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# Whose News?

## Does Gender Determine the Editorial Product?

■ *Aliza Lavie and Sam Lehman-Wilzig*

### ABSTRACT

■ The study reported in this article is a survey of 16 female and 25 male editors in seven Israeli newspapers to examine how gender affects professional news selection. It rated the newsworthiness of 16 different general subject areas, 17 journalism selection criteria, and 24 'concrete' headlines as a simulation. Several editors were also interviewed in-depth. Ninety students of mass communications were surveyed as a control group. The findings indicate an absence of significant 'otherness' between female and male editors, both in newsworthiness criteria and actual practice – similar to the control group. The article goes on to address possible reasons for the small number of Israeli women in editorial positions as well as the lack of gender distinctions regarding news values; personal, social economic and news consumption factors, rather than gender-related obstacles or organizational ethos, are implicated. ■

**Key Words** gender and news, journalistic profession, male/female editors, news values, newsworthiness criteria

What difference has this trend made. . . . Have women and men journalists become increasingly similar, or do they continue to differ in their social background, experience and careers? . . . and do women and men differ in their perceptions of the role, news priorities and ethical standards? (Weaver, 1997: 22)

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## Background

Louise Seals, editor of the *Times-Dispatch* (Richmond, VA), noted in a conference of senior editors that many opportunities have opened up for women in new industries. Seals, one of 35 female editors (a sixth of all the conference participants), also added: 'Women know that there's an additional place in the newsroom' (Seals, 1998), a comment that reflects the current global process of media feminization.

Women's entry into journalism, and especially the accelerated and increased nature of the process, is a relatively new phenomenon. For many years the world of journalism and its wide range of functions remained for all practical purposes out of bounds to women (van Zoonen, 1994; Turner, 1993; Vivan, 1991). However, under the impact of the feminist movement an increasingly greater number of women studied in the halls of academe, obtaining professional training (Friedan, 1963).

Increased admission of women to US schools of journalism began in earnest in the 1970s and later spread to other countries (van Zoonen, 1994; Beasley, 1993; Limor and Caspi, 1994; Limor and Lavie, 2002). Nevertheless, various studies indicate a lack of appropriate representation in senior positions in western news media (UNESCO, 1987; van Zoonen, 1988; Wilson, 1988; Beasley, 1993; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996; Lavie, 1997). Thus, despite the significant increase in the number of women holding journalistic positions in the media, and notwithstanding the explosion in the number of mass media channels, senior management and editing positions remain in the hands of men (Beasley, 1993) – similar to what is found in teaching, social work and other professions marked by a majority of female workers.

The situation in Israel is no different. Whereas in 1955/6 only 9.3 percent of all journalist positions in the four leading Hebrew-language daily newspapers were held by women, this figure rose to 37 percent almost four decades later (Caspi and Limor, 1999). A similar rate (37 percent) was found in a study on women journalists in Israel's print press, conducted in the late 1990s (Lachover, 2000). Women account for 41.3 percent of all journalists in Israel's five leading national daily newspapers (Limor and Lavie, 2002).

## Gender and news

This picture of female underrepresentation in editorial positions is paralleled by Tuchman's (1973) accepted classification, which distinguishes news items by content types: 'hard' or 'soft' news. Tuchman identified key concepts in the news production process and con-

ceptualized the practice based on the perspectives of professions. She noted, *inter alia*,<sup>1</sup> the distinction prevalent among professionals between 'hard' news and 'soft' news that is interesting because it concerns the lives of people (Mott, 1952). Tuchman noted that urgency and immediacy are additional criteria for this classification, in that 'hard' news is typically of the moment and its publication cannot be delayed, while 'soft' news usually does not demand immediate reportage. 'Hard' news primarily concerns issues such as politics, economics, international relations, welfare and scientific developments, while 'soft' news focuses primarily on human interest stories, gossip, etc. (Tuchman, 1973). However, this could be merely a temporary aberration, the last bastion of male dominance in the newsroom, for if the number of women continues to increase – most with high levels of journalism education in general and topic-specific expertise in particular – the situation in the hard news departments could begin to change in the near future, not only numerically but also in a possible redefinition of what constitutes hard and soft news.

As a result, a central question which concerns researchers in western journalism today is this: if and when women begin to enter the news departments and the newsrooms in increasing numbers, will this affect the classification of news items and their newsworthiness (Beasley and Gibbons, 1993; Braden, 1996; Creedon, 1993; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996; Weaver, 1997)?

The accelerating trend of women entering the media workforce has raised serious concerns among journalistic veterans. They are especially worried about possible status decline of the profession that in turn would impact self-image, salary structure and accompanying incentives. Another worry is a possible change in traditional, male-oriented, professional news criteria, now reinterpreted and expressed by women in the news issue agenda and treatment of stories (Peterson, 1980; Beasley, 1993; Covert, 1981; Muramatsu, 1990; Pandian, 1999; Rakow, 1992). An alternative school of thought believes that the complex news selection and production organizational structure does not enable any one person – notwithstanding seniority or position – to overly influence the final news product. Thus, women's massive entry into the field will not have much influence on the news agenda. It is worth noting that most of the aforementioned scholars dealing with agenda-setting in the 1980s and early 1990s (Lafky, 1991; van Zoonen, 1988) focused on the individual journalist (or teams) and not on organizational aspects or the influence of journalistic norms in and outside the newsroom.

Little is known regarding female journalists' professional values. Most studies of professional news values do not distinguish between men

and women (Kocher, 1986). As several recent theoreticians have pointed out (Kitzinger, 1998; Carter, 1998; Skidmore, 1998; de Bruin, 2000), even extensive studies of news, including those that deal with relevant gender aspects, have mostly ignored the politics of gender in the news production process and news professionalism within this context. Academic research has mainly concentrated on men and women as subjects of the news and not as initiators, reporters or specific job-holders within the world of journalism (Herzog, 1941; Radway, 1985; Press, 1991).

Nevertheless, some researchers (Covert, 1981; Limor and Caspi, 1994; van Zoonen, 1994; Rakow, 1993) have suggested the possibility that the increasing ratio of women in key news positions may lead to a new emphasis on values such as harmony, brotherhood, affiliation and community, while deemphasizing dichotomous and conflict-related values of victory/defeat. Covert (1981) and Rakow (1993) argued that journalism is usually written in terms of triumph or failure, controversy and dispute – an aggressive style more characteristic of males, compared to the female approach which emphasizes coordination, harmony and belonging to a community. Valenti (1996) summarized the conclusions of a number of empirical studies by noting that the findings consistently affirm gender's impact on certain issues:

[There are] gender-based differences in ways of knowing and covering audience responses, leadership and consumer behavior, *decision making processes* and more. Men tend to look at communication as a means to establish and maintain control or dominance whereas women (possibly have learned to) look at communication as a means to develop and maintain relationships. (Valenti, 1996: 42; emphasis added)

In short, throughout the 1980s and most of the 1990s two schools of thought opposed each other. One believed that if and when women would come to 'dominate' the mass media as the majority (especially in the newsroom), this would lead to changes in the way the news has been traditionally presented, its style and even in type of content. This approach rested on the basic assumption of gender 'otherness'; when women are 'freed' of male dominance they will be able to express their true self in the process of selecting and writing the news (as well as other types of media content).

The second school of thought insisted that news production, in its very essence, is professional and non-gender specific – or to put it more bluntly: 'news is news and it doesn't involve gender'. Thus, even if the process of journalism feminization continues apace and the profession

becomes mainly run by women, this will have little impact on the media's news content.

This school's leading proponent is van Zoonen whose theoretical criticism (van Zoonen, 1994) is based on two primary arguments:

1. *Female non-universality*: The basic assumption of an existing universal female perspective should be rejected; values among women journalists differ as much as do values among their male counterparts. As is noted later, a diverse list of anticipated and desired change in news product attests to the difficulty of establishing 'general' female values.
2. *Organizational factors*: The dominant research perspective is that team endeavour plays a more decisive role in the production of news than individual effort. Systemic constraints and other influential factors shape news items, beyond the worldview of the people directly involved (Dimmick and Coit, 1982). The effect of gender may be discerned, at best, on the lowest of the nine levels – the individual cognitive level.

In response, several researchers do not view national 'differences' as proving their point but rather as undercutting it. Werner (1994), reviewing empirical findings of studies conducted in Norway, noted that studies which deal with coverage of features, topics and interviews found a positive correlation between gender of news writer and media coverage content, including news items related to what is stereotypically called 'the world of women'.

A study conducted in Japan by Muramatsu (1990) indicated that female (and not male) journalists tended to identify with the underdog position, took a more pragmatic view of everyday life, and related to women as news subjects in ways based on other than external appearances.

Even if one adopts the view that an increase in the number of women in key journalism positions will lead to changes in the content of news, an obligation exists to explore the nature of the anticipated change. Van Zoonen (1994) summarized various studies which examined this issue and listed possible different time- and place-dependent changes such as fewer texts tainted by sexist stereotypes, more space afforded to soft news and women-related issues, as well as greater representation of women in the media (as subjects of coverage and interviewees).

In sum, it is evident from the preceding review that even the most basic questions in the field – such as the very existence of a otherness between men and women in their approach to news – continue to be

debated. Moreover, even if empirical analysis of male and female news classification indicates no practical gender-based otherness, several researchers still claim that such significant otherness exists inherently, but is eroded by the comprehensive organizational mechanism of news production that obliterates the possibility of identifying it in the final product. According to this view, only general organizational change can lead to change in the final news product.

Notwithstanding all of this – or perhaps as a result of the theoretical impasse in which researchers found themselves – the most recent research studies (from the late 1990s onwards) have broadened the focus to include other factors and questions involved in gender influence: organizational structure, subjectivity, objectivity and identity formation. In other words, the previous dichotomous discussion ('influence': yes or no) has been supplanted by a focus on other factors that might supply an answer, or at least some substantive hints. Gender is no longer perceived as something static but rather as being dynamic, changing over time and place.

Such research approaches attempt to examine the existence of gendered substructures involved in the practice of news production. Some choose to start from the influence of the dominant male culture (and professional ethos) deeply rooted in the newsroom – thereby explaining the feeling that women journalists have that women's or feminist issues are not appropriate for a true professional (Skidmore, 1998: 207). Others emphasize the fact of women's lack of progress in the newsroom as a function of the ruling male attitude that journalism and femininity are not consonant values. This research approach, in effect, challenges the reigning professional norms and values in the newsroom, arguing that the 'news' is informed by gender politics, strengthened through such criteria as 'objectivity' and 'ways of knowing' (Allan, 1998; Kitinger, 1998).

An example of conceptual change, openness and theoretical development based on mediating factors that enlarge the discussion can be discerned in van Zoonen. As we have seen, she argued in 1988 that the complex organizational structure of news selection, production and publication is not under the influence of any one individual, senior as he might be. Ten years later van Zoonen maintained that the organization's identity is a product of structural exigencies (budgets, work routine, professional demands, market needs, etc.) as well as professional values on the one hand, and subjective discourse (including gender and ethnic identity) on the other (van Zoonen, 1998a): 'The concept ["organizational identities"] in journalism . . . intends to show that the journalist as an organizational person or a "team-player" is the primary actor in

journalism, rather than the subjective individual constrained (or not) by structural factors' (van Zoonen, 1998b: 137).

In other words, she is now claiming that organizational identity is an ever-dynamic combination of beliefs, values and feelings poured into organizational needs. Within such active processes that structure organizational culture, gender too finds a place. The overall result, therefore, is that gender identity is one of several components of organizational identity (much like professional identity) – all absorbed together into the organization's general character.

Where does one go from here? It is our contention that the serious differences of opinion, theoretical approaches and findings in previous studies stem at least in part from incomplete methodology. First, few if any previous research studies have used an 'untainted' (value-biased), non-professional control group to discern whether news organization factors distort male/female news values. Second, other than Weaver and Wilhoit (1996), the preponderance of previous studies did not include male editors in their research sample. Third, interview or survey questions have generally been directed at all women within the media and not specifically at those involved in news production. Moreover, these studies usually combined women from different media; however, as sundry media have different characteristics of news production, such cross-media analysis can be misleading. Finally, and perhaps of greatest importance, no previous study has put the journalists/editors through an actual news title selection simulation process, in order to determine whether their *stated* news selection criteria are actually carried out *in practice*. The present research study, then, uses Israel as a case study not merely to add another country to the research list but more important as the first study to attempt to comprehensively, systematically and simultaneously attack the general question from several different perspectives.

## Research hypotheses

The present study's basic hypothesis is that no gender otherness will be found regarding news production and the editorial product. The following are the three subhypotheses detailing the overall hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Female and male editors will evince the same preferences regarding the relative importance of news topic areas.

*Hypothesis 2:* The stated professional criteria used in determining the relative newsworthiness (importance) of an item will be the same for both male and female editors.



*Hypothesis 3:* Actual news items (headlines) chosen by female editors as 'newsworthy' (of greater importance) will be similar to the items selected by male editors.

If an absence of gender otherness is found, a further question concerns the source of this lack of otherness: does it rest on a non-gender basis, operated by each female/male editor independent of external influences, or is the source rather a continued internalization of 'male' values by the few female editors involved in the production of news?

*Hypothesis 4:* There exists a prior non-gender-related newsworthiness scale, i.e. the lack of otherness does not stem from value internalization resulting from continued involvement in a field dominated by a male ethos.

This fourth hypothesis was tested by examining gender-based, news production similarities/differences among female and male (entering) undergraduate students of mass communications – a group which hadn't yet entered the professional world of news production and therefore had no opportunity to internalize the reigning criteria/values through actual news work. As opposed to previous research that tested journalism students in the middle or at the end of their studies (e.g. van Zoonen, 1989), we ensured that they would not be 'tainted' by their lecturers' news values through the conscious choice of questioning only first-year students at the start of the academic year.

## Method

### *Population sample and tools*

The population sample of the present study comprised 25 men and 16 women holding senior editorial positions in the Israeli press as well as 52 female and 38 male undergraduate students studying mass communications in three Israeli universities. These students were included not as a subject of study in and of themselves, but rather as a control group for purposes of comparison, neutralizing the possible influence of the news *organization* on news value formation. Again, we chose only first-year students at the start of the academic year in order to avoid the possibility of their also having being 'influenced' by their journalism teachers who come from the field. Among these students, although response rates were high (86.6 percent; 130 of 150 questionnaires were completed), a significant number were returned incomplete (mostly because of lack of time and the questionnaire's length), so that 90 questionnaires remained for analysis.<sup>2</sup>

Distribution of the questionnaire was carried out in two stages: first, questionnaires were given to acquaintances of the researchers within the newspapers, for them to pass on to news desk editors with whom they worked; 60 percent of these questionnaires were completed in their entirety. Second, questionnaires were then personally distributed by one of this study's researchers to news editors in the course of their late night editing. Overall, of 60 questionnaires distributed, 41 were fully completed. It must be emphasized that the editors participating in this study work exclusively in the hard news sections, rather than in other areas where women editors have a more significant presence. It should also be noted that given the preponderance of male editors in Israel, an extra effort was made to reach as many female editors as possible. In the event, we estimate that the 16 in our 'sample' comprise virtually the entire female population of (hard news) editors.

In order to understand better newsroom social phenomena anchored in local tradition, in-depth interviews were conducted with eight of the surveyed female and male senior editors, following the first data collection stage. These interviewees were afforded the opportunity at their own initiative to raise issues that they considered relevant to the present study – thus enabling us to gain greater insight into their perceptual world. However, in order to receive their full cooperation we had to implement special precautions to preserve confidentiality. This is why no direct quotes are offered in what follows but rather only general impressions from these 'for background only' interviews.

Finally, in light of the complex nature of the newsroom, on-site observations were also undertaken and unstructured 'off-the-record' interviews conducted over the course of a number of nights of editing to better understand the de facto news selection process.

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire, comprising four separate sections, was designed to elicit information on the actual professional practice of the subjects as well as their general perceptual-cultural world and professional values. The students' questionnaire comprised most of the same questions, constituting the basis for evaluating Hypothesis 4.

- A. *Personal data*<sup>3</sup>
- B. *Professional attributes*<sup>4</sup>
- C. *Prioritizing topics and news criteria* – this section of the questionnaire provided information regarding the dependent variable of determining Israel's news agenda. First, in order to test

Hypothesis 1 the respondents were requested to rate 17 subject areas (listed in Hebrew alphabetical order) on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high).<sup>5</sup> For Hypothesis 2 they were then given 17 news criteria – taken from Galtung and Ruge (1965) and Lehman-Wilzig (1994) – which enable an ‘item’ to become ‘newsworthy’, and scored them as well on the same sliding scale.<sup>6</sup>

- D. *Simulation* – for Hypothesis 3, the subjects were presented with a list of 24 news headlines to be rated by newsworthiness. Each respondent was asked to list the top 10 headlines in order of importance. This list was based on the topics specified in Section C and was a realistic representation of current events. It is important to emphasize that the specific headlines were not ‘real’ but they were reflective of Israeli reality. However, in order to neutralize two major non-substantive criteria, all 24 headlines had a *negative* slant and almost all were associated with famous people or institutions.<sup>7</sup>

### *Statistical techniques*

The findings were analysed separately for the group of editors and the group of students. Findings relating to the questionnaire were analysed separately regarding continuous and dichotomous variables. Due to the large proportion of missing values, a number of uni-variable tests were conducted (e.g. *t*-test and analysis of variance) to test for significant differences between averages of continuous variables; chi-square was used to test for significant dependence between gender and other dichotomous variables. A regression analysis was also carried out.

## **Findings**

### *Demographic variables*

Socioeconomic analysis of the population sample indicates that both female and male editors have a similar age range (25–54; male editors were slightly older), family status (most are married) and country of origin (approximately 70 percent are native Israelis of parents who immigrated from Europe/America or second-generation Israeli born). The general level of education of the entire group is an academic degree, with many holding advanced degrees, but female editors on average had a higher level than their male counterparts. Gender differences were also found in terms of number of children, which was significantly higher for

male editors (three, almost precisely the national average for Jewish Israelis) compared to their female counterparts (only one). Again, one of the more notable group differences lay in the gender variable itself – only 16 female editors compared to 25 male editors, despite our best efforts to track down every one of the former. In sum, the general sociocultural background of the female and male editors is quite similar. In theory, this should enable us to attribute any differences in attitude between both groups to the gender variable rather than to any other demographic variable.

### *News topics and newsworthiness criteria*

Regarding all but one topic on the list of news areas presented to the subjects, no significant otherness was found between female and male editors in their attribution of importance. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was validated. The only general area where a significant difference was found was international news (including world economics). The average rating of this topic by female editors was 4, while the average rating of male editors was 3.24 ( $\alpha = .0206$ ). Notably, this topic which is stereotypically perceived as hard news was rated higher by female editors! Clearly, then, both female and male editors had similar evaluations of the importance of the listed topics in their totality. Moreover, in general no major difference was found between the female and male communication students' scores. The only topic indicating any significant difference was sports (3.08 and 3.66, average ratings by female and male students, respectively;  $\alpha = .0126$ ). Overall, then, there is no real evidence here supporting the preference (or rejection) of soft news by female editors and hard news by male editors, nor of starting communications students; both genders in both groups view news subjects in much the same light.

An even stronger result was found regarding the 17 newsworthiness criteria. No otherness whatsoever was found between female and male editors – nor among the communications students. Hypothesis 2 was validated in the strongest fashion possible.

These findings (news topics and criteria) are both in line with Shachar's (1987: 249) analysis of the news production process in Israel:

Those who take part in the production of news in Israel, i.e., the news people, think of their occupation as a commitment to the news first and foremost, while their organizational-institutional involvement, their position and status are attributed by them secondary (and sometimes marginal) importance compared to their primary obligation to the field to which they are affiliated – the production of news in Israel.

*Simulated headline selection*

As noted, the subjects were presented with a list of 24 headlines, each of which they scored for degree of importance ('newsworthiness'). This was intended to elicit information about the decision-making process of news agenda-setters and the rules accompanying actual implementation. The responses to this section of the questionnaire provided a measurable index for comparing their stated newsworthiness criteria with actual practice. As noted, the headlines paralleled the list of subject areas, although they were not taken from actual reports in order to maintain 'freshness' and a measure of neutrality.

This time, editors' otherness was found in four (out of a possible 24) cases. Among the students, which we do not elaborate upon here, significant otherness was found in only two headlines, one of which is listed in the Notes section – 'd'.<sup>8</sup>

Using logistic regression analysis, we found that gender as an independent variable (among the editors) was a significant factor in only two headlines ('b' and 'c'), explaining two-thirds of the variance between male and female editors. Thus, there exists scant evidence of widespread gender influence on *actual* news selection overall. Hypothesis 3 too was validated.

Finally, the close similarity – as noted earlier in each of the three elements tested (topics, criteria and selection) – between the students' and editors' scores, validates Hypothesis 4. In sum, the general finding of the present study is that, in Israel at least, 'news is news'; it has no gender for those already working – as well as those planning to work – in journalism.

**Discussion**

The findings of the present study unequivocally support the claim that no significant otherness exists among news editors in their professed news values (topics or criteria) nor in their news selection in practice. The single headline which could possibly be used to conclude that gender 'otherness' exists was item 'a' (Professor Shalvi claiming that women earn 45 percent less than men for the same work). Here we did find significant gender-based variability ( $F = 7.06$  and  $M = 5.56$ ). Nevertheless, it is our contention (further elaborated later) that this variability stems from the content of the headline, which addresses gender compensation discrimination rather than being reflective of a general context of women's rights and equality. We reach this conclusion on the basis of the fact that in all other feminist-related items presented in the headline

simulation, none elicited higher rankings from female editors compared to their male counterparts.

Moreover, the survey results from the female and male mass communications students clearly show that among this 'pre-professional' control group no gender otherness was in evidence regarding topic preferences, newsworthiness criteria and actual news selection. Rather than a process of 'internalization' of dominant (male) values by women involved in the production of news, the evidence points to a lack of otherness in gender-based values; there is no reasonable possibility of attributing the similar scores of early first-year students and seasoned professionals to the influence of traditional organizational factors on newswomen.

Obviously, our overall conclusion that there is no important difference in the classification of a news item by female or male decision-makers in news production undercuts the accepted belief that a future increase in the proportion of female journalists and editors will inevitably lead to changes in the priorities and the content of news itself. This is not merely of academic interest, for this belief guides many researchers in the western world (such as Beasley, 1993), as well as constituting the basis for a not insignificant number of operational programmes implemented in the EU and Scandinavia, aimed at correcting distortions through affirmative action.

On the other hand, the results of the present study are consistent with the somewhat revolutionary approach of van Zoonen, who claimed that no change in newsworthiness ratings could be identified as gender related. Nevertheless, despite our agreement with her conclusion, we do not accept the specific emphases in the constellation of arguments and causes in which her general conclusion is grounded (van Zoonen, 1994, 1998a, 1998b). In her more recent work, she puts maximum emphasis on organizational and group factors which shape the news item and its level of newsworthiness, and which for all practical purposes erase (in her view) any personal influence grounded in the editor's gender. In contrast, it is our opinion that such an all-inclusive assumption ascribing complete negation of individual influence to the cogs of the organizational mechanism is unjustified. Instead, we suggest quite a different approach.

### *Alternative explanations*

It is our contention that a non-gender newsworthiness scale exists as an inherent reference point for all editors (male and female). Such a non-

gender newsworthiness scale has evolved through the continuous, prolonged and arduous effort of entire editing teams over decades – *with the primary aim of reflecting the taste of the average reader.*

In Israel as in Europe, the American model of a commercial, non-ideological press has taken root, aiming to reach the largest audience possible. In addition to a balanced presentation of issues which are the subject of public controversy and debated values, this model requires the construction and ranking of a mix of news topics which appeals to the average reader, male and female alike. This latter clause is an important one, for it may well be that many decades ago ‘male values’ did indeed predominate for the simple reason that the vast majority of newspaper purchasers and readers were themselves male. However, once the number of women roughly equalled men among the readership, marketing criteria took over from whatever exclusively ‘male’ editorial values may have existed.

The Israeli press of the 1990s (at least those newspapers in the present study) is similar to the western print press in its commercial and basically non-ideological nature. A primary standard by which one measures the success of a commercial newspaper is obviously its audience share. Such an exogenous factor obligates editors to continually examine public taste in an incessant attempt to identify the issues which attract the public. In light of this, the findings of the present study are clear and attest to the existence of a non-gender scale of newsworthiness, reflecting the common denominator of the newspapers’ heterogeneous readership.

Of course, this approach does not purport to claim a single non-gender newsworthiness scale for the entire news industry. On the contrary, the approach presented here is based on the principle of ‘facing the reader’, i.e. recognizing reader segmentation. Thus, we might well find various newsworthiness scales among papers (or groups of newspapers) of a different nature. For example, we can assume that the newsworthiness scale guiding tabloids is different from that used by elite newspapers. If such a difference in news criteria between newspaper types is discovered, this would reinforce our argument of the existence of a non-gender scale of newsworthiness directed at the ‘average reader’.

There is an irony in the preceding explanation. If newsworthiness values are indeed a function of audience interest, then any wider cultural change such as increased influence of women in society as a whole – rather than a change in the gender of the average editor – will inevitably lead to greater salience being given to ‘female’ topics and values (if such really do exist). In other words, in the case of extensive society-wide cultural

change, an adjustment in the scale of newsworthiness will occur even if newsrooms remain the exclusive providence of men!

Some support for this view can already be found in the finding that hard news does not always receive a higher score among male editors. For example, in our headline simulation, 'hard' news items such as those reporting collaboration with Japan or a lack of sufficient training areas for the army are rated somewhat lower (by male editors) than 'soft' news items such as a famous performer's arrest on charges of alleged domestic violence. This may indicate that the scale of newsworthiness has already begun to change as a result of the increasing influence of women in Israeli society (and by extension as newspaper readers and advert consumers) over the past few decades.

Beyond this, one can also point to a different, even broader, cultural change. There is firm ground for the claim that the incipient transformation of the newsworthiness scale constitutes an additional facet of postmodernism. The basic argument of postmodernism is that the 'great theories' have disappeared, leaving the *relativity* of truth as the highest value. Traditional criteria of importance have disappeared as a relativist approach spreads and brings to the top of the newsworthiness scale many issues which were previously excluded. Thus, it would not be surprising to find 'female' issues ('soft news items') rising to the fore of the newsworthiness scale and being considered high priority news.

Nevertheless, we must emphasize that these hypothetical explanations are not based on extensive empirical evidence; a thorough examination is required through a specific research effort aimed precisely at (un)changing scales of newsworthiness over time, and comparatively between types of newspapers and their audiences.

An additional theoretical possibility, which also requires further study in order to provide sufficient evidence, lies in a phenomenon relatively unique to Israel: the country's extreme security problems. The physical security of the individual and the community will always be at the top of the newsworthiness scale as long as these continue to be salient in daily life. This explanation follows Maslow's (1954) scale of motivation which sets security as one of the main, dominant motivational factors. Only after satisfying their security needs do individuals direct their attention to other elements of life, e.g. social intercourse, self-respect, etc.

Therefore, as a result of Israel's decades-long existential danger together with ongoing security threats in various guises (Fedayeen, War of Attrition, civilian terror, Intifada, Scud attacks, uprisings in the West



Bank/Gaza, Southern Lebanon attacks, etc.), a relatively rigid newsworthiness scale has evolved which accords any security issue the highest priority. Furthermore, the continuous presence of a clear and immediate danger to the state and society may also influence the entire newsworthiness scale in such a manner that many 'extraneous' items will be evaluated in light of their potential to harm or benefit 'us'. Thus, for example, the election of an anti-Semitic president in any country abroad, however far away and lacking influence, would be an item rated higher than a political victory in a major country with no Jewish/Israeli implications or even than a story with more immediate, local, non-security ramifications.

In short, it might well be that the absence of gender otherness between female and male editors stems from the fact that the uncertainty underlying Israel's very existence drives and controls the newsworthiness scale and leaves no room for any genuine expression of gender-based preferences. Furthermore, were newspaper readership surveys to be conducted, we would most probably find similar results to those presented herein among the editors due to newsworthiness values which have been internalized by the entire community, with hard reality – rather than any specific organizational imperative – operating as the compelling force.

Indeed, this might explain the communications students' results – almost identical to the editors'. As citizens of Israel, they are influenced by the general politico-strategic environment in the same measure as their civic counterparts (whether professionally interested in the news or far from the journalistic profession). In any case, the students' results clearly indicate that whatever factors exist underlying news values/criteria they are most probably not gender related and certainly not influenced by any news organization socialization process.

### *Why are women editors still a minority?*

If we have found that there does not exist significant editorial otherness between men and women, there remains the question – that so many previous researchers have grappled with – as to why Israeli female editors, and by extension, their counterparts in other western countries (Stone, 1988; Cramer, 1993), remain a distinct minority in the newsroom, especially in the more prominent area of hard news. While the present study did not originally intend to examine sociological aspects of this phenomenon, one aspect of the findings (especially from the in-depth

interviews) is highly suggestive, as well as indirectly shedding light on our central research questions.

In the student control group, a significantly lower proportion of female communications students expressed interest in working in news journalism, compared to male students. One should note that female preference for the fields of advertising, public relations, spokespersonship, etc., instead of journalism, is not a phenomenon unique to Israel but characterizes other western countries as well. Surveys clearly show that students of mass communications, especially women, have turned their backs on news gathering and editing, which figured prominently in past curricula, preferring advertising and public relations. Peterson has concluded that women more than men are attracted to the non-traditional categories of 'journalism' (Peterson, 1980, cited in Beasley, 1993).

Undoubtedly, several diverse considerations are at the root of female students' preference for advertising and public relations over news, such as heightened consumer awareness regarding the role of advertising and PR; increasing willingness of the business sector to employ professionals in communications; innovative technologies which enable telecommuting and part-time employment; low starting salaries in journalism; and perhaps others. Still, most of these trends could be said to impact both females and males. The fact that more women than men turn to non-news job categories requires an investigation of the issue from the perspective of gender otherness.

One crucial finding of our study is that there is a wide gap regarding the average number of children between male editors (three, on average) and female editors (one). This finding, supplemented by in-depth interviews with a number of female editors, affords us a more well-rounded picture.

The news profession is considered an inherent 'work around the clock' job (at least up to the most senior positions), necessitating engagement on the part of the professional at all times. The fundamental requirement of the news journalist is total dedication and commitment to 'immediate' demands (breaking stories, etc.). This deters many women, most of whom are interested in granting their professional life an important but not exclusive status in the complicated mosaic of home-family-work. These women, acutely aware at an early age of what each profession demands, tend therefore to avoid the field of news journalism on the assumption/certainty that such work will almost surely upset the desired balance between the various important elements in their lives. Such considerations are absent from the minds of most men who perceive

the superiority of professional demands over all others as something 'natural'.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that women who enter the field of news, despite all these dissuading factors, have markedly fewer children than their male editor counterparts (given that there are few male spouses willing to take over most parental duties). Our in-depth interviews indicate that these women editors have abandoned the traditional value system which prioritizes children over professional advancement. They create a familial-social support network that enables them to continue working full-time without being overly worried about the possible adverse affects of family obligations on work (and vice versa). However, it is apparent that many of the women who are aware of the difficulties inherent in choosing the hard news field as a career tend to avoid it from the start, preferring other areas of journalism (soft news) or communications (PR, advertising) instead.

If this is correct (perhaps universally among western countries), could it be that the lack of gender-based, news value/criteria otherness that we found is actually an artefact of professional self-selection, i.e. women harbouring 'female' values avoid the profession of journalism consciously, leaving those with a more 'male' value system to work in news production? On the face of it, this might seem to be a reasonable conclusion; however, when we return to the communications students (one professional stage prior) we find that such a conclusion is probably unwarranted. As we have seen, these students, who are representative of *all* mass communication workers (many of whom will work in PR, advertising, as spokespersons, etc.), do not express or evince any gender otherness in news values. Using the students as a control group, therefore, enables us to provisionally discount an explanation not heretofore raised in the research literature: female journalists, while perhaps placing greater emphasis on professional work than on maternal goals (compared to other female communication workers), do not necessarily have different *newsworthiness* values than their PR and advertising female counterparts. In order to definitively determine that this is indeed the case, it would be worthwhile in a future study to compare newsworthiness values/criteria between female journalists and their counterparts who work in PR, advertising, as spokespersons, etc.

## Conclusion

This study ends on an ironic note. On the one hand, we have found unequivocal evidence that Israeli female and male editors view news

selection in almost identical terms. On the other hand, the professional situation of women journalists and editors does not seem to be aided by this in finding work and later during the promotion process. The conclusion based on the evidence here is that journalistic values and modes of practice are not the root cause of gender inequality in the newsroom; rather, such factors are sociological and organizational.

The common denominator of both findings is that 'extra-journalistic', economic and societal forces are the prime movers underlying Israeli women journalists' situation. Their news values (almost identical to those of male editors and students) are a function of market demands and national exigencies – audience share (van Zoonen, 1998a) and security problems. The professional obstacles they face are also in large part based on economic and social considerations – legislative 'benefits' and 'personal family values/demands'.

To be sure, the two aforementioned explanations regarding news selection need to be corroborated by additional studies in Israel and elsewhere. Regarding the economic factor, we suggest a longitudinal study to examine changes over time regarding newsworthiness in the context of a growing commercial-marketing orientation among the press in the recent past. This is especially germane given Underwood's (1993) argument that increasingly newspapers are hiring MBAs as heads of news desks, as opposed to the traditional system of hiring only experienced journalists. Another type of study could empirically examine newsworthiness scales among diverse newspaper types, classified by their different readership. If the marketing factor is found to be the dominant consideration, different scales of newsworthiness would appear for diverse types of newspapers (each with a specific type of audience).

With regard to the national security explanation, here too additional studies are in order. These would focus on a comparative analysis between countries with different levels of external threat, regarding their editors' perception of newsworthiness criteria. Indeed, one could even perform such a study longitudinally on any one country as it moves through different levels of security crises and periods of peace.

Finally, while we have added communications students as a control group, enabling us to discount organizational factors as decisive in news value formation, there still exists the possibility that news consumption has a strong socializing influence. In other words, both journalists and communications students are most probably heavier news consumers than others, and over time they may internalize the 'accepted' news values/criteria emanating from the press (even if they were not heavier consumers, such news socialization would take place, albeit less quickly

or profoundly). Thus, we suggest that a further study might usefully continue this control group approach by moving one more step down the age group ladder: examining news values/criteria of middle/high school students who are very light hard-news consumers, if at all, i.e. before they have been 'contaminated' by the dominant news system's way of presenting and framing the news. Indeed, such a study might even show that news value formation – for men and women alike – is more a function of internalizing news norms through personal news consumption than any professional factor, e.g. news organization or journalism education.

In summary, at least regarding the print press, various factors lead us to believe that there exists only a small probability of a female majority in senior positions in the foreseeable future. However, even if newsrooms were to be transformed into a female bastion, no significant changes in editorial practice should be anticipated. If we ask in the title of this article 'whose news?' is it, our answer is that whether or not women journalists will produce the news in growing numbers, in the end the news belongs to – and is a reflection of – the common concerns and interests of both sexes among the *readership*. Thus, the growing empowerment of women may indeed change the news, but more from the bottom up (women as audience) than from the top down (women as editors).

For caution's sake, however, two caveats must be added here. First, as already hinted at earlier in this article, what is probably true in general for the print newsroom may not necessarily be valid for other media news-rooms. Organizational constraints might be different; with remote control in hand, television news audiences (not to mention Internet surfers!) can more easily change channels than print news readers tend to change their paper; and so on. Second and more specifically, it might well be that non-commercial media (public broadcasting, party newspapers) have a different gender dynamic – internally as well as with their audience – than commercial venues. Thus, our suppositions must be seen as tentative and at this stage not necessarily generally valid. Only further research in sundry directions can determine whether and to what extent the present study's conclusions are universally applicable.

## Notes

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1. Tuchman (1973) identified, defined and positioned several key concepts in the field of news production: spot news, developing news, continuing news, pre-scheduled news, unscheduled news, breaking stories and non-scheduled news.
2. The editors were chosen from seven Israeli newspapers: the four leading Hebrew-language dailies (*Yediot Abaronot*, *Ma'ariv*, *Ha'aretz* and *Globes*), and three municipal weeklies (Jerusalem's *Kol Ha'ir*, Haifa's *Kol Bo* and Netanya's *Ha'shavua be'Netanya*), in order to ensure editorial diversity.
3. Sex, age, education, country of origin, family status, number of children, as well as length of tenure in an editing position, weekly frequency of editing news pages, pay schedule, type of newspaper, etc.
4. Work habits, opinions, perceived professional status, daily media consumption of news, satisfaction with place of employment, continuity of journalistic work, previous employment and promotion history. This section elicited a description of the subject's job history and opinions on news journalism in the subject's own words.
5. Fashion and design; environment; national security; culture and entertainment; religion; societal concerns (education, health, poverty and minorities); international news (including world economy); foreign policy; economics; science and technology; sports; Israeli politics (political parties, etc.); law and order; local government; the peace process; transportation and communications.
6. Elite members and local heroes; size and intensity of the event; wide-ranging scope; continuity (from previous days); surprise; editorial mix (with other news items); degree of predictability; reference to people involved; cultural identity; editor's personal preference; (occurred in a) leading country; significance; conflict; matches paper's ideological stance; geographical proximity; negativity; frequency of occurrence.
7. The fabricated (albeit realistic) headlines were: (1) The former mayor of [small town] Beit Shemesh was exonerated of bribery charge: 'I plan to sue the Attorney General's office for false accusation'; (2) Japanese Foreign Minister: 'Cooperation will cease if the peace process stops'; (3) [Environment] Minister Yossi Sarid: 'The plan to move the [country's largest] garbage dump from the centre of the country will be delayed for quite some time'; (4) Leah Gottlieb, owner of Gottex [world renowned Israeli swimsuit company], and a young designer for the Shenkar [Fashion Institute], are the two finalists in the World Golden Pin competition: 'The time has come to appreciate MTV fashion', the young designer declared; (5) Central Bank chairman to announce interest rate increase of 2 percent; (6) Famous singer arrested on suspicion of wife and child beating; (7) Zubin Mehta will not conduct the [Israel] Philharmonic Orchestra during the coming year; (8) Professor Alice Shalvi: 'In Israel, women earn 45 percent less than men for the same work'; (9) Administrators of the Israeli Science Fund do not recognize the Hebrew language – all proposals must be submitted in English; (10) [Commercial television]

Channel 2 licensees: 'Don't permit commercial advertising on the Russian and ultra-Orthodox cable stations'; (11) Only three months' actual time in jail for a teacher in the southern part of the country who raped his pupil; (12) Britain announces its intention to leave the European Union; (13) Apple Computers lost \$500 million during the last six months, losing market share in Israel; (14) [Israeli basketball superstar] Doron Sheffer breaks leg and won't play in NBA next year; (15) MK Deri: 'Despite opposition from the Immigrant Party and Zomet [a secular party], [ultra-Orthodox party] SHAS will concentrate on anchoring the religious status quo in a Constitutional Amendment'; (16) Saudi Arabia refuses to allow El Al planes to traverse its air space; (17) [Israeli] Soldier killed by missile fired from Southern Lebanon; (18) MK Blumenthal: '70 percent of third graders in [small town] Or Akiva cannot read or write'; (19) [Popular Israeli singer] Ofra Haza: 'I will not appear in the Territories for security reasons'; (20) Israeli Basketball National Team loses in the European Championship Finals; (21) Chairman of Clalit [Israel's largest health provider]: 'Prescriptions will not be honoured in private pharmacies'; (22) Ehud Barak: 'Israeli Air Force pilots don't have enough air space for training'; (23) Wheat prices up 20 percent following drought in US; (24) Microsoft spokesperson: 'We have failed to transcribe Hebrew into our Internet browser'.

8. a. Professor Alice Shalvi: 'In Israel, women earn 45 percent less than men for the same work.'

$F = 7.06$  (SD = 1.84);  $M = 5.56$  (SD = 2.09)

- b. MK Blumenthal: '70 percent of third graders in [small town] Or Akiva cannot read or write.'

$F = 7.88$  (SD = 2.09);  $M = 5.24$  (SD = 2.44)

- c. [Popular Israeli singer] Ofra Haza: 'I will not appear in the Territories for security reasons.'

$F = 4.25$  (SD = 2.29);  $M = 5.76$  (SD = 2.24)

- d. Wheat prices up 20 percent following drought in US.

$F = 7.56$  (SD = 1.21);  $M = 6.08$  (SD = 2.54)

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