Reconstructing gender for the 21st century: News media framing of political women in New Zealand

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Ever since Tuchman (1978) popularised the notion of "symbolic annihilation" to examine sexism in the media, a large scholarship has quantified and qualified the news media's sins against women. Is there any evidence that as women's political power has increased, their media representation has similarly improved?

This paper answers this question with reference to international and New Zealand studies. It discusses how the strategy or "game" frame, common in news media coverage of elections, is altered by the presence of women candidates in New Zealand's national and local body elections. Further, media coverage of women in the 2001 local body elections raises issues of both positive and negative gender stereotyping, including the female candidate, dubbed "the naked politician", who stripped for billboards. The paper concludes by raising questions about the implications for journalism educators, and for women in politics, as the media reconstruct gender for the 21st century.

The concept of "symbolic annihilation", referring to the media's condemnation, trivialisation and omission of women, was popularised by Tuchman (1978) in her benchmark work. Since then a large scholarship has quantified and qualified the news media's sins against women (e.g., Fountaine & McGregor, 1999; Witt, Paget & Matthews, 1994). While "symbolic annihilation" remains an important reference point (Fountaine & McGregor, 2001), gender in the news media needs to be re-conceptualised for the 21st century. In the twenty years since Tuchman (1978) wrote about "the hearth and home" women's political power has increased dramatically in New Zealand, with all three major constitutional positions—Prime Minister, Governor General and Chief Justice—currently occupied by women. An assumption in much gender-related media research was that increased female status would be accompanied by more and better representation of women in politics. So how are the media framing women in politics? Is "symbolic annihilation" alive and well or do we need to reconstruct theory so it is relevant for contemporary journalism education?

This paper examines the framing of women by the news media in both national and civic politics in New Zealand. It asks whether women have improved in terms of the quantity of coverage, in relation to Tuchman's (1978) omission concept, and whether the coverage has improved in relation to condemnation and trivialisation. Has the representation of women improved as they have increased political participation?

Quantity of coverage

The invisibility of women has been explored in front-page news stories (e.g., Hernandez, 1996, 1994), newspaper sports pages (e.g., Fountaine & McGregor, 1999; Brown, 1995) and coverage of politics (e.g. Norris, 1997). Many of these studies have had a single focus. The largest international study to date, the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), documented news media coverage of women on a particular day (1 February 2000), in 70 countries. Overall, and as in 1995 when the first study took place, women were under-represented as news subjects. In the 2000 study, women comprised 18% of news subjects, a miniscule increase from 17% in 1995 (Spears & Seydegart, with Gallagher, 2000).

On 1 February, New Zealand had the highest proportion of female news sources in political news stories, a point noted by the authors. Forty-six percent of New Zealand's political news sources were women, compared to 11% women in Australia, 18% in the United States, and 9% in the United Kingdom. This figure is related to the high-profile political women in the coalition government of the time (a female Prime Minister and eleven women ministers), as well as the presence of a female Leader of the Opposition. There is tentative support, based on the New Zealand findings, for the notion that the news media simply reflect social reality; in this case, the level of women's parliamentary representation. This is consistent with Tuchman's (1978) suggestion that changes in society would eventually result in more equitable media coverage although a period of "culture lag" would first need to be endured. However, other country's findings are less positive: Sweden, which tops the world in the proportion of women in its parliament (42.7%), managed just a quarter of women as politicians and government sources. In this respect, then, there is not a clear indication that media representations of women have increased as more women enter political positions.

Political women in New Zealand appear to have achieved a higher level of coverage as political participation and status has improved. It is one thing, though, to be in the news. Quite separate considerations apply to how political women are covered. Are they condemned or trivialised in the media? And could we argue that despite women's coverage increasing, omission still occurs? For example, American research by Carroll and Schreiber (1997) identified a positive tone in coverage of women in the 103rd Congress, with little evidence of bias and trivialisation. Yet the authors returned to the idea of omission to explain their results, noting that general press coverage gave the impression women were only involved in legislation such as health and abortion, and failed to mention significant contributions in areas like foreign affairs and trade. Their work, then, offers continued support for the omission aspect of "symbolic annihilation", although their approach is slightly different from the original.

Gidengil and Everitt (1999) identify three phases in the study of women, politics and media, beginning with visibility/invisibility (typified by Tuchman, 1978), then moving to the narrow focus in coverage of women politicians, and finally into "gendered mediation". The latter "shifts the focus...to the more subtle, but arguably more insidious, form of bias that arises when conventional political frames are applied to female politicians" (p. 49). Despite their suggestion, these phases should not be regarded as distinct. Aspects of Tuchman's omission, trivialisation and condemnation remain key reference points for contemporary studies of women, media and politics (e.g., McGregor, 1996; Lemish & Tidhar, 1999).

Framing theory, adopted more recently by researchers interested in media coverage of gender politics (particularly those in Gidengil and Everitt's second and third phases), provides a useful conceptual tool to examine how political women are covered. We turn now to the concept of media framing, and the results of framing analyses, to test the relevance of Tuchman's theory to the contemporary scene.

Framing theory and gender

Framing theory considers how the news media cover events and issues, and—in another component of the approach – how individuals make sense of these events and issues, drawing partially (but not exclusively) on media representations. Two relevant, commonsense understandings of what it means to "frame" demonstrate the theory. First, the media can be said to frame events and issues in the same way as a photographer frames a photograph, choosing what aspects to highlight or draw attention to, and what parts to leave out (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997). Similarly, a media frame can be likened to the frame of a house, providing the structure around which everything else fits, and influencing the overall style of the construction (Tankard, 2001).

Framing theory is regarded as especially relevant to the study of media in political life (Reese, 2001). Gender theorists have also used the approach to explore the framing of women politicians and women's issues. The approach

offers a new, more nuanced way of understanding gendered media representations, which partially supplants the traditional preoccupation with negative news coverage of women (Sreberny- Mohammadi & Ross, 1996). A European Commission study published in 1999 concluded that, across all media, the status of gender portrayal "is no longer monolithic stereotyping of the kind described in content studies of the 1970s and 1980s" (Gallagher, 2001, p. 5). Norris' (1997a) findings about media coverage of women leaders worldwide provide further evidence of what gender and media theorists can gain by moving into more subtle analysis. She notes that the majority of coverage does not contain simple or crude stereotyping, centred on appearance or "feminine" traits such as compassion and sensitivity. However, the gendered news frames she did identify (the leadership breakthrough for women, women leaders as outsiders, and women leaders as agents of change), "reflected a more subtle conventional wisdom about how women are seen as politicians" (p. 161).

Framing theory can also explore links between media coverage of events or issues, and individual views on these. It is not the purpose of this article to explore framing as a media effect (we concentrate on media frames rather than individual frames), but it is worth noting, in the context of journalism education and media literacy, that members of the public demonstrate an instinctive understanding of the media's efforts to frame issues in particular ways. In the area of gender relations, a pertinent example is found in the letters section of Christchurch's *The Press* newspaper. A reader wrote complaining about a front-page headline, "Women: Don't go out alone":

> What a difference it would make if your paper led the way in changing readers' attitudes about who needs to take responsibility for the recent attacks on women in Christchurch…..Women are not attacked because they walk about on their own. Women do not need to change this behaviour. What about a headline that says: "Men: Look out if you attack our women in the street!" Or

perhaps: "Men urged not to target women on the streets", or perhaps "Men condemned for attacks on women in Christchurch" (Sidford, 2001, p. 4).

Stereotypes and naked ladies

Recent local body politics in New Zealand also provide insight into whether the news media is perpetuating stereotypes about female political candidates, or as Tuchman (1978) expresses it, "trivialises" women. In an extraordinary event in the 2001 local body elections in New Zealand one young female candidate did not wait for the news media to trivialise her representation - she did it herself. Eighteen year old Paula Gillon stripped down to blue tulle and a smile, and proclaimed herself "the naked politician" for her North Shore billboards and campaign postcards. Her actions resulted in a flurry of media interest, some criticism from other women politicians who despaired at the "sex kitten" angle of the photograph, and election to the city council.

Further south, unsuccessful Waimate mayoral candidate Anne Townend faced a different problem, as her running mates attempted to discredit or "marginalise" her with suggestions she was attracted to the glamour of local body politics. The comments of her male opponents, including the incumbent mayor, were used to build a picture of Townend as a political lightweight, lacking experience and commitment. It begins:

> The "new lady on the block" Anne Townend was thrown under the spotlight …at last night's meet-the-candidates meeting. Peter McIlraith reminded the 230-odd members of the public that the mayoral race was not a beauty contest, while mayor David Owen made a dig at "the new lady on the block".… Mr Owen also questioned whether the mayoral candidates knew what was involved in being mayor…. "We do need a mayor with experience and we don't need people who come along because they think the job looks glamorous. I wonder if they know what

it is like at the coalface" ("Mayoral race not a beauty contest," 2001, p. 2).

In another article, the four contenders were described as "*sitting mayor* David Owen…*councillor* Len Shaw, Hakataramea *farmer and community trust chairman* Peter McIlraith, and *Waimate woman* Anne Townend" (Allison, 2001, p. 2—our emphasis). Townend did not suffer from inadequate media coverage in terms of quantity, as the newspaper later suggested in its analysis of her campaign and exploration of why no women were elected to the council, but the style and focus of newspaper articles may well have worked against her.

The above analysis is not meant to suggest women politicians fall into simplistic categories of conspirator or victim. Women leaders Jenny Shipley, and now Helen Clark, have enjoyed periods of positive coverage in their honeymoon periods as Prime Minister, and during other high profile events (for example, Shipley received positive coverage during the APEC leaders' summit in New Zealand in 1999). The status these positions confer mean the women are highly regarded news sources, with strong media profiles. However, the coverage both women received on their way to the top (Clark in particular was criticised for her voice and appearance, and there was speculation about her sexuality) suggests that it takes women a long time to quell the media's propensity to marginalise and trivialise—and that they have to "earn" the right not to be treated in this way. The absence of large numbers of women in top national leadership positions means this remains to be tested, but limited evidence from Norris' (1997a) study of women leaders worldwide shows they receive significantly less media coverage than their immediate male predecessor.

Framing women in politics

There has been concern that the modern bias facing women in politics is that the media simply use traditional frames—which are built around the dominance of men—in coverage of women, making it difficult for women to be portrayed as anything other than political outsiders. Gidengil and Everitt (1999), for example, regard the application of conventional political frames—such as metaphors of warfare and sport—to women as a more subtle but insidious form of bias than preoccupation with "feminine" characteristics. Their analysis of the 1993 Canadian leaders' debates suggested that "what is perceived—positively—to be combative in a man may be judged—negatively—to be aggressive in a woman" (p. 62).

An analysis of New Zealand's 1999 General Election shows that the presence of women leaders led to the media's feminisation of the dominant "game" or strategy frame (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), albeit in superficial ways. For example, the emphasis on winning and losing remained central, and was exemplified early in the campaign by linkage between the All Blacks' loss in the Rugby World Cup, and the chances of the incumbent National government (personalised in the form of Shipley) being returned for another term. Shipley's depiction as a rugby player or coach in various editorial cartoons had two aspects, related to her physical appearance and image of ordinariness. Closely related is the strategy frame's use of the language of war, games and competition. Again, the media responded to the presence of women leaders by employing feminised versions of these, pushing the image of Clark and Shipley as Xena warriors, and remaining primed for signs of a "catfight" between them. In fact, contrary to the Canadian experience, the New Zealand news media did not judge the women's behaviour harshly (i.e. as too aggressive), but appeared disappointed that they did not resort to dirty tactics, and looked to them for more "fight" when they were overshadowed by the male party leaders. For example, an editorial cartoon published by two newspapers in this period depicted three male meatworkers discussing the recent leaders' debate. The first asked his colleagues if they had seen "the sheilas on the box". The second responded with his verdict: "I thought both Jenny and Helen were well groomed, well prepared, moderate, intelligent and articulate", to which the third replied, "So that's what politics has sunk to in this country". Similarly, the themes of "attention to polls and candidates' standing" and

"centrality of performance, style and perception of candidates" were only superficially altered by the presence of women.

However, one aspect of the strategy frame did develop differently, reflecting the gender of the contenders for Prime Minister. The motherhood theme was closely linked to the women's (Clark in particular) perceived ability to lead the country. It is not unusual for leaders to campaign with reference to family values (e.g., Wahl-Jorgensen, 2000) but the New Zealand experience was unique for several reasons. First, parental status (not merely "family values") was suggested as a criterion for leadership, in a way not seen before, and it appears that this originated with Shipley. Second, it was a point of contention between the two women leaders. The softening of Shipley's image, along with increasing references to her family in discussions of policy, were interpreted as her way of showing the public she identified with the "hopes and concerns of ordinary families" (Clark mum over jibes, 1999, p. 2) but also as a veiled attempt to portray Clark as remote.

The empirical evidence about the perceived benefits of motherhood for women's leadership is mixed. Some successful women's campaigns contain strong reference to feminine attributes (Witt et al., 1994). More recently, McCarthy and Clare (1999) explore the flipside to this, addressing the difficulties the mother role could create for Cheryl Kernot, were she to become the first woman Australian Prime Minister, because of ambivalence about maternal power. Similarly, letters written to New Zealand newspapers during the 1999 election period were overwhelmingly negative about Shipley's positioning, regarding it as hypocritical and irrelevant. A preoccupation with the maternal and familial status of women politicians is consistent with the concepts of trivialisation and condemnation when equivalent criteria are not applied, or used to judge, their male colleagues. The New Zealand election context shows that Clark did feel condemned by the media's attention to maternal status, and there was a feeling amongst the public that Shipley trivialised parenthood for political gain, both of which are resonant of Tuchman's symbolic annihilation.

It is interesting to note the tendency for women themselves to contribute to trivialisation in the media. Short term gain and political survival no doubt motivated Paula Gillon and Jenny Shipley's decision to draw on feminine attributes in their quests to gain or maintain political power. A similar situation occurred when Shipley first became Prime Minister and deflected a press conference question about the significance of gender, saying the only difference it made to her was that it is harder to step over television cables in high heels. This is not a trend anticipated by Tuchman when she wrote about symbolic annihilation originally, but may need to be taken into account in an updated version of her theory. The wider implications of women's exploitation of gender in some contexts may be to hinder the progress made by women in general, toward equality in media representations.

Conclusion

It is clear that women's representation in the news media is changing to reflect their increased political status and participation as elected representatives both in community and national politics in New Zealand. But the old adage that more does not mean better applies. While the visibility of women has increased, structural, systematic gendering of women in politics takes place daily in television and radio broadcasts, and in the print media. This gendering often takes place with the connivance of women themselves, but this connivance anticipates and feeds sexist media representation of women in politics. As the Global Media Monitoring Project notes, in its reviewing of election coverage generally, it is important to distinguish between what journalists can feasibly do to access female sources, and the responsibility of political parties themselves (Gallagher, 2001).

So what should we conclude about the on-going relevance of Tuchman's classic work on symbolic annihilation? Do media reports reflect the reality of women in politics or are they mired in outdated, sexist images and vocabulary and in notions about women's place in the

"private sphere" (van Acker, 1999). This paper shows that instances of omission, trivialisation and condemnation continue despite greater political gains by women. While women in New Zealand topped the world in terms of representation as political sources, recent examples suggest trivialisation and condemnation still occur, and in some instances, trivial media portrayals reflect public relations strategies employed by women for political gain. The concept of omission, in its original form, is less relevant in a contemporary political scene dotted with high profile women, but there is evidence that female perspectives are still omitted in some areas. Journalism educators need to re-theorise gender in the news for the 21st century less in terms of visibility/invisibility and more in terms of the quality of media representation.

The onus falls back on the industry to ensure journalists are trained in and maintain high standards generally, which will have positive implications for diversity. Gallagher (2001) discusses workshops in which journalists discuss a selection of news stories and how they might have been written differently, a process which tends to result in "more rounded and in some ways more credible information" (p. 54). She argues that the lessons learnt from this type of analysis are not only that women are ignored and stereotyped, but also that there is a tendency for reporters to practise "lazy journalism" in, for example, reverting to stereotypes to explain actions. Later, she notes the professional and institutional constraints within the media industries, but denies practitioners are strait-jacketed, unable to exercise individual choices which impact on gender representations. Instead,

> one of the problems is that in the media, as in every sector, the accepted way of doing things is usually also the easiest. The challenge for the activists is to convince media professionals that the easiest way is not necessarily the best – in terms of the quality of their output, or its appeal to the audience (Gallagher, 2001, p. 172).

The challenge for us as educators is to produce practitioners who rise to this challenge, and a media literate audience that will tolerate nothing less.

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