



# 'Missing' Women: Media Gender Bias

*Women are the missing story from the front pages of Australia's newspapers and television programs. Compared to men, [women] stand a less than one-in-five chance of being mentioned in an editorial, gaining a by-line or appearing on screen as a presenter or reporter.*

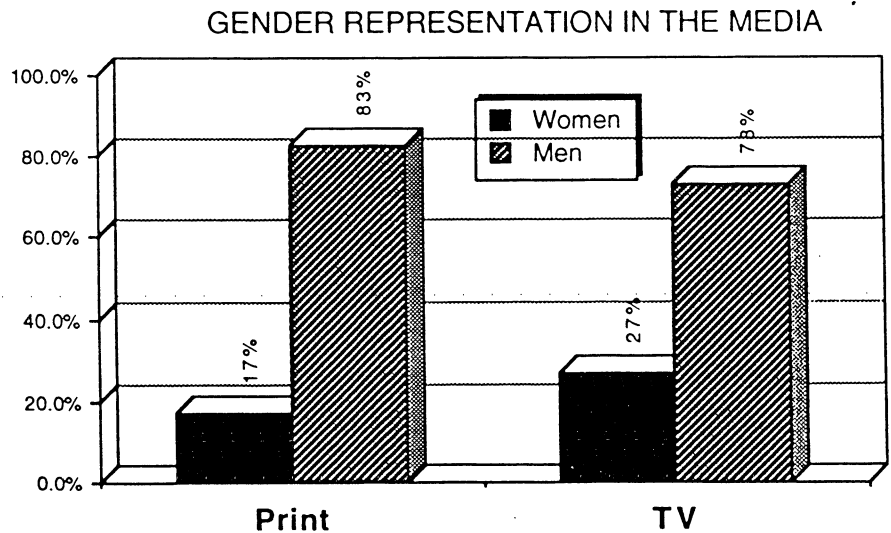
**Hard on the heels of evidence about our media's failure to reflect Australia's cultural diversity (see June CU) comes new research showing the extent to which women are missing from the media picture.**

A major forum convened by the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media earlier this month saw the release of a specially commissioned study of media content. The study's approach was one of 'counting heads': analysing the content of nearly 6,000 newspaper front pages and television news/current affairs items by the gender of the people involved (reporters, front people, interviewees, story subjects), and also analysing the issue context.

Milton Hill of the research firm Media Insights said that this approach was 'unsophisticated', but it nevertheless yielded startling results in terms of the sheer weight of numbers: women as subjects or appearing as frontline workers represented only **18 per cent** of references in the newspapers and television programs monitored.

In addition, when the news media did involve women as subjects or reporters, it was primarily for stories of **human interest** or **leisure** rather than the traditionally 'male' areas of business or sport.

Since the head-count approach reduced the possibility of bias or subjective reactions on the part of the researchers, it was difficult for the usual industry 'knockers' to pick holes in it: a favourite technique for belittling research which shows any sector of the industry in a less than favourable light. Nevertheless, FACTS General Manager Tony Branigan had a go, saying



that there was 'nothing particularly new or insightful in the papers' and the extracts he had seen were too brief and 'disjointed' to permit sensible analysis in advance of the forum. He also said some of the statistics on women's viewing preferences were 'just plain wrong', a claim later refuted by the organisers.

The main findings of the research are summarised on page 6.

## Work of the Working Party

The Working Party is the second on the issue of media portrayal of women. The first, which focused on advertising, concluded its work in 1991. It placed the issue firmly on the public agenda, and produced an impressive resource package and advisory notes for advertisers and agencies.

The second working party involved high level representation from industry bodies such as the Press Council, FARB and FACTS, the Media Council,

Consumer Affairs and the ABA, as well as working journalists, unions and women's organisations.

Working Party chair Anne Deveson, coincidentally using almost the same words as a speaker at the earlier seminar on portraying cultural diversity, said that the group was 'not on about political correctness, but about creativity - let's reflect the enormous changes in women's lives'. Women's view of the world is different, and we are limiting ourselves by not drawing on it, she said.

The National Working Party is using this research to emphasise the extent to which taking account of women and their views makes **commercial** sense from the industry's point of view. This claim is backed up by figures and financial evidence in the research reports.

Rosemary Crowley, Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Status of Women, said in her opening speech that the media are out of step with women's changing lives and eco-

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economic circumstances. Women now control the vast bulk of spending and saving and represent 42 per cent of the workforce, and the number of women running small businesses is increasing at three times the rate of men.

Media Insights pointed out that while women attract less than 20 per cent of news media references, they are responsible for 70 per cent of household expenditure decisions. They argued that improved media portrayal of women offers the media industry opportunities for growth in audiences, advertising rates and profits.

## No Women Authority Figures

Popular Radio National Broadcaster Geraldine Doogue told the forum that women were not seen as figures of authority in the media 'because we haven't been allowed to stay around and develop authority'. The constant search for new female talent, the 'use-by date' syndrome, was insidious, she said. Women who had participated in a phone-in to her program *Life Matters* said they resented not seeing women on television who looked like them.

Women need greater force of numbers: a lone successful woman, or three in a group of 12, will be held up as an example, but there must be critical mass if there is to be real change. Women may agree with only 60-70 per cent of the male agenda, but without the numbers they haven't got the 'clout' to change or influence that agenda.

As an example of the difference, Doogue mentioned the way male reporters and commentators focused on 'the losers after the recent federal election', while her day-after program had sought the views of the community about the reasons for the unexpected result.

'Mediocre women do as well as mediocre men' Doogue said, a statement which greatly captivated Nine Network chairman Bruce Gyngell. She said that at Radio National, women worked in a supportive environment

where they didn't have to be 'utterly exceptional all the time' and could develop their confidence. There is an alternative to the adversarial approach and this is what women are interested in, Doogue said.

## Print Editor Beats His Breast

One person who was not surprised by the research findings was the editor of Sydney's *Telegraph Mirror*, John Hartigan, who said he recognised that there is still a long way to go.

'What gets told depends on who is doing the telling' he said, and mentioned US research in which male editors said: 'News is what I say it is'.

In bad economic times, no industry can afford to ignore half its market. His paper had made a purely commercial decision that it had to attract more ads and higher sales, and had made a conscious effort to reposition itself with a strong pitch to women and an emphasis on lifestyle issues. It had moved away from the 'TV news blotter' style of reporting to portray the news in a less aggressive, confrontational style, and left the showbiz and glitz coverage, which had once been the province of the afternoon papers, to the magazines.

The paper has experienced an increase of nearly seven per cent in female readership since 1991.

While changing attitudes is not the role of the reporter, Hartigan said, the new generation of journalists is covering issues which would not have even been on the agenda a decade ago. Five of the top seven jobs on the *Tele-Mirror* and the *Sunday Telegraph* are held by women, and as the number of women working in the media increases, so does the diversity of stories covered.

## TV Industry Still Lagging

As in the cultural diversity area, radio industry body FARB is leading the

way and has produced guidelines for its members on the portrayal of women. Once again, television's equivalent body, FACTS, is taking the conservative approach. Referring to program codes and guidelines in areas not specifically covered in the Broadcasting Services Act, like the portrayal of women, FACTS's Tony Branigan said that he would not want things to return to 'the bad old days when television's role was seen as reinforcing social values'. There was a need to demonstrate 'overwhelming public benefit' as a trade-off against constraints on freedom of speech. The 'subjective' wording of guidelines makes their interpretation open-ended.

The industry is not 'unaware or unconcerned' about this issue, Branigan said. Nevertheless, it 'sticks in [his] craw' when politicians are critical of the media, when the worst gender imbalance of all is in politics.

ABA Chairman Brian Johns left the audience in little doubt that he thought FACTS should follow the example of its radio colleagues, but said it was up to the industry.

Under the former ABT the system was very 'juridical, adversarial' and the name of the new game is negotiation and consultation.

He said that the industry was not used to co-operating or playing as a team, and it needed to give support to its own industry bodies instead of the traditional approach of behind-the-scenes lobbying.

At the same time, public interest groups had to switch their efforts away from legislators to the media themselves.

As might be expected, the ABC came out ahead of its commercial counterparts. Head of TV Paddy Conroy mentioned instances where positive discrimination had been used - for example by requiring that all short-term vacancies in management be filled by women, and trying to redress the gender imbalance in engineering.

Conroy announced two new fellowships for women: for a sports broadcaster, and an early childhood education fellowship for a NESB woman. He also said that the ABC was supporting

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women in TAFE electrical engineering courses. But employment of women alone was not enough, he said. Standards had to be set for program makers, and the ABC had specific standards on gender stereotyping.

## Production Industry View

Matt Carroll, film producer and one of those responsible for some notable TV drama productions like *GP* and *Brides of Christ*, said a 1983 survey on women in film and television had pulled him up short and made him re-evaluate the kinds of films he had been making up till then - 'boys' own adventures' like *Breaker Morant* and *Sunday Too Far Away*.

He said some of the highest rating drama of recent times - *Brides of Christ*, *Police Rescue*, *GP* - had been 'creatively driven' by women, and put a fresh view which audiences were finding acceptable. The balance of women in writing departments was particularly important because 'men don't write good parts for women'. The number of women directors remains 'embarrassingly low' Carroll said.

The film and television industry has a long way to go to overcome its 'boys' club' image. And if the networks are going to counter the new competition effectively, they are going to have to recognise the need to involve women. □

Media Insight Pty Ltd for the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, *The Missing Story: A Gender Study of Media Content*, Office of the Status of Women, Dept of Prime Minister and Cabinet, AGPS Canberra 1993, 79pp.

Media Insight Pty Ltd for the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media, *Women's Media Preferences*, Office of the Status of Women, Dept of Prime Minister and Cabinet, AGPS Canberra 1993, 33pp. □

## Some Key Findings on Women and Media

- There is significant gender bias in the Australian news media. For example,
  - women gained only 18 per cent of all references in an aggregation of the newspaper and television reference categories;
  - women did not dominate in any single category covered by the gender study.
- In the print media 27 per cent of by-lines and pictures included women. Of women referred to in the body of all news stories, only 14 per cent were described by proper name.
- In print media, women were most likely to be mentioned in human interest stories (37 per cent) and least likely to appear in a sports item (5 per cent).
- Television mostly references women as content in political\* (25 per cent) and human interest (23 per cent) news items, and least in business (2 per cent) and sport (5 per cent). (\*It should be noted that the survey was conducted during the federal election campaign and the incidence of women in a political context can be largely attributed to stories about the wives of the two leaders).
- The incidence of female references in all news media is more likely to result from their on-air appearance as reporters or presenters (27 per cent) than as subjects (20 per cent). Women are depicted least as main subject, participant or authority figures, and are not seen, heard or quoted as authority figures commensurate with the role they play in Australian society.
- 77 per cent of television news and current affairs stores were covered by male reporters; 77 per cent of interview subjects were male.
- 69 per cent of all news items were fronted by men and 93 per cent of all current affairs presenters were men.
- There were some significant regional differences. For example, the front pages of Western Australian newspapers referred to women more often than other state or national dailies, though the focus was on human interest items (52 per cent). Of WA by-lines, 44 per cent were female - 17 per cent more than the national average. Queensland had the lowest proportion of female by-lines: 16 per cent as against 27 per cent.

Data from *The Missing Story: A Gender Study of Media Content*, a study by Media Insight Pty Ltd for the National Working Party on the Portrayal of Women in the Media.