



The Syllabus is a Boys' Club: The Paucity of Woman Authors in Journalism Course Materials

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Abstract

The majority of instructional material used by three major U.S. journalism schools during the 2018-19 academic year was created by men, according to our analysis of 222 syllabi. Of the authors listed on the syllabi in our sample, just 34% could be identified as women, and roughly 20% of the syllabi analyzed listed no female authors at all. Female instructors were somewhat more likely to assign material created by women. We argue that this paucity of female authors delegitimizes the work of female journalists, contributes to the symbolic annihilation of women from the profession, and may enforce male hegemony in newsrooms. We also ponder where our findings fit in broader conversations about multicultural education and discuss the role groups like AEJMC's Commission on the Status of Women and the Journalism and Women Symposium might play in encouraging journalism educators to make their syllabi more inclusive.

Introduction

For more than three decades women have represented the vast majority of students entering undergraduate programs in journalism and mass communication, but they remain the minority in most newsrooms – a trend that persists despite decades of efforts to bring gender parity to the profession (Weaver, et al., 2018; York, 2017.) In this paper we examine one possible factor in this persistent gender gap: a lack of female representation in the instructional materials assigned to students at three large, accredited U.S. journalism schools.

Our inquiry was born out of a conversation between a journalism professor and several of her female students who had noticed a lack of female authors on

many of their syllabi. They were especially frustrated by the required reading in one class where the long list of magazine articles included just a few pieces of work by women. They decided to find out if this paucity of female authors was an isolated case or part of a broader trend in journalism education. Material from our own program isn't included in this analysis. Instead, we focused on publicly available syllabi from three large, geographically diverse journalism schools throughout the U.S. in an effort to answer the following questions: How likely are journalism students to read, see and hear work produced by female practitioners? How many of the textbooks and research papers used in standard journalism classes are written by female scholars? And what can the gender demo-

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graphics of a typical journalism school syllabus tell us about the role of journalism education in reinforcing the profession's white male hegemony?

We ponder our findings in the context of multicultural education as well as the relationship between gender representation in instructional materials and the profession's persistent gender gap. The role organizations such as AEJMC's Commission on the Status of Women and the Journalism and Women Symposium might play in bringing more diversity to the curriculum is also discussed.

Literature Review

When it comes to gender parity, journalism in the United States has a persistent and well-documented problem. Despite decades of conversations about the importance of building newsrooms that reflect the diversity of the communities they cover, most news organizations remain overwhelming white and male – a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced in leadership positions at major news organizations (Chideya, 2018). A 2013 survey of roughly 1,000 U.S. journalists working for legacy and digitally native newsrooms found that 37.5% were women, a slight increase from a similar study performed in 2002. Despite this small gain, the study found that most U.S. news organizations look very different from the nation's demographics as a whole. “The typical U.S. journalist today is a married white male, 47 years of age, with about 20 years of work experience and a college degree” (Weaver et al., 2018, pp 109-110). The same study found that woman journalists are generally paid less than their male peers, and are more likely to be the targets of sexual misconduct, trolling and other forms of harassment. Women also seem to leave the profession far faster than men (Weaver et al., 2018). A 2013 study of digitally native news organizations found many aspects of this gender gap may be replicating themselves online (Heckman, 2014a).

It's hard to find recent, comprehensive data on the demographics of American news organizations. The rise of digital publishing has caused widespread disruption, causing a massive reshuffling of the news ecosystem. There are fewer news organizations and fewer journalists, and organizations that research newsroom diversity have struggled to get an accurate snapshot of the industry (Heckman, 2014a). For instance, a 2018 survey by the News Leaders Association had a response rate of just 17%, although its findings did hint at gains for women in some areas with nearly 80% of

responding publications reporting at least one woman among their top editors and represented roughly 42% of newsroom employees overall (NLA, 2018). (These annual demographic reports were for many years conducted by the American Society of News Editors and are often to as the “ASNE census.” In 2019, ASNE merged with the Associated Press Media Editors to create the News Leaders Association, which is rebooting the survey as of this writing.)

Still, journalism remains a male-dominated profession. Women can and do excel in the field but, as Kristin Grady Gilger and Julia Wallace explain in *There's No Crying in Newsrooms*, they remain rare in the highest echelons of news organization management. “When women began entering journalism in significant numbers fifty years ago, the hope was that progress would be much faster,” they write, noting the industry's enduring resistance to demographic change (Gilger and Wallace, 2019, p. 3).

Woman who have succeeded in journalism have done so by attempting to behave like their male colleagues, often ignoring or minimizing “an atmosphere of sex discrimination” (Lumsden, 1995, p 914). Those that embraced and innovated with feminine content – usually the women's pages of the mid 20th century – were seen as something other than legitimate journalists. Their work was often ghettoized and dismissed as fluff despite their efforts to publish stories about serious social matters such as child care, education, reproductive health and domestic violence – issues the male-dominated news pages tended to overlook (Voss, 2019).

These dynamics contribute to women's absence from media history. Feminist scholars are working to document the contributions woman journalists have made to the field, but gaps remain. Female journalists are, for instance, woefully underrepresented on Wikipedia; even women who have won multiple Pulitzer Prizes lack entries (Weldon, 2020).

“Macho” Journalism Textbooks

So what role, then, does journalism education play in reinforcing male dominance in the profession? The existing research into gender diversity in journalism course materials is limited and focused mostly on textbooks. For instance, a content analysis of eight sports journalism textbooks found that men outnumbered women in the text nearly 5 to 1. Of the sports journalists the books reference, roughly 89% were men. (The vast majority of athletes features in

the books – about 88% – were also male.) The majority of the photos in the book also referenced men. This paucity of women may, the authors argue, have lasting repercussions on female students interested in careers in sports journalism. The textbooks, they write, “do not help foster a sense of ‘that’s a job for me’ in women who would be reading these books” (Hardin et al., 2006, p. 441). They also presented sports departments in newsrooms as “pillars of patriarchy,” further dissuading women interested in sports-related beats (Hardin et al., 2006, p. 441).

More general journalism textbooks also have a long history of presenting the profession in ways that align with stereotypically masculine qualities. One historical analysis of journalism textbooks from the 20th century “revealed that textbooks taught that journalism was a macho profession – man’s work – and that, even for women, the highest compliment was to be called a ‘newsman’ (McCaffrey, 2019, p. 228). Interestingly, the same study found that textbooks didn’t start portraying journalism as “macho” and potentially dangerous until *after* women began to enter the field in greater numbers during World War II – a way, perhaps, to make it seem logical to give their newsroom jobs back to men in the post-war years, and confine these talented, ambitious female journalists to the women’s pages.

It’s also useful to look at similar dynamics in other academic disciplines as well as ongoing discussions about making education in general more inclusive.

Both psychology and international affairs, for instance, have grappled with the relationship between the content of instructional materials and diversity struggles in their fields. A 1997 analysis of introductory psychology textbooks found insufficient material about the experiences of members of the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, woman and minorities. The study also found that textbooks written by women covered diversity issues more extensively than those written by men (Hogben and Watterman, 1997). More recently, a 2017 study examined syllabi used in graduate-level international relations syllabi for signs of gender bias, finding that most of the research assigned was written by men. Woman instructors, however, were significantly more likely to assign research by female authors but far less likely than their male peers to assign their own research to students (Colgan, 2017).

The Role of the Individual Instructor

The relationship between an instructor’s gender and the curriculum she uses fits in to ongoing conversations about multicultural education, a movement that, among other things, “behooves multicultural teachers in higher education to identify their own social positions because doing so allows the teachers to understand potential power dynamics in the classroom, biases they or their students may have, and any socially constructed notions students may hold” (Hearn, 2012, p. 39). It acknowledges that education is not neutral and has the power to reinforce or dismantle existing power structures. Even the most progressive and fair-minded instructors are not “blank slates when they enter a classroom” and their own various identities may shape the classes they teach. They may also be subject to educational routines and traditions that have created a learning environment “replete with embedded scripts on account of a society’s shaping of its views in regards to persons and people groups” (Hearn, 2012, p. 42).

Textbooks remain a key part of most college classes, but it’s becoming increasingly common for professors to curate material to either supplement or replace traditional textbooks. This trend is part of the rise of open educational resources, or OER, a term used to describe material that is freely available and often published under a creative commons license (Butcher, 2015). In journalism education, OER takes many forms: articles from trade publications like Poynter and the *Columbia Journalism Review*, instructional videos and examples of specific types of journalism. The OER movement has been embraced by journalism professors around the globe with many organizations routinely publishing open material designed to improve the quality of journalism education. It allows journalism professors to adapt their syllabi to the fast-changing media landscape and, one would hope, compensate for the shortfalls in the textbooks associated with their classes.

One prominent source of such open-source material is UNESCO which, in 2013, published a collection of model journalism curricula, arguing that the quality of a society’s journalism education directly impacts the journalism it produces. The collection’s authors highlighted the importance of creating gender-inclusive syllabi because “all too often, the voices of women are inadvertently silenced in the news content, rendering them passive and voiceless” and “women are still lacking adequate access to the

journalism profession in many newsrooms across the globe” (Banda, 2013).

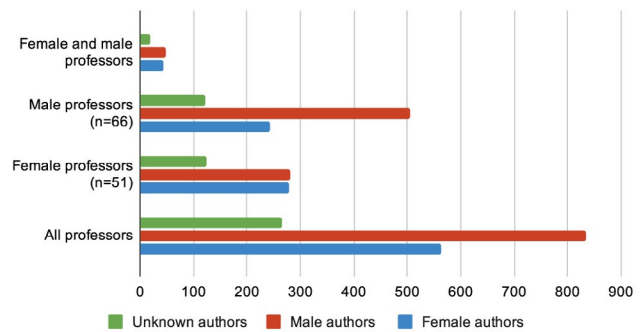
There are two theories that can help place our work in larger conversations about diversity, equity and inclusion in journalism. The first is symbolic annihilation as described by Gaye Tuchman in a 1978 essay in which she argues that the mass media tends to symbolically annihilate women through omission, condemnation or trivialization (Tuchman, 1978). The second is the male hegemony other scholars have observed in newsrooms both in the U.S. and abroad (for instance, Allan et al., 1998).

Methods and Research Questions

Previous studies into curricular diversity in journalism schools have focused largely on textbooks. We chose to examine syllabi instead to account for the growing trend of journalism educators curating material in addition to – or sometimes in lieu of – a traditional textbook. We collected a convenience sample of 222 undergraduate and graduate journalism syllabi from the 2018-2019 academic year archived online by three major U.S. journalism schools. We selected these schools both because of their comprehensive, publicly available syllabi catalogs and their geographic diversity – one school is on the West Coast, one is on the East Coast and the third is in the South. The West Coast school was the smallest with a student population of roughly 20,000. The East Coast school has roughly 30,000 students. The southern school’s student body is the largest at 35,000. All three schools were reaccredited by the Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications in the last five years.

We examined the required materials listed on these syllabi and, when possible, determined the gender of the person who created each work. We also coded syllabi based on the gender of the instructor of record listed for each course. Our methods provide a snapshot of gender diversity in journalism school instructional material, but there are limits to our analysis. We don’t, for instance, examine the content of the textbooks listed on the syllabi. Nor are we able to determine how closely instructors adhered to their syllabi or if they exposed students to diversity via guest speakers, conferences or other avenues. Our analysis deals with gender as a binary and therefore doesn’t account for trans or gender nonconforming people. We also recognize that gender is just one aspect of diversity; we chose it as our metric because it’s more

Figure 1: Syllabi Authors and Instructors’ Gender



straightforward to quantify than other factors such as race, class and ability.

This method is, however, similar to the byline counts often used to gauge gender representation in news production at professional outlets. Therefore, we believe it’s a valid technique for this particular inquiry.

The following research questions guided our work:

RQ1: What percentage of authors listed on journalism school syllabi are women?

RQ2: What role, if any, does the gender of the instructor of record play in the likelihood that a syllabus will include female authors?

RQ3: How does the percentage of woman authors listed on syllabi differ among the universities in our sample?

Results

The 222 syllabi examined listed a total of 1,664 authors. Of those, 50% were men, 34% were women and the remaining 16% were organizations or other non-gendered entities. Female professors were more likely to assign work created by women; in those courses 40% of authors listed on syllabi were female. Similarly, classes co-taught by one man and one woman were closer to gender parity with syllabi listing 39.5% female authors. (It’s important to note that just a few classes were co-taught, so this finding may be statistically insignificant.)

We detected differences in syllabi gender parity among the three schools in our sample. The Southern school, for instance, had the largest gap with men representing nearly three quarters of authors listed on syllabi. The West Coast school, meanwhile, came the closest to parity with roughly 37% female authors. (See Figure 2.)

At all schools, classes with female instructors of record were more likely to include required material

created by women, although that trend was most pronounced at the West Coast school where female professors' syllabi nearly achieved gender parity with 46.6% of listed works created by women. The difference between male and female instructors was the least pronounced at the East Coast school. (See Figure 3.)

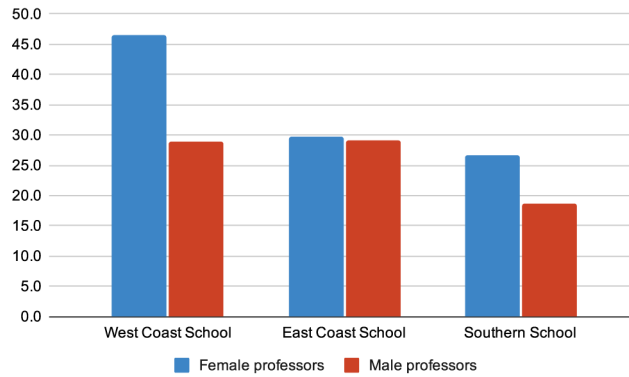
We also made some qualitative observations during our analysis. For instance, we noted that, while self-citation was rare, the practice was more common among male instructors. We were also surprised by the rarity of material focused explicitly on gender dynamics and other forms of diversity. In one case, a book listed under suggested reading about female journalists was written by a man.

Discussion

Our analysis, while limited in scope, raises serious questions about how well journalism education is serving female students and about how seriously U.S. journalism schools are taking ongoing calls to make journalism education more inclusive. We had hoped that the rise of OER in journalism education coupled with ongoing conversations about the importance of diversity would lead to more inclusive syllabi. Rather, they seem to replicate the gendered issues previously observed in journalism textbooks that depict the profession as a macho landscape in which the kind of work historically produced by women is viewed as somehow lesser or illegitimate.

As we've noted above, the growing availability of journalism-related OER creates an opportunity for journalism educators to revamp their syllabi to present a more inclusive (and, we'd argue, accurate) version of journalism's past, present and future. In addition to the UNESCO materials we've already described, educators should look to publications such as

Figure 3: Syllabi Authors and Instructors' Gender



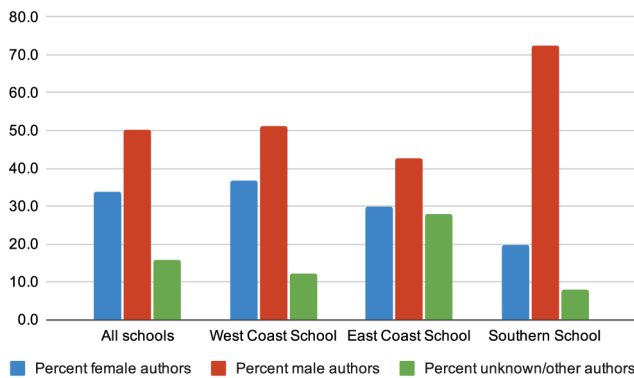
Poynter.org, the *Columbia Journalism Review*, the Reuters Institute and Nieman Lab/Nieman Report for material by and about woman journalists. There are also a variety of podcasts and Ted Talks about gender in journalism. And the Pulitzer Prize website includes expansive archives of award-winning journalism by women from the last several decades.

The relationship between the instructor's gender and the likelihood that students will be exposed to female authors – which tracks with findings in other fields – points to the importance of hiring female professors and putting them in the kind of leadership positions that would give them more control over choosing instructional materials. This could have truly profound impacts given the increasing reliance on open education resources and other forms of curated content. Picking a new textbook for a required course is a bureaucratic hassle (and might not do much to diversify the syllabus given the previous research about the gendered content of most journalism textbooks). It's fairly easy, however, to add a few woman authors to a syllabus either in addition to or in lieu of existing content. This might be an opportunity for organizations like AEJMC's Commission on the Status of Women and the Journalism and Women Symposium to encourage journalism schools to curate more inclusive instructional materials.

We hope our analysis spurs journalism educators to examine their own syllabi with an eye toward providing students of all genders with examples of how they, too, can be successful, practitioners. We also encourage accrediting organizations to consider more emphasis on curricular diversity in their standards.

Failing to present the work of female journalists and journalism scholars in our classrooms creates a lopsided view of the profession and may reinforce the idea that "real" or "hard" news is produced by white

Figure 2: Author Gender by School



men. It may also have lasting psychological impacts on female students considering careers in news. Among the many themes Gilger and Wallace explore in *There's No Crying in Newsrooms* is the self-doubt women – especially those at the beginning of their careers – face when navigating male-dominated news organizations. Providing them with plenty of role models on their syllabi and in the broader curriculum could help counter that doubt and set them up to transform journalism for the better.

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