looking at how German journalists ranked issues, found that women place more emphasis on issues involving humanity and less importance on abstractions and institutions. Craft & Wanta (2004) compared newspapers with high and low ratios of women managers. In a content analysis of 30 U.S. papers, they found that women in managerial positions encouraged positive news reporting and treated women reporters on par with men. At places with a higher concentration of women managers, men and women were evenly distributed among beats or topics. In newspapers with lower ratios of women managers, male reporters covered politics more often (Craft & Wanta, 2004). But we should add here that these papers hewed to the usual news agenda regardless of how many women held managerial positions. Crime and politics remained the top two topics (Craft & Wanta, 2004).

Others have found similarly subtle differences. Gold and Auslander (1999), who examined stories about people with disabilities in newspapers from Canada and Israel, found men much more likely to report on a subject's occupation, financial problems, disabled rights, government institutions, and the courts. Women were much more likely to report on functional limitations, problems of service delivery, and living arrangements and were more likely to quote family and friends. A decade later, in reviewing content, the 2010 Global Media Monitoring Project showed that female reporters were slightly more likely to include female news sources. Of stories written by women, 28 percent of

the subjects were women, while men wrote about women in 22 percent of stories (Gallagher, 2010). The GMMP maps the media representation of women worldwide in five-year cycles. Stories in Canadian media that included women as a central focus were much more likely to be written by a female reporter. Sixty percent of the stories with women as a central focus were by female reporters (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010). But again a caveat – across the board, women remain underrepresented as subjects. In Canada, only 30 percent are women (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010).

In summary, then, some scholars detect subtle differences in how women journalists perform their work, generally under the umbrella of *treatment* – of women in the newsroom or of women as subjects – rather than in any explicit challenge to prevailing news values. If there are differences, maybe measuring the demographics matters? Of course, the news industry implicitly supports tracking numbers. Organizations such as the Radio Television Digital News Association (formerly the Radio Television News Directors Association) monitor the ratio of women in the field regularly. RTDNA data as of 2011 showed that 39.9 percent of local television news reporters and 28 percent of news directors were women – little change from results in 2007 (Papper, 2011; Papper, 2007).

If the numbers matter, then what else have the counters found? The short answer is: more mixed messages, arising from mixed methods. The International Women's Media Foundation examined 522 companies in 59 countries in 2009 (Byerly, 2011). Unfortunately, the IWMF did not give a total percentage of women in Canadian journalism. Instead, it split its data along 10 employment levels and includes financial and administrative personnel, thus making some trends difficult to discern. Nevertheless, there is encouraging news: about 45 percent of senior newsgatherers in Canada are women.

The Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 went in another direction, looking *not* at newsrooms but at news reports, analyzing a total of 279 stories in 24 high-impact Canadian news sources on Nov. 10, 2009 (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010). The study found that 42 percent of all reports were by women. This is significantly higher than the worldwide percentage, 35.1 percent, and also a jump from Canada's result in the 2005 GMMP—30 percent. Women reporters had the most impact in television news (45 percent) and the least in radio at 29 percent. In print, 43 percent of all reports were by women. This looks like the nearest women have ever come to reaching parity with men in Canadian journalism. Gertrude Robinson (2005), for example, found that women made up 29 percent of reporters in the mid-90s. In the press, women hovered around 30 percent and in TV at 37 percent.

But, before anyone pops the Champagne, keep in mind that the GMMP was counting *stories*, while Robinson was counting *heads*. The project measures output and would conceal the effect, for example, of more productive women reporters—or less productive ones, for that matter. It is worth noting too that the Employment Equity Act requires national broadcasters to report annually on the number of women and other groups employed (Agocs & Osborne, 2009), perhaps fuelling those gains in television.

Robinson's 1995 surveys also examined which beats women were covering. Ten beats—lifestyle, consumer, social welfare, ecology, health, minorities, organizations, labour,

science, and education – were deemed female (Robinson, 2005). The GMMP's more recent findings categorized stories into six topics: economy, celebrity and sports, health and science, social and legal, crime and violence, and politics and government. Only 37 percent of crime stories and 34 percent of stories about politics and government were covered by women. Stories about the economy and celebrity and sports were almost balanced, with women covering 47 percent and 46 percent respectively. Stories about health and science were more likely to be reported on by women. Social and legal stories were too few to matter statistically (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010).

In other words, while general figures show that women are moving toward parity with men, some drilling down reveals that women are not equal in the two largest news topics. Since crime and violence and politics and government make up 50 percent of the news (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010), this may suggest that most women are not assigned to the most important stories. The GMMP report did not divide major topics into categories as specific as Robinson's, and analyzed stories in all three media types (print, radio and television) while Robinson's 1995 survey looked at Canadian newspapers only. Thus, this renders detailed comparative analysis difficult even as it seems to suggest that women are not at parity when it comes to covering the beats that editors deem most significant.

Varying methodologies also undermine attempts to measure whether women are assuming leadership in news—though the general trend seems to be that the glass ceiling still prevents advancement. Between 2002 and 2005, Barber and Rauhala (2008) surveyed 221 news editors and news directors from television, radio, and newspaper outlets across Canada, finding that only 19 percent (42) of those surveyed were women (Barber & Rauhala, 2008). A 2011 report by the International Women's Media Foundation surveyed 11 Canadian news companies that provided information on almost 14,000 employees. They found that 55.1 percent of those in senior management positions, which included news directors but also executive editors, were women (Byerly, 2011).

Now, it is possible that the number of women news directors and editors jumped by more than 30 percent in five years. But a more likely explanation for this discrepancy is in the methods used to count and rank journalists. The IWWMF survey sought data on a wide range of job categories, while Barber and Rauhala focused on only those people with direct assigning duties, that is, not including CEOs nor clerical staff. Barber and Rauhala contacted all news companies across Canada, whereas the IWWMF drew its data from 11 companies who responded. While Barber and Rauhala surveyed people with assigning responsibility, the IWWMF surveyed larger categories, including presidents of news, bureau chiefs, and "similar titles" (Byerly, 2011, p. 24).

Despite the anomalies arising from methods, the two studies coalesce on one significant point: women are stuck. The IWWMF concluded that women hit a glass ceiling at senior level management; positions in governance and top-management were less accessible, with women making up 26.3 percent and 39.4 percent. Below the glass ceiling, women held 50 percent of the positions in middle-management, including jobs such as senior editor, but also senior personnel in finance (Byerly, 2011).

Where do women go if they are not moving up the ladder to top jobs? A few scholars have tried to solve the case of the disappearing woman journalist. A 2005 survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found that women were leaving journalism

earlier than men. Many attributed their departures to a belief that careers in journalism are incompatible with raising a family. Everbach and Flournoy interviewed 17 women who had left journalism, one of whom said: “Young male reporters were consistently offered better jobs and pay than young women. Maybe because the bosses saw them as an investment—they knew a lot of women would leave” (Everbach & Flournoy, 2007, p. 57).

That dovetails with some of what we see in Canada. Robinson found that 27 percent of all Canadian female journalists interrupted their careers at least once (vs. 19 percent of men). Aldridge interviewed nine female Canadian journalists in 1999. Some respondents believed that women should not have any domestic ties, not even a spouse, to be successful (Aldridge, 2001). Certainly, fewer female journalists are married than men, and when Robinson was counting, the majority did not have children (Robinson, 2005). As for senior editors, Barber and Rauhala found only 51.2 percent have children, significantly less than other working women, 72 percent of whom have children under 16, according to Statistics Canada 2003 data (Barber & Rauhala, 2008).

Women journalists acknowledge difficulty in balancing work and family. Robinson found that child care arrangements and other obligations interfered with 42 percent of women’s work schedules (Robinson, 2005). Among managers, Barber and Rauhala found that 80.5 percent of women believed the news business makes family commitments difficult (Barber & Rauhala, 2008).

But it is not just the mommy track that derails women. Everbauch and Flournoy’s work offers insights into other reasons why women flee. Many voiced concerns about being unable to report on what they thought mattered. An Asian American ex-journalist wanted to explain the Vietnamese community to the average reader. Instead, she realized, “I was never going to write the kinds of stories I wanted. They weren’t interested in in-depth psychological stories; they were interested in quick-hit gang stories” (Everbach & Flournoy, 2007, p. 58).

This supports what others have said about the persistence of old-school news values. Craft and Wanta (2004) note that the literature suggests that the individual journalist is unlikely to be able to inject much personal perspective into the news. “News culture and routines dampen most of the differences in viewpoint or experience workers bring to the newsroom.” Splichal and Garrison (as cited by Craft and Wanta, 2004) speculate: “Perhaps women who achieve management positions, as their male counterparts, have been rewarded for conformity in addition to achievement” (Craft & Wanta, 2004, p. 127). That conformity coincides with what Barber and Rauhala found—that female managers agree with their male counterparts about journalists’ roles (Barber & Rauhala, 2008).

Other researchers (e.g. Melin-Higgins & Djerf-Pierre, 1998) have investigated how women adapt. Do they accept the macho culture of news, challenge it or abandon it? The answer has been: yes, all of the above. The persistence of traditional if not male-focused news values at least among the upper tiers of newswomen may explain the stereotyping of women that scholars have found. The number of female news subjects in Canada was low across the board, according to the GMMP, and when women *were* included, they were portrayed in ways that seem unrepresentative. Women were quoted as experts, spokespeople, or main subjects only 29 percent of the time or less and were more likely to be included as ordinary “Janes.” More than 72 percent of stories support stereotypes

about women (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010). Fifty-eight percent of homemakers or parents used as sources were women. Women were identified by their family status 19 percent of the time versus only 13 percent for men (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2010).

To summarize, women may be more present in news in Canada but it is not clear what impact they have. Their numbers at the top and even in the ranks do not reflect parity, never mind their preponderance among journalism students. They continue to encounter a glass ceiling at the senior management level. Many women attribute this to the difficulty that a profession in journalism poses in balancing work and family life. In fact, women in journalism tend to have fewer children than male journalists and are less likely to be married. Women leave the industry perhaps because of the challenges of balancing work and family life but also perhaps because the industry does not allow them to influence content. Their impact in newsrooms seems muted; while they may be slightly more likely than men to include female subjects in stories, newsroom values may inhibit their efforts to assign, report and write what they want. Whether the reporter is male or female, women are generally underrepresented in the news and gender stereotypes are often reinforced.

This report provides only an overview of the often contradictory and methodologically inconsistent evidence about women in Canadian journalism. The literature—and the questions that arose at the *Women in the Field* symposium—make it clear that more reproducible research needs to be done exploring the reasons behind women's underrepresentation in the news, the persistence of male newsroom culture, as well as an update on the status of women in the field today. Certainly there is a need to chronicle the impact on women and news sparked by the explosive changes in the industry in the past five years. Beyond more tallying of job titles, qualitative investigations might tell us more about the extent to which women and men differ in their coverage of the news, perhaps by means of a focused, in-depth examination of how men and women cover a beat or topic area that is generally deemed gender neutral. Politics and crime seem like fertile choices.

Finally, the most recent Canadian data on work and family balance dates back to 2005 and focuses on news managers rather than all journalists. Large-scale reports by the GMMP and the IWMF do not examine women journalists' family status. More research needs to be done, perhaps mass surveys or qualitative interviews, to examine how women juggle work and family life and what the industry can do to make newsrooms more adaptable to a female workforce.

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