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Karen Ross and Margie Comrie

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# The rules of the (leadership) game: Gender, politics and news

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**Karen Ross**

University of Liverpool, UK

**Margie Comrie**

Massey University, New Zealand

## Abstract

The abiding interest of researchers to explore the nature of political communication continues to provoke lively debates about who controls the moveable feast of the news agenda – politicians or journalists. This article argues that despite journalistic claims of impartiality, a careful, multilayered analysis of print and broadcast news of a general election (New Zealand, 2008) and, more specifically, reportage about the leaders of the Labour Party (Helen Clark) and National Party (John Key) demonstrates clear bias against the long-serving (older female) incumbent in favour of the (younger male) challenger. This bias is manifest in several ways, including the visibility of the two leaders measured by column inches, their uses as quoted sources and the tone and tenor of reportage. Whilst we found few examples of explicitly sexist commentary, there were numerous ways in Clark's personal attributes, including her sex and age, were slyly used to undermine her continued suitability for the top job.

## Keywords

Journalistic routines, media sexism, news bias, reporting general elections, woman Prime Minister, women politicians

A parliament composed wholly or mainly of women politicians is not a prospect to be regarded with enthusiasm. Were political office to become the ambition of the fair sex and were standing for Parliament to become the latest craze of fashion, there would be many dreary and neglected homes throughout the country sacrificed on the altar of political ambition. (Editorial, *The Age*, 15 March 1921, p. 6)

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## Corresponding author:

Karen Ross, Professor of Media and Public Communication, Department of Communication and Media, University of Liverpool, Liverpool L69 7ZT, UK

Email: [rossk@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:rossk@liverpool.ac.uk)

The historical dearth of women candidates for political office has meant studying the relationship between gender, media and politics is still a juvenile sub-discipline, although in the 20 or so years in which researchers *have* been examining that relationship, most studies suggest that women and men attract different kinds of media attention, not just in tone and content but, as importantly, in volume and therefore visibility (Adcock, 2010; Braden, 1996; Banwart et al., 2003; Bystrom et. al., 2001; Gidengil and Everitt, 2003; Heldman et al., 2005; Kahn, 1991, 1992, 1994a, 1994b; Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Ross, 2002). While the naked misogyny of *The Age* has long since faded, more subtle gender bias and omissions still hamper female politicians' media presence. If candidates are not put in front of voters, name recognition is hard to mobilise and this is not only a disaster for the women involved but damages the wider political process by denying women's talents and experiences. The practice of a deliberative democracy is thus compromised by a journalistic tendency to marginalise women's candidacy and voice. To some extent, this tendency is mitigated by the increased use of personal and party political blogs and social media bypassing traditional media's gate-keepers (see Entman, 2010). But traditional media remain highly influential in providing the public with political information (Gibbons, 2007; Kalitowski, 2009; Tapscott, 2008). More than 30 years of agenda-setting research demonstrates the media *can* set the agenda for what policy issues audiences think are important (Coleman et al., 2008) and recent studies indicate the media can also influence parliamentary agendas (Van Noije et al., 2008). Moreover, Entman (2010: 393) uses the narrow margins in the recent US elections to demonstrate that a media slant favouring one political party over another can influence close election outcomes. Finally, contemporary studies using frame analysis (*pace* Eldridge, 1995; Entman, 2007; Hardt, 2004) to explore the salience of sex in media reportage of women parliamentarians consistently argue that it remains stubbornly evident, albeit in subtle forms (see Ross, 2009).

This article therefore aims to contribute to this debate by examining media coverage of former New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark in the run-up to the general election in 2008 and during the campaign itself, where Clark lost the election and subsequently resigned. We argue that the twin themes of age and gender played out in Clark's media coverage in both subtle and more overt ways. This, combined with the journalistic desire for something new (Clark and her Labour Government were contesting a fourth consecutive term), produced a form of reporting which did not help her cause at the ballot box.<sup>1</sup>

However, we should also note that *some* research suggests that the media do not *always* privilege men in their stories (Devitt, 2002; Smith, 1997) and, sometimes, the novelty value of women's candidacy increases their media visibility and/or extends the range of issues the media cover (Atkeson and Krebs, 2008; Bystrom, 2006). This seems especially the case in the USA, where several studies of the 2000 elections showed that women received more coverage than the male competition (e.g. Bystrom et al., 2001). However, not all publicity is good publicity. For example, women politicians in Ross's (2002) study made clear that they could easily grab a headline if they did something quirky, wore bright red stilettos or indulged in attention-grabbing behaviour, and especially if they acted aggressively and thus confounded gender norms (see also Gidengil and Everitt, 2005). But five minutes of such notoriety could easily undermine five years of dull but important policy work, so such strategies are extremely high risk.

So, although some research suggests there *has* been some improvement in coverage of political women over time, women politicians mostly remain obstinately ‘othered’ by and in media discourse. They are still given the prefix ‘woman’ to mark them out as different to the traditional (male) politician, are still undermined by a continuing fascination with their coiffure, couture and conjugal relations, and their views on policy are still largely ignored. As our findings show later, the problem of differential treatment based on sex can be exacerbated by other characteristics such as age – a double-whammy rarely befalling male politicians.

Much work on gender, politics and media tends to focus on coverage during election campaigns, often comparing women and men candidates’ media visibility, but do the rules of the game change when women compete for the top job? When women contest leadership positions, the media can inflict considerable damage if they undermine women’s credibility and competence to take on very senior political portfolios, as happened, arguably, in successive US campaigns with candidates such as Elizabeth Dole, Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin. Whilst this is not everywhere the case – and Mary McAleese, Angela Merkel and Julia Gillard are all good examples of women competing for and winning leadership elections recently – we argue that not only do these exceptions prove the rule but also that such women often succeed despite rather than because of their media representation.

Studies of Elizabeth Dole’s candidacy, for example, demonstrate an over-emphasis on personal attributes and characteristics to the detriment of coverage of her policy positions (Aday and Devitt, 2001; Gilmartin, 2001). Importantly, the study by Heldman et al. (2005) also suggested that, despite being the second strongest contender in the polls, her suitability for senior political office was persistently questioned and a focus on her sex made clear that this was the only interesting (and novel) thing about her. Women candidates more generally are often defined first by their biology and then by their politics; media preoccupation with sartorial style is something women parliamentarians persistently lament (Ross, 2002), and coverage is often less than complimentary.

Of course, sex is only one variable influencing women’s media visibility when seeking high political office, since other elements such as their likelihood of success and the popularity of their party are also in the mix (Norris, 1997; Ross, 1995). A woman’s status prior to running for office also plays a part as found in a study of the Bulgarian press where, although most women candidates were subjected to negative gender stereotyping, Meglena Kuneva, a law professor and high-profile policy analyst, enjoyed a ‘well-balanced’ relationship with the press (Ibroscheva and Raicheva-Stover, 2009: 124). Where women are seen as weak contenders, not only will their media visibility be diminished but their framing as ‘also rans’ further consolidates their position, producing a self-perpetuating cycle of negative coverage.

## **An exemplary case study: The fall of Helen Clark**

The majority of studies exploring the ways that gender plays out in leadership contests feature women (and sometimes their male opponents) who are newcomers to contesting senior political office. However, focusing on New Zealand’s former Prime Minister Helen Clark provides an opportunity to examine the coverage of a long-standing female leader and explore ways in which issues of incumbency and gender play out in media

discourse. Clark had led the Labour Party for 15 years, won the 1999 general election by standing against the country's first female Prime Minister (National's Jenny Shipley) and was also the first Labour Prime Minister to win three successive elections. Unlike many of her senior political women colleagues who rarely spoke out on the issue, Clark long condemned the inherent sexism of Parliament and the gendered nature of her media coverage (see e.g. Edwards, 2001; McGregor, 1996). As well as the more routinised, sex-based name-calling such as 'nanny' and 'matron' that women leaders endure, Clark's political authority was challenged in a more novel way when the term 'Helengrad' was coined. As part of this current project, we trace the etymology of 'Helengrad' in the New Zealand press and consider its significance as an example of gendered politics.

Clark has experienced ongoing prurient speculations on her sexuality by a scandal-fixated press (Comrie, 2006; McGregor, 1996) and, although Clark's second term in office saw her media profile shift to one more focused on her government's achievements, her third term was more problematic, with greater personalised attention, and speculations about her marital and child-free status resurfacing (Trimble and Treiberg, 2010). Pressure on all politicians has increased as media now routinely scrutinize their intimate lives in search of sex and other scandals (see Juntunen and Välvirronen, 2010), glossing such coverage as being in the public interest.

The hot-house atmosphere of a general election makes party leaders particularly vulnerable to such scrutiny and New Zealand's 2008 election saw Clark (already slipping in the polls – see later discussion) fighting for survival against the younger, media-savvy and newly elected John Key, leader of the opposition National Party. A long-term incumbent is often at a disadvantage compared to a fresh new face and we were interested to see how gender might also come into play in such an election contest. John Key, a relative political newcomer, was an energetic, extremely successful 'self-made' man. His publicists were astute, marketing Key (*pace* Corner and Pels, 2003) as both fiscally sophisticated (he was formerly a foreign exchange dealer) and simultaneously down to earth, a man with humble origins who had made good (e.g. *New Zealand Herald*, 2008a). Key's 'blokey' style was, we argue, a presentational strategy casting him as a man-of-the-people who apparently relished his regular appearances on TV3's *Gone Fishin'* show. When juxtaposed with Helen Clark's more sober, restrained public persona, which incorporated her intellectual background as a university lecturer, Key was presented as a radical alternative. Where Clark's Labour Government favoured state intervention, Key promoted (and was seen to embody) the entrepreneurial turn where his abilities to run a successful business were proxied as the reason he could be trusted to run the country.

## Methods and approach

Our primary aim in this study, then, was to explore the ways in which the sex of candidates for the 'top job' was a discernible feature of news reportage during an election campaign, using a case study approach of the 2008 New Zealand elections. We used a mixed-method approach, gathering four different, but complementary sets of data to tease out issues of language, content and 'tone',<sup>2</sup> including name-calling, as well as differences in volume, visibility and source positioning in news stories published in the press and broadcast on TV. As with Margaret Thatcher's soubriquet of 'the Iron Lady', Helen

Clark's style was notoriously captured by the phrase 'Helengrad' and we consider how this term first came to be used and its subsequent (re)appearance during her terms of office. Having established the existence of a sex-based media critique of Helen Clark, we use this as a jumping-off point to undertake a set of explicitly sex-based comparative analyses of particular aspects of the media's coverage of the two party leaders during the 2008 general election. The first set of articles we interrogate are from the corpus of news stories focusing on the results of an influential set of opinion polls published in 2007.<sup>3</sup> We analysed 35 articles drawn from the three major newspapers (*The Dominion Post*, *The New Zealand Herald* and *The Press*) and news items from the two major TV channels' evening news programmes, *One News* (TVNZ) and *3 News* (TV3), all published or broadcast on the days the polls came out (13, 26 and 27 May 2007). We suggest the publication and discussion of these early polls results were a defining moment in Clark's political career because they constituted the first significant indication that she would face a serious challenge for power in the upcoming elections.

We also analysed two sets of complementary data from press and broadcasting coverage of the election campaign itself. For press coverage, we sampled 12 October (as the main parties opened their formal campaigns) to 9 November 2008. We monitored the two most widely distributed and largest circulation newspapers, the *New Zealand Herald* and the *Dominion Post*, omitting the third most important newspaper, *The Press*, since its circulation is mostly restricted to the South Island. Articles for analysis were selected using the following criteria: a) they had to have a minimum length of three paragraphs; and b) they had to feature Helen Clark and/or John Key as the substantive *subject*, not simply be *about* the election. The sample was derived using the search engine *Factiva*,<sup>4</sup> a database containing, amongst others, all articles published by the major newspapers in Australasia. To identify the preliminary sample, the key words 'Helen Clark' and 'John Key' were entered, generating 511 articles. Once the selection criteria were applied, 151 articles were selected for analysis, 93 from the *New Zealand Herald* (62%) and 58 from the *Dominion Post* (38%). This filtered sample was then interrogated in several ways to determine differences in coverage between the two leaders, and we constructed the tonal categories of 'supportive' and 'hostile' which we identified by searching for the key terms 'new', 'upbeat', 'tired', 'old' and 'desperate' and the extent to which they were associated with either or both of Clark and Key. We also searched for the two key phrases which characterised the primary attack advertising for each party, 'time for change' (National) and 'National cannot be trusted' (Labour).

The TV sample comprised the two early evening news programmes broadcast on publicly owned TVNZ (*One News*) and privately owned TV3 (*3 News*). These have the widest reach and ratings for television news, attracting over two-thirds of the national audience between them. During the period 8 October (Writ Day) to 7 November 2008 (election eve), we monitored each channel (62 shows, 31 of each), indentifying 194 national political news stories (106 from *One News* and 88 from *3 News*).

From this corpus, we analysed all news items in which Clark and/or Key spoke, totalling 112 news stories (61 and 51 respectively across the two channels). The amount of time each leader spoke in each story was recorded, as was position as first speaker. Coders also noted all instances of negative and positive bias. Negative bias was identified by the use of emotive pejorative terms by a newsreader or journalist which were not attributed to

any source (for example, connected with deceit, untrustworthiness, pandering to interest groups or 'buying' votes), particularly if the accusation was also being made by opponents. Positive bias was noted when journalists praised personal characteristics or policies of one or other leader, or drew supportive conclusions from little evidence (for example, saying that young men in a gymnastics demonstration were 'keen' to do 'backflips' for Key). Coders also noted whether party slogans (as above) were repeated in coverage.<sup>5</sup>

By using this kind of mixed-method approach, we hope we have provided a richly textured analysis of the ways in which issues of sex (bias) were more or less prominent across the New Zealand mediascape. The underpinning analytical framework is a synthesis of content, discourse and frame analysis, but we do not claim to employ a 'formal' critical discursive analytical approach more commonly found in linguistic analysis (see, e.g. Fairclough, 2010; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). Rather, our approach considers tone (as described above), phrasing and topic as indicators of media framing and, we argue, a sex-based media bias, however unintentional.

## Sex, politics and media reportage – three faces of Eve

Given the multi-modal approach described above, we first discuss the findings from each of our three complementary research phases before moving to consider their meaning in the wider context of women, politics and news.

### *The icy plains of 'Helengrad'*

In January 2008, the term 'Helengrad' made Australia's Macquarie online dictionary among 85 other new words as, 'a noun used to describe the iron grip of New Zealand's prime minister over Wellington' (McDonald, 2008: A1). The earliest reference to the term we could find was in 2000, in an *Evening Post*<sup>6</sup> editorial describing Helen Clark as a 'control freak' with 'exacting standards'. It asked, 'Does she know the Capital's earned the nickname, Helengrad, such is her total command of issues, initiatives and airtime?' (*Evening Post*, 2000). This assessment was in response to Clark's efforts to keep control over the public utterances of her less experienced ministers whom the media regularly lambasted for their poor, mistake-prone performances. But, while similar behaviour by male leaders might be described as party discipline, a negative valuation was given because, we argue, the disciplinarian was a woman. This sense is further exaggerated with descriptions of Clark as a 'dominatrix', producing the perceptual double blow of steely control and sexual enslavement, allowing speculations about her sexuality to be reprised and repeated. We suggest 'Helengrad' should be understood as a manifestation of the media's antipathy towards the Labour Government and what journalists appeared to believe was its totalitarian tendency, coupled with a distaste for Clark's personal style: the term appeared 55 times in New Zealand newspapers during 2000,<sup>7</sup> invoked in a variety of contexts. For example, a *Dominion* editorial, criticising Clark for not providing lighting for the Premier House Christmas tree, asked, 'is it further evidence of a descent into a joyless Helengrad?' (*Dominion Post*, 2000).

By 2003, a year into Clark's second term, Colin James (2003: 34) suggested 'Helengrad' had all but disappeared with a mature government that had 'captured the centre'. However, more general examples of sex-based stereotyping were still much in

evidence and Clark was persistently described as ‘aggressive’ and ‘strident’ in a TVNZ leaders’ debate during the 2005 elections. In the *New Zealand Herald*, Fran O’Sullivan (2005) judged Clark as the overall debate winner, despite lacking her ‘usual lethal force’ and then, in a casual aside, described Clark as ‘The political dominatrix – whose regime has been termed “Helengrad”’. Therefore, although the term is usually understood to have had a short lifespan, it actually enjoyed regular revivals as a shortcut signalling autocracy. For example, when Clark responded negatively to the Auditor General’s report on political party election spending, a commentator advised her to learn from Hitler’s troops at Stalingrad and ‘break out of Helengrad and retreat in good order to a more defensible position’ (Trotter, 2006: 15). The continuing, although irregular use of ‘Helengrad’ since 2000, reveals an underlying ambivalence about the appropriateness of strong female leadership, while its inclusion as a dictionary entry in early 2008 means its currency now outlives Clark’s own political fortunes.

### *The slide towards unpopularity: Three polls that defined an election*

Although the 2005 election outcome had been close, Helen Clark’s personal standing as Prime Minister took its first brutal knock in May 2007 with the publication of three major polls (*TNS-TV3*, the *New Zealand Herald-DigiPoll* and *One News* Colmar Brunton) showing that, for the first time in eight years, she had lost her preferred leader status in favour of the opposition National Party’s John Key.

Here we discuss coverage of the polls on each of the days they were published in the three major New Zealand newspapers (35 articles including six editorials) and covered on television, TVNZ’s *One News* and TV3’s *3 News* (six stories). Examining coverage of these poll results reveals ways reportage tends towards a common position. Most stories viewed the results as highly significant and emphasised Labour’s current difficulties (with recent legislation and politicians’ behaviour). An unfavourable contrast was made between an out-of-touch and tired Clark administration with the unsullied keenness of Key and the Opposition. For example, Clark was described as ‘looking somewhat tattered at the edges [compared to a] resurgent National Party [with] a fresh and appealing message’ (*The Press*, 2007). Or, a ‘stone-chipped’ government versus ‘a fresh-faced [Key] brimming with enthusiasm’ (*Dominion Post*, 2007). Although all three newspapers were broadly unsupportive of Clark and the Labour Government, only *The Press* was openly hostile. For example, in one editorial, Key was described as a yet untested leader but judged ‘moderate’, ‘smooth’, ‘pragmatic’ and ‘constructive’ whilst an ‘embattled’ Clark was ‘one of the shrewdest political operators ... ruthlessly prepared to do whatever it takes to retain power [and now] desperate’ (*The Press*, 2007). A rather less biased but still subtly devastating critique was made by the *New Zealand Herald*’s senior political commentator, Colin James (2007), who posited a series of dichotomous trade-offs between the two leaders, their style and respective strengths and weaknesses:

Clark comes to decisions slowly ... That is the way of a safe-pair-of-hands manager ... Key listens, then moves decisively ... His is the way of a leader with dash. Clark’s risk is to be thought dull and dismissible. Key’s risk is to be thought incandescent and inconstant.

**Table 1.** On-air time by party leader

| Source      | TVNZ ( <i>One News</i> ) |                       |                        | TV3 ( <i>3News</i> ) |                       |                        |
|-------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
|             | 1                        | 2                     | 3                      | 1                    | 2                     | 3                      |
|             | no. of stories           | total seconds airtime | average time per story | no. of stories       | total seconds airtime | average time per story |
| Helen Clark | 37                       | 520                   | 14.05 secs             | 39                   | 510                   | 13.1 secs              |
| John Key    | 50                       | 670                   | 13.4 secs              | 35                   | 648                   | 18.5 secs              |

James suggests respect for Clark will be pitted against attraction for Key and the election results showed which attribute won.

These examples demonstrate a particular tone that we argue is party political in orientation and although we did not detect an explicit sex bias in most of these stories, much of the discourse hints at an ageist agenda. A notable exception to the mostly neutral tone of coverage comes with woman journalist, Fran O'Sullivan (2007), writing in the *New Zealand Herald*, where she mused on Clark's reaction to the polls, 'the blue-stockinged academic who shafted two former PMs on her way to the leadership – will be alarmed ... but will put on a brave face'. This anti-intellectualism is not uncommon among journalists (see Phelan, 2008), and its (male) equivalent is the equally out-of-touch 'boffin', but O'Sullivan's jibe seems to ignore the reality that *all* leaders become so by ousting their predecessor. Instead, she suggests Clark's actions were unique in their treachery, implying an expectation that female politicians should have different behavioural standards. This is a good example of how political women are expected to behave in ways different to (and by implication 'better' or more ethically, than) men (Fountaine, 2002; Ross, 2002).

### *Battle of the sexes? Election coverage of Clark and Key*

As part of a larger study of the media's coverage of the 2008 general election, we analysed outputs from the two most significant news bulletins on each of TVNZ (*One News*) and TV3 (*3 News*), from 8 October to 7 November, both broadcast at 6 pm. We were particularly interested in the relative airtime given to Clark and Key during these 62 TV shows (see earlier methods discussion). After discussing the TV sample, we move on to consider print media coverage.

The slide towards infotainment means political voices are rarely allowed a free rein and news formats tend to repackage (following Franklin, 2004) political messages into snappy sound bites, overlaid with journalistic commentary. Nonetheless, securing speaking time is likely to confer a political advantage, enhanced by being the first speaker, because subsequent speakers are frequently shown in reactive mode. Table 1 shows the number of stories in which Clark and/or Key appeared on camera (1), their total speaking time in seconds (2), and resulting average on-camera time per story (3). Overall, Clark had far less airtime, 44 per cent compared with Key's 66 per cent. Further, Clark appeared in far fewer stories on TVNZ. Also, despite appearing as an on-air source in *more* stories on TV3, she was actually given *less* on-air time. Arguably, part of the discrepancy may be due to the more experienced Clark having a more incisive delivery, although the relatively

small difference between the two leaders' average on-camera time for TVNZ throws some doubt on this as a plausible explanation.

Overall, Key had a clear edge as a news source and this finding, for TV3 at least, is reinforced when considering who appears first in the story. On *3 News*, Key was first speaker in 41 per cent of stories in which he appeared, while the figure for Clark was 31 per cent. Clark fared better on TVNZ, though, where she was first speaker in half of the stories while Key, who appeared in more stories, was first speaker in one-third of these.

Commentators (see e.g. Atkinson, 2006) have noted the strong tendency amongst New Zealand political journalists for disdain and mockery. Although in the first part of the campaign both leaders received relatively even-handed coverage, this 'balance' was disrupted after news reports that Labour Party President Mike Williams had gone to Australia, seeking, and failing to find, evidence that Key had been involved in fraud during his career as a foreign exchange dealer. Both channels described this as an 'own goal' and a turning point in the campaign. TVNZ's opening pictures on 30 October showed Clark falling over during a mall walkabout while the presenter read the headline: 'The pitfalls of the campaign trail have the Labour Party stumbling.' During the item, the falling shot was repeated as the reporter said, 'when [politicians] slip up everyone tends to know about it. Labour had been hoping it would be John Key who would take the big fall today.' *3 News*, however, was considerably more critical, positioning Labour's economic rescue package as a hollow cheat headlined, 'Watch the hands closely. Helen Clark comes bearing smoke, mirrors and relief.' The lead item's introduction likened the package to a conjuring trick to 'distract attention from its last trick, trying to dig out dirt on John Key'. The report, from Clark's visit to a factory, lingered on shots of workers looking grim and bored. This can be contrasted with coverage given to Key's economic package the next day, which TV3 said 'out-Laboured Labour', calling Key 'the main market man with a heart'. TV3's treatment of Labour's package can also be contrasted with TVNZ's, where the story was not merged with Williams' abortive trip. Pictures on *One News* showed some workers engaged with the presentation and judging the package worthwhile. Significantly, while recognising Clark was trying to pre-empt Key, the TVNZ item also revealed it was National's leader who suggested the announcement was a ploy to distract from Labour's dirt-digging, rather than this being an independent conclusion reached by TV3.

During the final week of the campaign, Key successfully promoted himself as a 'clean' leader subjected to a dirty tricks assault by Labour and, by the end of the campaign, TVNZ was actively promulgating the notion that the robust and entirely routine campaign tactics of ambush and heckling attributed to Labour were an example of grubby politics, while the National Party was hoping for a 'clean' run. Also, throughout the campaign, Key's media team were successful in their efforts to include his main campaign slogans of 'time for change' and 'a fresh start' in TV reports. In this, Key's advisors were assisted by the similar campaign waged by Barack Obama with its ubiquitous 'change we need' and 'yes we can' motifs. In contrast, Clark gained less traction with Labour's 'it's about trust', which rebounded against Labour when she was reluctant to break ties with a minor party leader facing financial scrutiny. Overall, though, despite Labour's poor showing at the 2007 polls, we suggest that the two TV channels' initial campaign reportage was mostly even handed in terms of coverage but that Key's comments and views were mostly met with a less critical response and received more airtime than those of Clark.

**Table 2.** News article tone, value terms by party leader

| News articles                        | Helen Clark            |                | John Key  |     |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|-----------|-----|
|                                      | Frequency <sup>1</sup> | % <sup>2</sup> | Frequency | %   |
| <b>Tone</b>                          |                        |                |           |     |
| Neutral                              | 106                    | 75%            | 101       | 80% |
| Hostile                              | 18                     | 13%            | 1         | 1%  |
| Supportive                           | 6                      | 4%             | 14        | 11% |
| <b>Value terms</b>                   |                        |                |           |     |
| Upbeat/fresh                         | 6                      | 4%             | 11        | 9%  |
| Mother/ly, Auntie Helen              | 6                      | 3%             | –         | –   |
| Bossy                                | 4                      | 3%             | –         | –   |
| Described as leading a ‘Nanny State’ | 4                      | 3%             | –         | –   |
| Tired, old, out of touch             | 6                      | 4%             | –         | –   |
| ‘Big spending’ used pejoratively     | 10                     | 7%             | –         | –   |

Notes: <sup>1</sup>The frequency of articles is different for the two leaders as some articles pertained to one leader only. <sup>2</sup>Percentage adds up to greater than 100% as some utterances were mentioned more than once in the same article.

Turning now to newspaper coverage, we used a similar time frame (12 October to 9 November) and sampled two (of the three) major newspapers (*New Zealand Herald* and the *Dominion Post*). After filtering for relevance (see earlier methods discussion), we analysed 151 articles, 93 from the *Dominion Post* and 58 from the *New Zealand Herald*.

As with the TV analysis, we were interested in differences in coverage between the two leaders and, on the face of it, we found that Clark was cited or quoted in slightly more (29%) articles than Key (23%). This appears to find against the view that incumbents receive less media attention than challengers. However, this ‘positive’ result is tempered when we consider source positioning, where a quote in the first or last paragraph of a story is considered an advantage in terms of recognition and recall. On this dimension, Clark was less visible than Key across both newspapers, featuring in 13 per cent and 10 per cent of first and last paragraphs, compared to Key’s showing of 18 per cent and 15 per cent respectively. As part of our exploration of potential differences in coverage, we constructed the tonal categories of ‘supportive’ and ‘hostile’, by searching for the key terms ‘new’ and ‘upbeat’ versus ‘tired’ and ‘old’. We found the majority of articles adopted what we considered a ‘neutral’ tone towards both Clark and Key (that is, there was an *absence* of value judgements and/or our key search terms), although, as Table 2 shows, where articles *were* critical, such a tone was more likely to be used against Clark, and where a tone was supportive coverage was more likely to feature Key. An example of a ‘hostile’ comment is this one, by Garth George, in the *New Zealand Herald*:

It’s all about being loosed from the tyranny of dogmatic ‘do-it-my-way-or-else’ socialism, which contends that the state knows best how to spend our money, how we use our property and how we run our families. (George, 2008)

Key was more likely to be depicted as fresh or upbeat than Clark, who was more likely to be described as tired, old or out of touch: she was never described as 'fresh'. Key never attracted gendered descriptions, unlike Clark who was variously described as 'Auntie Helen', as leading a 'Nanny State' and being 'bossy', all terms implying a controlling or interfering (female) personality. Although hostile comments against Clark were infrequent, their power lies precisely in their judicious use, since these terms constitute, arguably, a form of shorthand, so they operate as a reminder (here we go again!) rather than a novelty. A useful example of how media space can be captured by canny political operators can be seen in the (pejorative) use of the term 'big spending/spender' against the Labour administration (10 instances in our sample). Thus, 'Labour's extravagance is matched only by the cynicism implicit in its desire to buy votes (*New Zealand Herald*, 2008b). This framing occurred despite Labour being simultaneously labelled as 'stingy' by the National Party for delaying the decision to reduce taxation.

Looking at the visibility of the two major party slogans in connection to the two leaders, we found 'Time for change' (National) appeared 19 times (13%) whereas 'National cannot [or can't] be trusted' (Labour) was reported seven times (5%). The extent to which this illustrates a media bias towards the National Party is hard to determine, but the result is arguably what counts and in this analysis Labour received more hostile coverage.

Our analysis so far relates to what we would call 'party' differences, but other aspects of journalistic practice are more clearly gendered; for example, the ways women and men parliamentarians are addressed. A number of scholars argue that using forms of address describing marital status is sexist, since this is rarely relevant to the story (Adcock, 2010; Ross, 2002) and fixes a woman's identity to her relationship (or otherwise) to a man, which is not the case with men. In addition, we would argue that giving a man the appellation of 'Mr' confers a formal status and professional legitimacy considerably stronger than simply providing his first and surname. Table 3 shows the different ways the leaders were addressed, where John Key is given an honorific title twice as often as Helen Clark (38% and 19% respectively) and demonstrates that 'Miss' continues to be used in relation to Helen Clark despite the alternative, entirely acceptable 'Ms' which avoids linking women to marriage. 'Ms' would be even more appropriate in Clark's case, as she is married, although does not use her married name. This use of the old-fashioned 'Miss' connotes both immaturity and (in this case, inaccurate) marital status and is a good example of the way women's political potency is subtly undermined: it is more damaging precisely because of its routinisation.

## Discussion

While these datasets (TV and newspapers) on the election coverage of Helen Clark and John Key are relatively modest in size, they nonetheless constitute a meaningful sample since they are drawn from the most popular and widely distributed media in New Zealand and cover the four weeks prior to polling day which constitute the most concentrated period of campaign activity. We suggest that, in examining the datasets together, there is some evidence to support our contention that both newspapers and TV channels gave a higher profile to John Key and the National Party at the expense of Helen Clark and the

**Table 3.** Names and honorifics by party leaders

| Helen Clark                | Frequency <sup>1</sup> | %    | John Key                 | Frequency | %    |
|----------------------------|------------------------|------|--------------------------|-----------|------|
| Miss Clark                 | 27                     | 19%  | Mr Key                   | 45        | 38%  |
| Helen Clark                | 102                    | 72%  | John Key                 | 63        | 55%  |
| Clark                      | 4                      | 3%   | Key                      | 6         | 5%   |
| Prime Minister Helen Clark | 9                      | 6%   | Leader of the Opposition | 4         | 3%   |
| Total                      | 142                    | 100% |                          | 118       | 100% |

Note: <sup>1</sup>The frequency of articles is different for the two leaders as some articles related to one leader only.

Labour administration. This finding could be construed as a negative bias towards Helen Clark and/or Labour more broadly and/or an antipathy towards Helen Clark in particular, on political and/or sex-based grounds. Our data demonstrate a degree of tonal negativity present in a small but noteworthy number of news items, suggesting an image of Clark as a tired, controlling and out-of-date leader. Similarly, there is evidence to demonstrate both explicit and subtle forms of support for John Key in the tonal orientation of his reportage, especially in the routine depiction of him as the ‘fresh new face of politics’.

Most feminist media scholars who have analysed the ways gender is implicated in political reportage suggest that sexism is evident in both overt and less obvious ways. Overt ways include the use of particularly gendered terminology (e.g. ‘she had her claws out’), or derogatory descriptions (women are shrill, men assertive) as well as the simple marginalisation of women by excluding them from coverage. In our analysis, instances of overt sexism were infrequent, but there were many instances of a more subtle undermining of women’s political authority and capability. For example:

In Miss Clark, Labour not only has the winner of the past three election campaigns, but a politician so experienced and so shrewd that she is serving as Labour’s chief strategist in this campaign. Mr Key is less experienced but, with polls suggesting voters are considering a change of government, his sunny, optimistic disposition could prove a critical factor in the campaign. (Venter, 2008)

On the face of it, words like ‘winner’ and ‘experienced’ evoke positive emotions, but, when coupled with ‘shrewd’ (shrew-like) and ‘strategist’, the overall sense is of manipulation. When juxtaposed with the words used to describe Key – ‘sunny’ and ‘optimistic’ – Clark becomes almost malevolent. Similarly, ‘Key’s lack of experience is countered by his sunny confidence, an ease in himself which is a sort of charm’ (James, 2008: 2), whereas in the same paragraph, Clark is described as having:

... worked hard to be what she is not naturally, cooing at babies and brightly smiling in malls ... [but] too many in the provinces and suburbs see Clark as representing a liberal urban elite and imposing its values where they don’t fit.

Such small barbs can have a devastating effect in their drip-drip-drip of negativity but just as disastrous is the under-reporting of Clark (compared to Key), since absence is as powerful as presence during a general election. Combined with the negative valuation as

'old and tired', such framing is likely to have played against Clark at the ballot box, if not decisively then at least as a contributing factor.

Whilst frequency of incumbent and challenger appearances can influence 'face recognition' and thus electoral success, it might be imagined this would be less of a problem for party leaders who *already* enjoy national recognition. But it still *does* matter because the media's insistence that it was 'time for a change' gave Key advantageous exposure over Clark, if not always in absolute volume terms, then certainly in terms of the amount of supportive commentary. In the case of Helen Clark, having served three terms as Prime Minister, we suggest that the media's framing of her was not focused on questioning her authority and competence to do the job but, rather, that it was time for someone else to 'have a go'.

## Conclusion

Does it matter that news media cover women and men politicians differently? While some work suggests the framing of politicians, in every sense of the word, has an impact on how those politicians are perceived by the public (see Coleman et al., 2008), that is not the same as saying there is a direct cause-effect relationship. However, media coverage contributes to the wider political landscape in which politicians and politics are understood, so differences in coverage (content, context and frequency) *do* matter. If some differences are sex based, this matters even more. The tenor of politicians' relations with journalists can also influence the ways they are portrayed and the kind of attention they might receive at periods of intense media scrutiny such as general elections, not just in terms of volume but crucially in tone, context and orientation.

In an interesting analysis of political scandals which had women at their heart, a more sympathetic treatment was given to women who had hitherto enjoyed good relations with the media. This encouraged public empathy rather than disgust (Lundell and Ekström, 2008). Helen Clark's media honeymoon (beginning shortly before her first election as Prime Minister and lasting well into her second term) was based, arguably, on her perceived political competence and accessibility to journalists (Comrie, 2006). However, her relationships with journalists were never especially warm and she endured enough media intrusions into her personal life to be professional but emotionally distant with most of the media, even as she made herself accessible in terms of actual 'face' time. We suggest her status as long-serving incumbent, the media's desire for new personalities, her age (unfavourably juxtaposed against the younger, male pretender) and the legacy of her media relationships, combined to produce personalised media coverage which, if not always explicitly sexist, nonetheless displayed something rather less than the scrupulous 'objectivity' which journalists insist is the sine qua non of their profession.

Our research contributes to a body of work analysing the ways in which sex, politics and news work together to produce a gendered news agenda which mostly disadvantages women, not just in tone and content but also in visibility. Importantly, we suggest that the journalistic practices we have described in our study produce similarly negative results even in situations where a woman is competing for the top job, even in conditions where her competence as a political leader is not being questioned. What's wrong with this picture?

## Notes

- 1 Some of the data in this article have been published in a conference paper and book chapter.
- 2 See discussion of our working definitions of tonal categories.
- 3 The *TNS-TV3* poll released on 13 May; the *New Zealand Herald-DigiPoll* of 26 May; and the *One News* Colmar Brunton poll of 27 May.
- 4 See *Factiva* at <http://factiva.com/about/index.asp?node=menuElem1098>
- 5 An intercoder check of eight randomly selected days (13% of sample stories) produced a measure of agreement of 0.894 using Cohen's Kappa.
- 6 The *Evening Post* closed and merged with the morning paper *The Dominion* to become the *Dominion Post* in July 2002.
- 7 These and subsequent figures in this section are taken from the Factiva database (calculations exclude repeated articles and letters to the editor).

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## Biographical notes

Karen Ross is Professor of Media and Public Communication, School of the Arts, University of Liverpool. Her primary research interests are in the broad areas of gender, politics and media, journalism practice and identity politics in popular media.

Margie Comrie is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication Journalism and Marketing at Massey University in New Zealand. She teaches and researches in journalism studies and political communication.