



# The method is the message

## Explaining inconsistent findings in gender and news production research<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Whether, and how, gender affects the news product is one of the most challenging areas in the field of gender and the media. This article analyzes the impact of specific research methodologies on findings regarding gender news influence – based on survey questionnaires and in-depth interviews of female and male editors working in Israeli public radio, as well as on content analysis of their editorial product. Based on different results obtained from these qualitative and quantitative methodologies, we conclude that gender/news research cannot rely on either method exclusively, as heretofore has been overwhelmingly the case. Editorial interviewees' responses can be as unreliable as autobiographies due to socio-organizational exigencies, while content analyses of news product must also be viewed critically as they do not necessarily reflect underlying gender 'otherness'. This study discusses the research implications of the findings as well as the extent of 'real' gender influence on news product/ion.

**KEY WORDS** ■ content analysis ■ editorial news process ■ gender ■ interview ■ news research methodologies ■ otherness ■ questionnaire ■ radio news and current events programming

There is a language of news. If the argument is that the news world is masculine and that the male language and ethics and thought and behavior are dominating us . . . it could be. I'm not sure that it can be done any other way. Here and there you need to add some depth, to explain all the processes – that's true. But even if one assumes that there's a male and a female way of looking at things, I'm not sure that any revision of the world of communications is possible, so that it would work according to the female approach . . . Perhaps there would be a few changes, but just at the margins. (Israel Army Radio female editor, personal interview, 1998)

## Introduction

To a large extent, our opening quote is similar to the stories of countless women in the western world who have attempted to enter the field of communications, in general, and journalism, in particular. Declarations of an existing professional model, of an obligation to objectivity, and of joint guiding principles have all characterized many interviews with news professionals. An additional emerging pattern is their emphasis on the irrelevance of gender otherness, not to mention the interviewees' discomfort with having to deal with the gender issue at all (Lavie, 2001). For instance, Eleanor Clift, a *Newsweek* journalist, suggests that even if 'other' coverage is possible, it does not get expressed nor does it influence the traditional structure of news-making: 'You can find specific examples where women [journalists] make a difference, but you can't say it has affected news coverage on a broad scale . . . I can't say as how I've seen a big change' (Braden, 1996: 167). In her opinion, women – as men – have internalized the predominant news tradition and, thus, an 'other' approach does not influence news coverage.

The present study originally set out to investigate whether, and to what extent, gender 'otherness'<sup>2</sup> exists (in Israeli radio) – as *perceived* by male and female news professionals and in the *actual* product that they produced. Our findings, however, forced us to deal with an even more fundamental issue that has turned into the central focus of this article: whether such a question can be even answered when using any one methodology. Indeed, as we will show, not only is this highly doubtful but the reasons underlying the need for methodological integration are themselves gender-related.

We start with a survey of the literature on gender and the news in all its complexity (and even confusion); move on to a description of a tri-partite methodology; present findings from each method that seem to be contradictory; discuss the possible sources behind such contradiction within the context of the news environment generally, and accepted, professional news values specifically; and finally, assess what this all means methodologically for researchers involved in studies of gender and the news.

## News objectivity and gender

No matter what the background culture, one can identify a common thread among male and female journalists regarding the centrality of professional norms. This seems to suggest a very homogeneous news work environment. But that very homogeneity itself leads to an uncomfortable feeling, for then one has to ask: what is its source? Is it based on the inherent needs of the

newsroom, i.e. a result of internalizing professional norms and of routinized work? Or perhaps the similarity is at base political, i.e. to curry favor with one's fellow workers and superiors? Or could it be a result of the 'dispassionate' journalist having turned into not much more than a neutral news channel (Bledstein, 1978), based on a belief in the importance of journalistic 'objectivity'? The demand of the latter is for news selection and presentation to be carried out according to purely professional criteria – divorced from the personal belief system, bias or perspective of the journalist. This is akin to the demand that judges make decisions objectively, on the basis of the letter of the law and its 'pure intent', neutralizing external influences or personal perspectives that tend to muddy the jurisprudential process.

The principle of objectivity, dominant among today's western journalists, is also evident in the internal ethical codes of news organizations and professional journalism groups in the western world, e.g. 'the nation's most widely invoked code for individual journalists and news organizations' (Black et al., 1993: 7) from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), the American professional journalists association – the largest such in the world – whose code demands comprehensive, factually precise and objective reporting (Beasley, 1997).

Other approaches, however, challenge the notion of universal, professional news values and norms. This general school of thought includes academicians and practitioners alike, with different approaches. Schudson (1978) describes how – and under what historical circumstances – the very notion of news objectivity evolved; ergo, it is not 'universal'. Tuchman (1978) analyzed the practical-institutional factors behind the establishment of 'objectivity' as a professional norm. Ward (1999) calls for 'objectivity with a human face'. Martin Bell (1998) goes so far as to attack 'objectivity' for its detached orientation, leading at times to evil results, as in the Balkans conflict when some of the press reported on the conflict in detached fashion as if covering a football match, notwithstanding the travesties committed by one side against the other.

More directly relevant to our discussion here is the argument that news discourse is really gender-politically oriented (Allan, 1998), with criteria such as 'objectivity' and 'ways of knowing' strengthening male hegemonic news values. Thus, quite a number of feminists criticize and question the use of 'objectivity' as the basis of journalism – the very search for objectivity in their eyes is antithetical to the female way of looking at the world, with the concept having distinct patriarchal origins. Indeed, they point to the relative dearth of research on the connection between gender and news values.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the use of standard news practices as being gender-free is called into serious question.

One can discern three distinct positions regarding this issue (Allan, 1999: 135):

- A *Neutral*: objectivity is the journalistic ideal. The proponents of this position argue that the problem lies in the seemingly 'objective' values and norms that have become rooted, distorting what 'really occurs'. Good reporting is gender-neutral, with the solution being unbiased systematic discovery of 'concrete facts'.
- B *Balancing*: 'objectivity' can only be attained by presenting both male and female perceptions of the world. Only women, of course, can speak in the name of females collectively. Personal experience, then, is the ultimate arbiter of 'truth' – and to reach it within the news, both sides have to express themselves and be adequately represented in the news-making process.
- C *Negation*: the concept of objectivity is negated altogether, because it is tied to the legitimization of patriarchal hegemony. The concept of objectivity is based on the initial assumption of a dichotomy between the knower and what is known but, in reality, one cannot separate facts from *weltanschauung* – gender being one – from which the 'facts' are produced. Moreover, 'objectivity' maintains the exile of female experience by reifying logic and rationality. In the final analysis, 'truth' is defined by those in power.

The question before us, then, is twofold. First, which concept of objectivity do women journalists/editors adopt in principle? Second, which do they actually carry out in practice? By focusing on the gender element/s underlying journalistic objectivity, we may be able to expand our understanding of this much-debated idea. However, because of the subtle interplay between gender and journalistic principles/practice, any attempt to specifically tease out the gender component is difficult because of such objective, social factors as consciousness, supervisory direction, information provision – as well as accumulated experience and 'professionally designated' gender roles. The status of objectivity as a 'cardinal tenet' of journalism, therefore, is both a given and also something that must be looked at anew from a gender perspective.

### **Popular methodologies and problems**

To what extent is objective journalism carried out in reality? Without doubt, most journalists do feel generally obligated to the objectivity principle and this is verbally expressed in quite consistent fashion when interviewed. Van Zoonen (1998: 37–8), though, argues that the situation is more ambiguous, with female journalists caught in an ambivalent situation: on the one hand trying to prove that they remain 'true' women; on the other, that they are good professional journalists.

Thus, over the course of 20 years, researchers have been driving home the same message. In 1978, Pingree and Hawkins argued: 'For those concerned about how news definitions affect women, it is surely more direct to examine

implicit definitions in the actual content and lay-out of the press than it is to rely on the stated intentions of reporters and editors' (p. 117). Twenty years later, Van Zoonen (1998: 37) asks the same question:

When the perception of female and male journalists regarding their profession is not profoundly gendered, what does that mean for working conditions and professional performance?

Indeed, Steiner (1998) does not believe in the relevance of asking journalists about the influence of gender on their work, for their internalized professional ethos obligates them to a position of strict neutrality and objectivity without undue, extraneous influences of an ideological or other nature. Steiner's critique is a direct challenge to the use of self-declared news values on the part of journalists, as many researchers have been taking mostly at face value these past two decades (UNESCO, 1987; Van Zoonen, 1988, 1994; Creedon, 1993; Werner, 1994; Gallagher, 1995; Lavie, 1997; Melin-Higgins, 2002).

One can speculate as to why these researchers have used the methodology of interviewing (written and oral) to understand the influence of gender on news production better. One possibility is technical: it may be relatively less expensive or logistically easier than attempting content analysis (especially of television news after the fact). However, it is perhaps more strategic, a function of continuing hoary research tradition. Or perhaps it is based on the simple belief that the best data are obtained from original sources. Whatever the motivation, regarding the general issue of gender influence on the news, interviewing journalists, editors and media professionals has become the dominant approach.<sup>4</sup>

However, there have been a few studies using content analysis (Kahn and Goldenberg, 1991; Kohut and Parker, 1997) but they have to contend with a different methodological problem: how to ascribe the final news 'text' to specific actors? News production is a process characterized by staff work and is not normally dependent on the decision of any one specific individual. For instance, television news-item selection, wording, contents and placement are the product of a team effort, usually based on a delicate balance between organizational demands and those of the editor, the producer, the anchor-person, as well as other staff professionals (camera, lighting, marketing).

This is in line with the work of Dimmick and Coit (1982: 3–22), who analyzed the news production and agenda-setting process on a nine-level hierarchical scale. Only on the lowest level do they find the individual's personal variables (e.g. education, age, gender, etc.) to be influential: all the rest are organizational and environmental (e.g. media competition, national and international exigencies, etc.). If this is the case, the final news product

certainly is not a good indicator of gender influence on the part of those involved – and research methods that assume such influence will miss the effect of team decision-making processes and organizational demands.

Women's lower status – in general, socially and particularly in the workplace – constitutes another possible distorting factor of interviewees' responses. The general perception of the 'weakness' of women's talking and transactional style (Rakow, 1986) is a concrete example of the power of sociocultural influence. If the female 'style' is perceived to be inferior, is it useful to survey professional journalists of either sex? Don't such frames of perception lead these professionals (no different than the average person in this regard) into a stereotypical mode of thought: the male (approach) is the measure of 'objectivity' (Bem, 1983)? What, then, is the reliability of the interview method regarding questions dealing with the contribution and worth of female work, in general, and the journalistic product, in particular?

This problem is no less evident among women than among men. Women – perceived as inferior and as the marginal 'other', defined by her relationship to a male as daughter, wife, mother (De Beauvoir, 1953: 89) – have developed a declarative filter regarding what is 'correct' to say and to tell. Moreover, women tend to under-report their own activity and contribution at work, thereby also denying possible 'other ways' of working and managing – because they are unwilling to stand out too much, wary or not aware of their own different *modus operandi*. However, men too are influenced by conventional wisdom – recently in the form of western political correctness that doesn't permit honest expression of stereotypical attitudes and ideas. Journalists and editors tend to be especially sensitive to this (and have played an important role in raising public consciousness as to the unacceptability of distorted female stereotyping) but this renders their verbal responses all the more suspect. Thus, paradoxically, many men may actually lend greater weight to their female colleagues' contributions than they actually believe, distorting the survey research results in the opposite direction!

Ever since Festinger's theorizing about cognitive dissonance (1957), we have to be on guard regarding the result of a gap between behavior and opinion. Rosenberg (1965) showed how interviewees might even state opinions different than their real ones in order to curry favor with the interviewer! These were but the first in a long line of research studies illustrating differences between attitudes, opinions and declarations, on the one hand, and actual behavior, on the other. This is not the place to survey those studies at length: suffice it to say that one must be leery of automatically assuming that what we hear is what the respondent really believes – especially if the question has to do with his/her own behavior and reasons for the same.

## Gender and the media

One of the more fascinating questions dealt with over the past two decades has been whether gender influences (or might influence) media content, in general, and news specifically – and if so, in what way? This question has become increasingly germane due to the growing feminization of the media in the West (Van Zoonen, 1994; Gallagher, 1995; Weaver, 1997; Caspi and Limor, 1999; Limor and Lavie, 2002). From the early 1980s onwards, several studies began to relate to the issue of whether traditional news-selection criteria and values might be expressed differently if and when women's presence as reporters and editors increased, thereby affecting news content and the public agenda (Peterson, 1980; Covert, 1981; Muramatsu, 1990; Rakow, 1992; Beasley, 1993; Pandian, 1999).

Gallagher's data (1995, 2001), from research conducted in 1993, 1995 and 2000, surveyed scores of nations around the world in a one-day snapshot. The results showed that any significant increase in women's editorial status and power is not yet on the immediate horizon. She found a general global uniformity of women's roles working in the media as well as a gender income gap, remarkably similar in most countries. This was, in large, part a function of the lower status tasks performed by women journalists as well as lower editorial appreciation (mostly male) of their work.

Until the mid-1980s, little was known about female journalists' professional values. Indeed, studies involving professional work values in general did not differentiate between women and men (Kocher, 1986). Even in-depth research regarding the news, including relevant gender aspects, hardly dealt with or referred to the politics of gender in the news production process (Carter, 1998; Kitzinger, 1998; De Bruin, 2000; Lavie, 2001), as well as journalistic professionalism in this context (Skidmore, 1998). Academic research (Herzog, 1941; Radway, 1985; Press, 1991) has mostly concentrated on men and women as subjects of the news – and not in their role as initiators, reporters or editors in the world of news.

Nevertheless, on the question of news criteria and values, some advances were made after the mid-1980s. In 1994, Van Zoonen conducted a comprehensive worldwide survey of research on gender and news values and discovered that several such studies had been undertaken over the previous decade (Van Zoonen, 1994). However, she also found that most of these studies were based on the respondents' declaration (i.e. their self-perception) while most of the others involved media content analysis exclusively. The picture has hardly changed since then. For example, a study of the influence of women entering British radio news was based on a telephone survey of

20 senior editors from the BBC and independent radio stations (Haworth, 2000). Similarly, studies of American journalists' attitudes (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996) as well as Israeli print editors' responses regarding news values and editorial functioning (Lavie, 1997) did not find that gender is very influential.

However, when Van Zoonen looked at a series of studies conducted in the mid-1990s as to how journalists viewed their profession, in general, and news values specifically in a gender context, she found that women journalists tended to be critical of the present news-selection process. They argued that topics relevant to women are pushed to the sidelines (Van Zoonen, 1998). Another study highlighted women journalists' dissatisfaction with the male orientation of hard news especially (Skidmore, 1998). Thus, at the present, it is obvious that gender does not have a marked effect on the final news product – despite women journalists' inclinations to the contrary (Van Zoonen, 1994; Lavie, 1997).

While several media production studies from a gendered perspective have been produced, there exists a serious objective difficulty in carrying out such research (Brennan, 1995; Hardt, 1995) as it entails following the activity of numerous actors, much of which is hidden from the eye. A second problem was noted earlier: by almost universally accepting the ethos of news objectivity (Steiner, 1998), journalists are not eager to transparently display factors that distort such journalistic pursuit and presentation of the 'objective truth'.

That leaves the researcher with one major alternative and, indeed, most research that does focus on the issue of gender and news content uses interview/survey methodology. Other than the problems involved in the aforementioned methodologies, there are three possible reasons for this.

- 1 *Budgetary constraints*: generating significant data from news content analysis is not only expensive but also logistically complicated, especially with the electronic media. Survey questionnaires or in-depth interviews are far cheaper and more straightforward – especially when dealing with a relatively limited number of journalists and editors.
- 2 *Perception of reliability*: researchers tend to place great trust in the veracity of journalists' and editors' responses because of their commitment to journalistic ethics and professional standards of objectivity.
- 3 *Academic fashion*: the discipline of social science (as well as part of the humanities) has begun moving away from a purely 'scientific-objective' method to a more subjective, post-modern approach in which personal 'narrative' takes pre-eminence. Thus, among gender scholars (and others as well) quantitative content analysis has become less popular than methodologies based on the personal witness of the actors involved.



From a purely scientific-methodological perspective, the first two reasons are not at all germane. Money and logistics cannot be an excuse for problematic methods; neither can unproven assumptions of interviewee reliability. The third reason is still hotly debated and there does not seem to be any good reason not to assess personal interviews in the same critical fashion that we use towards autobiographies, diaries and other 'personal' historical texts.

However, content analysis studies (more limited in number) regarding the influence of gender on the news product have also not successfully presented a clear picture – indeed, some findings are contradictory (Van Zoonen, 1988, 1994) – so that one has to use such a methodology with no less care.<sup>5</sup>

Given this general state of affairs, it seems clear that greater attention has to be given to the sundry quantitative and qualitative methodologies employed – and their possible effect on the findings. Indeed, it is doubtful that either of the two dominant approaches can ever be proven to be more scientific or reliable, so that a complementary approach – using the strengths of both content analysis and survey interviewing – seems to us to be the far more preferable route. Only a multi-methodological approach can uncover subtle layers of meaning and influence that are missed by a single methodology (Nielsen, 1990; Reinhartz, 1992). If we wish to have any hope of truly discovering whether, and to what extent, gender influences news content, we shall have to mesh and meld the main two methodologies together, adding other subsidiary approaches as far as possible.

## Methodology

In order to properly test the sundry factors underlying the final news product and the possible effect of gender, we did not limit the research to the professional attitudes of news editors nor merely to an analysis of news content but rather combined the two in a multi-method approach. This is in line with Staley and Shockley-Zalabak (1989) who argued for data richness in feminist studies, holding out the promise of a more multi-varied picture of reality that includes both subtle and obvious connections, factors and processes.

Israel's two main public radio stations were chosen as the basis of this case study. 'Kol Yisrael' ('Voice of Israel', Station B; henceforth 'KY') and 'Galei Zahal' (Israeli Army Radio; henceforth 'GZ') are the two most widely listened to news and current events stations in Israel, a country whose people live with the radio on at all times. However, these two stations have markedly different organizational and personnel profiles. KY is part of the umbrella Israel Broadcast Administration (IBA) – under governmental supervision – incorporating

public TV (Channel 1) and several public radio stations (each devoted to different types of programming). Most KY journalists and editors are permanently employed for decades. GZ works under army auspices and the Minister of Defense. Its journalists are mostly young inductees working at the station for their three-year mandatory army service or in reserve duty capacity on a multi-week, rotational basis. Thus, professional advancement at GZ is far faster, as many journalists leave after their army stint is over, while at KY advancement is slow, with employees generally working until retirement. It should be noted that while KY is the more popular station (with daily ratings of about 40 percent), GZ is popular too – most of its listeners are *civilians* and not just soldiers.

In order to analyze possible influence of gender on news production, three different methods were employed:

- 1 A structured, anonymous questionnaire was distributed (September 1997 to January 1998) to 23 male and 18 female editors (altogether 80 percent of the entire editorial staff: 26 KY editors and 15 GZ editors) of the two stations' radio news and current events programs. They were asked questions related to their personal and professional news sources. The main focus consisted of three parts:
  - a scoring the 17 news topic areas that they thought the audience most wanted to hear about (presented in Hebrew alphabetical order): fashion and design, ecology, security, entertainment and culture, religion, society (education, health, poverty and minorities), international politics and economics, Israeli foreign policy, Israeli economics, science and technology, sports, Israeli politics (parties, Knesset, government), crime and justice, advancement of women, local government, peace process, transportation and infrastructure;
  - b scoring the 11 news functions that they, as editors, thought were important: fast reporting to the public, commentary and explanation on complex subjects, providing fun and entertainment, keeping track of the government's doings, investigating crimes, providing intellectual sustenance, pushing women's rights, being skeptical of governmental decisions, being skeptical of private business decisions, agenda-setting, enabling the common citizenry to express themselves (this list was based mainly on Weaver and Wilhoit [1996], with minor adjustments for this study and the Israeli milieu);
  - c scoring the importance of 24 realistic/dummy news headlines, each representing popular subject areas (similar to the list of 17 in (a)).<sup>6</sup>
- 2 Seventy in-depth interviews were conducted with female and male editors, news anchors, producers, desk editors and station managers: 40 during the on-site observation period and another 30 after the research results were in hand (2000–01).
- 3 Content analysis of 181 news as well as current events programs (broadcast in 1988, 1990, 1993, 1996/7 and 1997/8<sup>7</sup>) was performed, based on a structured score sheet. The purpose was to investigate which news items were chosen *in fact*

by female as compared to male editors and how these items were actually presented. The central variables here were subject area (of the 17 in 1(a)) and placement in the program (lead item, etc.).

## Findings

As noted at the start, the study's original intent was to analyze whether (and to what extent) gender affects news content production. However, our findings of necessity lead this section in a somewhat different direction: explaining (different levels of) inconsistency between the stated values of male and female newsroom editors, on the one hand, and each gender's actual editorial behavior, on the other hand, i.e. news program content. Obviously, before one can deal with gender influence on news production, it is incumbent to understand the sources of differential findings emanating from different methodologies. The ensuing discussion section will reflect this change in direction as well.

Two significant gaps were discovered between the editors' questionnaire and/or interview declarations, on the one hand, and the program content analysis, on the other hand – the first, methodological; the second, gender-oriented. The former can be seen in the different findings emanating from the three different methodologies employed: survey questionnaire, content analysis and in-depth interviews. Indeed, not only were there differences between the first two (statements and behavior) but even between the tools studying the editors' stated declarations – the questionnaire and the interviews regarding *actual* news work patterns! Indeed, the women's editors' declarations in the survey and the interview were quite similar but, on further probing during the interviews, it was found that they contradicted themselves by acknowledging other, diverse ways of approaching news work with the common denominator being audience-oriented (instead of emphasizing objective, professional values). This became a pattern throughout the three methodologies: the extent of each gender's gap between declared values in the questionnaire/interview and actual programming results was greater among women editors than their male counterparts between declared values and actions in the newsroom.

In order not to get lost in a jungle of results, we shall concentrate on four of the main editorial gap findings.

The first finding shows a connection between the editors' gender and actual news topic priority selection as seen in 181 news/current events programs broadcast over a ten-year period. Seemingly, there exists gender otherness regarding news topic selection and placement in the programs' line-up.

Of the top five subject areas (among 17 overall), only one ranked identically (No. 1: security), three had different rankings (Israeli politics, peace process and international news) and two did not appear in the other group's top five (society and economics).

This finding is quite different from the editors' declared news values and functions as found in the questionnaire. For instance, the results of the 17 news topics showed very little gender otherness in scoring the importance of each, other than where most expected (e.g. sports). Similarly, of the 11 news functions, only one showed significant otherness: more women (44.4 percent) ranked 'commentary and explanation' as 'very important' than their male counterparts did (26.1 percent); conversely, more men said that it was only 'partly important' (34.8 percent) than did women (11.1 percent). However, the otherness in scores between female and male editors for the remaining 10 functions was minimal and inconsequential. Much the same was found regarding the dummy headlines – of the 24 listed, only in five were the scores significantly different between the two groups.

On the declarative level, the lack of gender relevance in news work was a common theme in the in-depth interviews as well. In general, the initial qualitative answers of the interviewees echoed the quantitative results of the questionnaire respondents (of course, in many cases, they were the same people, a fact which at the least reinforces the reliability of the questionnaire responses): gender has no influence on news selection. The main considerations mentioned were the obligation to professionalism, to ethical behavior and to news regulations and standards. However, as previously noted, when probing the women editors further during the interviews regarding how they actually go about editing (goals, motivation, etc.), we discovered that their criteria were quite different: audience needs (and presenting commentary) were given priority over more traditional, 'professional' considerations.

Overall, then, the questionnaire results regarding professional values and work criteria did not indicate any significant gender otherness among women editors – while the programming results did show such otherness. This is an indication that editors don't necessarily do what they say – or at least don't seem to be aware that their professional behavior is at some variance with their declared intentions.

The second finding emerges from our content analysis of the news programs: male editors gave preference to 'hard' news whereas female editors tended to emphasize 'soft' news more. This stands in contradistinction to the editors' declarations in the questionnaire (Table 1), in which the editors were asked to prioritize the 17 news topic areas (and which we scored based on the categories that Tuchman [1973] identified).

**Table 1** Hard/soft news – declared and actual

Editors' gender	Questionnaire	News program product
Women	Hard	Soft
Men	Soft	Hard

Third, through the in-depth interviews, we found that communication *with* (and not just *to*) the audience is more important to women editors (80%) than their male counterparts (50%). Declaratively, female editors are more attuned to audience needs and wishes. This is in line with Weaver (1997) and Haworth (2000) who made the same argument, as well as with other research findings regarding the print press (Kohut and Parker, 1997; Van Zoonen, 1998). The latter found that male editors categorize and classify newsworthiness items more on the basis of their own perspective and values – especially strict professional criteria of what is important, new and interesting – and less on what they believe their news audience actually wants to read. Unfortunately, the Israeli editors contradicted themselves in their questionnaire responses, for there no gender gap was evinced between male and female editors on this point.

Our fourth finding also relates to a gap between declarations made in the questionnaire and during the interviews. In the former, the editors declared that they would make efforts to ensure relatively equal representation among interviewees of both genders but this does not gibe with what they offered in the interviews (nor in their actual editorial behavior). Here both female and male editors admitted that there are topics for which they would only interview men on-air. And in fact, overall there was a huge disproportion between male and female interviewees.

The picture changes somewhat, however, when we divide the questionnaire responses by radio station. KY evinces a clear gender gap: the vast majority of women editors (90%) offered that they would make special efforts to ensure that interviewees come from both genders, compared to slightly more than half of the male editors (57%) who said the same thing (Table 3). At GZ, though, both male and female editors in equal measure (80%) responded that they would make such efforts. However, whereas at KY there was no difference between the genders regarding the question of whether there were subject areas in which male interviewees were preferred, at GZ such a gap did appear: 71 percent of the men answered in the affirmative, compared to 25 percent of the women.

Overall, then, we not only found different results depending on the methodology used but gender-based gaps as well. Put bluntly, the variation in

findings between the three different methodologies was usually greater in number among women editors than among the men. For example, female editors' assessment of whether gender affects editorial work and the news product differed between the questionnaire results (no influence) and the in-depth interview responses (influence exists) – a difference not found among male editors.

## **Discussion**

The present study sought to investigate gender's effect on news production through a multi-dimensional methodological approach. We believed that by combining the declarative (stated intent) approach with actual content analysis a clearer picture could be attained, eliciting various subtle elements that might be missed by a solitary methodology (Nielsen, 1990; Reinharz, 1992). What we found instead was an overall gap incorporating several inconsistencies and even contradictions between the two approaches, necessitating a serious discussion of this phenomenon even before one can get to the main question of editorial gender otherness.

We adopt the perspective of Maynard and Purvis (1994), arguing that differences emanating from sundry research techniques are themselves as much an aid in getting at the truth as are points of similarity. It is in this spirit that the discussion here is offered – we will not focus on specific explanations for discrete findings but rather take a bird's-eye view of the situation as a whole, i.e. discussing the basic factors underlying the overall gaps found between the different methodologies. Such an undertaking is critical if we ultimately wish to arrive at a better understanding of gender influence.

Indeed, our contradictory findings can be considered in and of themselves a sort of important datum. Thus, analyzing the reasons for such a gap can serve to further our quest to understand the complex interaction between gender and media – in addition to spotlighting important methodological issues.

As we saw in the previous section, two general types of gap were found. The first is methodological: between declarations and actual practice. On the one hand, professionals of either gender's declarative statements indicate that no gender influence exists in editorial prioritizing of the news lineup – indeed, for many editors the question is 'simply not relevant'. In analyzing the topics based on rank order of their appearance (an expression of news importance), almost all news topics were given the same rank by both male and female editors (except for a very few, narrow differences). The same thing emerged from our in-depth interviews: both genders claimed that there are no intrinsic differences in the way they look at the news. The editors clearly expressed

allegiance to the values of professionalism, ethical behavior and accepted practices:

In the newsroom, the motto is professionalism; either you're a newsperson or not. (GZ female editor, personal interview, 1 January 2001)

There are no real differences [between men and women] unless you're a feminist and a conscious fighter, in which case you implement your own style in conscious fashion when you wish. (KY female editor, personal interview, 3 January 2001)

There aren't – and there shouldn't be – differences between men and women in reporting the news or current events. It's purely a matter of professionalism. (KY male editor, personal interview, 12 January 2001)

However, in looking at the news product we find a completely different picture. In order to get around the problem of collective editorial decision-making that renders gender influence difficult to sort out, we focused on news and current events programs edited by women exclusively. Among these, there was a marked difference of topic ranking – in contradistinction to the picture received from the women's questionnaire and in-depth interviews. This does not come as a complete surprise, having been noted at least since the 1970s (Pingree and Hawkins, 1978).

The second major gap is gender-related: greater differences between news product and declarations found among women editors than among men.

In the event, to a large extent the two gaps are related, i.e. part of the explanation for the greater female inconsistencies can be found in the realm of methodology.

### **A. Gaps between professional declarations and behavior of all editors**

We begin by offering two possible explanations for the differences found between the declared beliefs and the actual behavior of the news editors: (1) the gap is endogenous; and (2) the gap is exogenous.

The first alternative has two possible foundations: methodological or cognitive. On the one hand, we must be aware that the gap could be a function of methodological flaws in the research design such as combining and comparing different approaches (questionnaire versus content analysis). However, this multi-method approach is certainly acceptable in the research literature and is known to lend extra reliability to the results. We do not see how the two methods in our study contradict each other or are incompatible. Another methodological problem could lie in comparing two different periods. In our case, the content analysis covered an earlier decade (1988–98) whereas the questionnaire and other methods were employed from 1997–2001. The latter period was characterized by a higher level of 'political correctness' and by

heightened feminist consciousness in Israel. However, this too turned out to be not relevant, for in analyzing the results over the five periods during the decade – the last one, overlapping the year in which the questionnaire was disseminated – we found no otherness in actual news selection by gender between the periods.

The second possibility is cognitive. It assumes that real behavior can only be determined by what was done: what editors declare does not necessarily reflect reality, either because people tend to state what is socially ‘acceptable’ (these days, especially regarding equality between the sexes) or because they have internalized official organizational norms. As most of our editorial respondents declared an obligation to the professional norm of objectivity, it is natural that they would consistently hold to an attitude of ‘transparent neutrality’, denying the importance or influence of personal considerations and beliefs in the news selection process (Steiner, 1998: 146).

Thus, an editor’s allegiance to professionalism could well mask (even from herself or himself) other influential factors, including gender-based attitudes and beliefs. Were they able to ‘let their hair down’ and talk freely, we might actually find them saying things that would support their editorial behavior that shows gender otherness. In such a case, the gap’s endogenous nature would be an indication of real gender otherness.

However, the gap might well be exogenous. Kitzinger (1998: 186) offers a likely explanation. Among the supporters of gender otherness, there are those who go a step farther and talk of the connection between ‘gender politics’ and the news. Kitzinger argues that gender politics substantively shapes news production through pressure groups – among other places, within the news organization.

## **B. The larger gender gap between ideal and real among women editors**

Gender politics as a force behind news production can also explain another anomaly in our findings: the larger gap between ideal and real among women editors than among men. It may be that male editors are aware of the need for change and have greater self-confidence in their professionalism. Women, in contrast, are more conflicted regarding their news values because ‘news professionalism’ has always been defined in male terms.

In addition, we may be witness here to a methodological problem noted by Eichler (1988). In the present study, the questionnaires and interviews were disseminated and conducted exclusively by a female researcher, which might have distorted the male editors’ responses due to stereotypical expectations of the respondents vis-a-vis the researcher (even though they were told at the start that this was a study on ‘radio news’, several of the questions were



obviously gender-oriented). Had a male interviewer queried them, there is a good chance that we would have found equally large gaps among male editors as we did with female ones.

The explanation of the larger variance among women editors between stated convictions and actual practice is that gender is deeply rooted in the workplace, thus affecting editorial beliefs. As Acker (1990: 145–6) put it:

To say that an organization, or any other analytic unit, is gendered means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of a distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine.

Stated another way, the structural editorial process developed by men (Esser, 1998) does not leave any wiggle room for women to deviate from established norms. Any significant change by a female editor will not be perceived as being a result of initiative or renewal but rather as non-professionalism.

Thus, women's previous journalistic jobs in secondary subject areas, the more senior positions that they may not have gained, along with the stereotype of the news values that women supposedly hold in general, all these may lead them to reject the newer news values that are paradoxically more in tune with their natural proclivities. For example, the growing trend towards infotainment along with the feminization of the journalistic workforce creates great psychological conflict among female journalists who seek to maintain a classical, 'normative, professional identity'. Male editors, in contrast, their professional identity well anchored, are naturally more open to accept the changing demands and values of the news profession.

To be sure, this is a multi-dimensional process. On the first hand, as noted, more women are becoming journalists, in theory affording them greater leeway to express their interests, norms and values (Kanter, 1977). On the second hand, professional standards have been in place for many decades – implicitly denying women the opportunity to express the 'added value' that they wish to bring to the public sphere. Finally, these standards lately have been undergoing revision. However, unlike men, women journalists do not have a longstanding professional tradition, as the preponderance of journalists and editors in the past – around the world and in Israel (Lavie and Limor, 2003) – were male. Thus, every change – especially one that seems to be pushing the profession backwards to 'feminine' norms (narrative reporting, little commentary, many stories at the price of depth) and to 'sob sister' journalism – recalls memories of previous journalistic work ('pink ghetto', soft news sections) and further sharpens their conflict and doubts regarding their work.

The result of all this is paradoxical. Contemporary journalism is moving in a direction that is more open to a range of stylistic approaches, to different

ways of treating news stories, to emphasizing 'otherness' – even if this is all in the name of 'higher ratings'. Such a trend would seem to be favorable to women journalists for two reasons. First, as noted, the more 'feminine' approach of 'softening' the news seems to be what today's hard-news jaded (or increasingly politically desensitized) audience is seeking. Second, and of even greater interest, is that Israeli female news professionals are (at least as they declared in the in-depth interviews – not in the questionnaire; once again, another internal female contradiction) more attuned to the audience's wishes than men. In other words, whereas Israeli male editors expressed firm loyalty to 'professional' standards notwithstanding audience wishes, their female counterparts laid greater emphasis on audience needs and desires – a finding that replicates what others found in the USA (Weaver, 1997; Haworth, 2000).

Nevertheless, it is the male journalist/editor, not having to look over his shoulder professionally, who is more comfortable moving in this direction as an ineluctable demand of an ever-changing profession. Experienced editors have been through change before and this is but one more in a series. The female journalist, with fewer years of experience and less seniority overall, is far more wary of this specific direction precisely because it was formerly identified with 'women's (journalistic) work'.

Thus, the fact that the gap between declared news values and actual editorial behavior found among female editors is wider than among their male counterparts can be explained in the ambivalence of the former vis-a-vis journalistic change. The latter are more comfortable with the trend to a more 'feminine' journalistic style than are the former.

In any case, whether for exogenous reasons of ratings pressure or for endogenous reasons of increasing numbers of women reaching positions of editorial power, change is afoot. This leaves us with one final question: what will be the *nature* of such editorial change? Research studies addressing this question have presented highly differing answers:

- 1 more balanced and less gender-stereotyped reporting, including severance of the equation positing 'hard news' = men; 'soft news' = women;
- 2 increasing amounts of 'soft news' and a more feminine touch;
- 3 redefining news values from a gender perspective, reflecting different criteria in news definition and selection; and
- 4 more female news interviewers and interviewees (Van Zoonen, 1988).

Overall, these studies view any change/influence/otherness as a positive development. However, not all changes are consonant with others, which leads to the basic question of whether indeed there is such a thing as 'female' news values (e.g. sensitivity, family, tolerance, empathy and others). If they do exist, then such values will ultimately find equal expression with today's

dominant 'male' values – in society at large and in news reporting specifically. However, numerical equality (or even majority) in the newsroom will not, *ipso facto*, immediately lead to female news values being expressed, for a few reasons. First, without a change of values in general society, the newsroom will not quickly be moved to attempt a re-evaluation of its own norms. Second, women in the newsroom will have to overcome their 'professional-psychological block' about being true to their innate value system. Third, numerical strength does not necessarily translate into real editorial power, so that without some sort of equality in high-level editorial positions, pressure for such news value change coming from the bottom of the news organization's pyramid will not suffice to 'restructure' (Esser, 1998) traditional, professional norms.

## Conclusion

Our study, designed to deal with gender influence on media news products, revealed gaps and contradictions between different methodologies' findings. We conclude that editorial respondents' declarations should be viewed as a product of a specific social environment, thus demanding of the researcher a critical – perhaps even skeptical – approach vis-a-vis their answers, similar to reading autobiographies, memoirs and historical texts. Thus, the warning of Pingree and Hawkins (1978) has retained its relevance two and half decades later.

However, studies that rely exclusively on content analysis of the editorial product should also be approached with great caution, for they do not reflect the complex, news decision-making process between workers specifically nor of organizational influences in general. Gender otherness cannot be easily discerned with such a gross, collective approach, for content analysis is, in most cases, not able to separate the contribution of each gender, among other categories.

The practical significance of this from a research perspective is to negate the traditional methodological approach of relying either exclusively on news professionals' declarations or solely on content analysis of the news. In other words, creating the delicate cloth of gender and the news requires not only great caution but also interlacing the warp of declarations with the woof of content analysis.

While our research did utilize several methodologies in recognition of the need for methodological variety, one cannot ignore the difficulties involved in meshing them together. As a result of gaps and contradictions in various methodologies, the researcher must develop a greater awareness of the

sundry factors behind such a divide. Only then can one directly attack the question of gender influence on the news. But this too is not so straightforward, for its (non)existence should be seen as a dynamic variable necessitating investigation.

Adopting a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies offers a much greater sense of reliability and credibility regarding the threads connecting gender and news production. At the least, for the practitioner and the researcher alike, it raises the possibility that between statement of intent and actual behavior there exists a gap demanding initial investigation. In other words, contradictions, gaps and lack of correlation between different methodologies' findings (as well as within each gender's differential responses) are, in themselves, a kind of finding – food for thought for anyone researching the influence of gender. At the least, they would seem to demand a combination of methodological approaches in order to more broadly and clearly understand the overt – as well as the covert – factors involved: specifically, social status, power, internalizing traditional values, news professionalism, objectivity and, more generally, the institutionalization of patriarchal dominance and the social structures maintaining and strengthening it (hooks, 2000). The more methodologies utilized, the better researchers will be able to neutralize such endogenous and exogenous factors, thereby successfully ferreting out the elements involved in gender influences on journalistic practice.

## Notes

- 1 The authors share equal responsibility for the article.
- 2 'Otherness' (not 'differences') is the currently preferred academic formulation regarding media products of men and women.
- 3 This is not to suggest that there exists a dearth of studies on the topic of gender and *news-makers*, i.e. female journalists. The following are only some of the leading studies on the subject: Lont (1995), Rakow (1992), Meyers (2000).
- 4 Thus, it would seem that investigating the actual news product is called for. As Kitch (1997) and Lemish (1997) pointed out, content analysis was the original approach in media and gender stereotype studies.
- 5 For example, a study of radio and television news in Finland (where women only recently joined the editorial ranks) and Sweden (where numerical gender equality has existed in the newsroom for a decade) exhibits clear otherness between the two cases. In the latter, there were more 'soft news' items while current events programs led by women were more probing and had a larger number of investigative scoops. However, the Finnish case exhibited far less otherness between news programs run by women and men (Zilliacus-Tikkanen, 1996, quoted in Haworth, 2000: 254–5). Similar non-uniform findings were found in other such studies, so that, at this stage, one cannot render any universal conclusion regarding gender otherness in the substance and presentation of the news across countries and cultures.

- 6 The headlines had a negative slant and also included a famous personality, in order to neutralize the possible effect of these two important news criteria.
- 7 A pre-test ascertained that these dates represented relatively 'normal' news periods and not a major news issue that might overwhelm any editorial discretion.

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