Shifting the Women and Media Agenda to Structural Goals

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Good morning everyone and thank you for your invitation to spend this time with you to explore something we share a mutual concern about – women’s representation in our mass media. As we know, those representations don’t get there by magic – they are the product of a whole process that involves many people, a great deal of money, and strategic decisions. I was asked to speak to women’s employment in media, one aspect of the women in media relationship. In doing so, we will also consider the larger context within which employment occurs – the structures of industry and the people who call the shots.

In 2008, the International Women’s Media Foundation invited me to lead a world-wide study of women’s status in news organizations. That study, as we know, led to the *Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media*. The project was groundbreaking for a number of reasons. It was the largest study of its kind to that time, in terms of number of nations and organizations surveyed. We also had a huge workforce – 160 researchers in all, including 145 women and men who gathered data from 522 companies in 59 nations; there were 3 statisticians, several graduate students, and a local project team, in addition to myself. I note with some pride that everyone on the project received compensation – no one got rich, but all were paid something for our work.

When the findings were published in 2011, the report revealed the serious degree to which men dominated the world’s news companies across the world. Men occupied three-fourths of the top management positions and on boards of directors, meaning they controlled (in every sense of the word) those companies’ policies and operations. We found that glass ceilings existed for women in a third of the nations we studied, with women stuck in junior and senior roles in their newsrooms. In some nations, the pattern was severe lack of representation, as in Japan where men outnumbered women 6 to 1.

We surveyed only 14 companies in the United States, and most of those were newspapers. We had intended to include more but many company executives refused to cooperate. In a couple of instances, the human service personnel would make an appointment with our researchers, then turned them away when they showed up. Somebody higher up did not want to reveal the company’s gender practices.

The 14 US companies that we surveyed together employed 3,000 people. Of those, women were only 40% of the workforce. Men dominated at every level but two – middle management and administrative roles. In addition, men were two-thirds of those on boards of directors, three-fourths of those in top management, and three-fifths of those in senior management.

Our *Global Report* findings for the US sample are corroborated by other data for employment in US media companies. For example, one study showed that in the 16 years since 1999, women’s employment in journalism has fallen from 21,000 to only around 15,000 today – that’s a loss of 300-400 jobs per year. There are many factors at work here, such as the greater efficiency brought on by technology and the growing conglomeration within media markets, but both of these always seem to results in layoff to *“streamline the workforce”* and *“enhance the profits of shareholders.”*

And, so we have to ask ourselves: Does the low and decreasing level of women in newsrooms and management help to explain the relative absence of women’s bylines in major news stories and of women as subjects in the news?

The most recent report of the Global Media Monitoring Project found that in the United States, like most other nations, there is gender discrimination in the way news assignments are made. Female reporters still largely cover “soft news” for health, education, and entertainment, and male reporters still cover the “serious” (or hard) news like politics, government, the economy, and business. Women’s bylines account for only 34% of those in the major sections of US newspapers -- and stories about women are also fewer – only 28%. Female sources are many fewer than men’s – only 25%. And, these stats have changed very little in the 20 years of the GMMP’s research on women in news. Above all, news stories they analyzed still tend to reinforce stereotypes of rather than to challenge them.

To better understand both women’s employment and women’s representation in mainstream news, we have to look to the governance and ownership of the companies where this all takes place. It is in this level of corporate structure where all the big decisions are made about salaries and other compensation, investment in infrastructure, employee training, and so on. It is also where the value system about gender equality is formulated, articulated, and implemented.

As I said, our Global Report surveys among the 14 companies for the US sample found that men dominated in the top echelons of those companies. But this finding is pervasive in the broader media landscape.

Consider this reality:

Comcast – 1 of 12 board members is female (8%)

CBS – 2 of 14 board members are female (14%)

Time Warner Cable – 1 of 12 board members is female (17%)

Disney – 3 of 10 board members is female (30%)

Viacom – 4 of 13 board members is female (31%(

And, the new high tech companies are equally egregious in their gender inequality at the top as the traditional “legacy” companies. Consider the number of women on boards of the following:

-eBay, 8% women

-Twitter, 13% women

-Facebook, 22% women

-Linked-In, 14% women

-Apple, 25% women

And what about actual ownership of media companies? In the US, most women have come to own media through inheritance – in other words, through the death of a spouse or father, for instance. Women have not had the capital and, in some cases, the experience, to establish their own companies. At present, women hold controlling interest in only 6.7% of full-powered FM stations, 8.3% of AM stations, and 6.3% of full-powered TV stations. But lack of capital and experience are not the only reason women own so few of these broadcast companies.

When I interviewed women in broadcast and cable a few years ago, they described old boys clubs at work that excluded smart, qualified women in the company from the same opportunities they gave to men entering the field – you know, fishing trips on week ends, lunches together, drinks after work. Much bonding and deal-making occurs in these social events, and men are the beneficiaries. My study participants also talked about a hostile regulatory environment that squeezes women out in one way or another – I will say more about that momentarily.

My current research with Alisa Valentin at Howard has looked at that “hostile” environment by tracing media laws, regulations, and court decisions as these have affected women’s employment and ownership over the last 60 years. We found, among other things, that pro-equality laws have mattered. After Title VII was passed in 1972, and the EEOC was established, women at the New York Times, Washington Post, Associated Press, and other companies were able to file complaints and lawsuits charging job discrimination. And, they won by and large, changing the game for others to follow. But laws and litigation alone do not root out institutionalized sexism in company practices or in agencies that are supposed to serve the public interest. The FCC, which regulates broadcast licensing and the limits on media ownership, ***has largely not been women’s friend***. I want to end with two recent, ongoing examples illustrating the embedded nature of gender biases in media regulation today – the basis for that hostile regulatory environment for women.

In 2004, in the *Prometheus Radio Project vs. the FCC*, the U.S. Third Circuit of Appeals in Philadelphia ruled that the FCC could not further deregulate media ownership without a substantial rationale. In that same ruling, it said that the FCC must address low levels of broadcast ownership by women and people of color. *Afterward, the FCC did nothing to respond.* Thus, in 2011, advocates for women and community broadcasters returned to the same court and asked the commission to block the FCC’s plan to allow one company to own stations and a newspaper in the same market. The court agreed and blocked that move, and, in the same ruling, it said again that the FCC must fulfill its mandate to address women and minority ownership. *I am most dismayed to report that it has been four years since that ruling, and still the FCC has done nothing.*

In a modern world dominated by Twitter and Face Book, this might seem to be an irrelevant situation – after all, who listens to broadcast? Who reads newspapers? The short answer is that most people in the US still get their news and information from the traditional media. Therefore, ownership matters a great deal. The online news sites most visited are those of CNN and the other established news companies. Their audience has not gone away, only shifted its venue, and those media’s informational role in a democracy has not diminished.

For lack of time, I must end there. Admittedly, this feels more like the beginning of a conversation instead of an end, doesn’t it? And, I hope that it will be, for there is so much more to explore, question, research, get mad about, and strategize around. I am an activist researcher who pursues investigations that are useful to others in their quests for a more just world. Please join me in finding ways to expand women’s access to our media through the professions and at the top, where they – where we – certainly belong.