Edited by Cynthia Carter,
Gill Branston and Stuart Allan

NEWS, GENDER AND POWER

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CONTENTS

SETTING NEW(S) AGENDAS

An introduction

Cynthia Carter, Gill Branston and Stuart Allan

'The story of modern journalism', declared British journalist Emilie Hawkes Peacocke in her book *Writing for Women* published in 1936, 'is that of the rise of the Woman's Story' (Peacocke 1936: 129). By a 'woman's story', she was referring both to the late nineteenth-century development of the newspaper 'Woman's Department', responsible for covering such topics as 'beauty', 'fashion', 'shopping', 'social affairs', 'gossip', 'home decoration' and 'child care', as well as to a corresponding rise in the number of women working in journalism as a vocation.[1] These sweeping changes were largely derivative of the 'New Journalism' which was also developing at that time. In general terms, this emergent form of presenting the news sought to emphasise 'human interest' stories, particularly those which were likely to appeal to the 'uneducated mass of all classes'. In the words of Matthew Arnold, who was arguably the first to coin the phrase, writing in the May 1887 issue of *The Nineteenth Century* magazine:

> It has much to recommend it . . . it is full of ability, novelty, variety, sensation, sympathy, generous instincts, its one great fault is that it is feather-brained. It throws out assertions at a venture because it wishes them true; does not correct either them or itself, if they are false; and to get at the seat of things as they truly are seems to feel no concern whatever.
>
> (Arnold 1887: 638–9; see also Griffiths 1992)

The emergent news values which informed the New Journalism were explicitly gendered at a number of different levels, in part so as to direct journalistic attention beyond the preoccupations of propertied, educated and leisured male readers. A range of factors were responsible for this shift, not least of which was the fact that newspaper proprietors and advertisers (especially in the domestic goods markets) alike were becoming increasingly inclined to regard women consumers as an important audience on their own terms. This movement also

created spaces for the re-articulation of bourgeois definitions of 'femininity' at a time when longstanding power-differentials based on sexual difference were undergoing extensive transformations across British society. 'The new press,' as Margaret Beetham writes, 'came to be associated with a range of characteristics which were traditionally "feminine", especially its tendency towards sensation and the personalising of information' (Beetham 1996: 118; see also Bateson 1895; Carter and Thompson 1997; Fry 1929; Grieve 1964; Head 1939; Hunter 1992; Knight 1937; Leslie 1943; Mills 1990; Sebba 1994).

Tellingly, though the contemporary 'story of modern journalism' now includes both press and broadcast histories, it continues to refer to similar types of developments, albeit often employing (in our view inappropriately) a language of 'post-feminism'. In Britain at the beginning of the 1990s, for example, many media commentators were insisting that this would be 'The Decade of Women'. Demographic statistics appeared to indicate that there would not be enough graduates to fill job demand, thus 'the female factor' suddenly became an important issue for employers, including those in the media industries (see Dougary 1994: xi). The Conservative government launched its 'Opportunity 2000' programme in 1990 to facilitate the movement of women into 'top jobs' so as to shatter the 'glass ceiling'. That same year would see three women appointed to editorial positions on national newspapers. As the recession started to take grip, however, the optimism of the beginning of the decade began to fade. Those women who had been successful in negotiating senior media posts were increasingly being portrayed in news accounts in either ambivalent or hostile terms.[2] More to the point, they were often the first to be 'let go' as 'efficiency gains' began to dictate moves toward 'downsizing' news organisations (at the time of writing, there is only one female national-newspaper editor, at the *Daily Express* and *Express on Sunday*).

Today, as we approach the start of a new century, the day-to-day culture of most newsrooms is still being defined in predominantly male terms. Whilst there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women securing jobs in journalism, white middle-class men continue to occupy the vast majority of positions of power throughout the sector. Women are still not being promoted to senior decision-making posts in proportion to the overall rôle they play in the profession. At a time when both broadcast and print news organisations are facing ever more intensive (and increasingly globalised) forms of competition, and when female readers, listeners and viewers remain as elusive as ever, the costs of this failure to treat women fairly in the journalistic workplace continue to mount. A study of British journalism by Anne Sebba documents the varied types of discrimination female newsworkers often encounter with their male counterparts, 'some of whom may feel themselves threatened by the star status accorded to several women reporters, others of whom resent what they see as special privileges granted them; a few merely patronise their female colleagues' (Sebba 1994: 9; see also Christmas 1997; Tunstall 1996). Still, this is not to deny that women have made crucial gains in the field of news reporting which have

fundamentally altered the types of sexist dynamics which once characterised the profession, as described by Peacocke (1936) above. Nevertheless, Sebba (1994: 10) is not alone when she looks forward to the day when 'women reporters are working in sufficient numbers that they are no longer judged by their looks, their personalities or their private lives and when we, the audience, are able to absorb merely the news they are reporting'.

Critical modes of enquiry

To point out that journalism is central to the study of the modern mass media across a range of academic disciplines is to state the obvious. Even a cursory glance at the research literature, however, confirms that insufficient consideration is being given to an array of pressing questions regarding how gender relations shape its forms, practices, institutions and audiences. It was a commitment to addressing this exigency which led, in turn, to the project that would eventually culminate in this volume.

The contributors to *News, Gender and Power* were invited to demonstrate from their respective analytical perspectives precisely why the media politics of gender deserve much more critical attention than they have typically received to date. Shared by each of the following chapters is a specific politics of intervention, that is, a desire to disrupt the familiar assumptions characteristic of conventional thinking about these issues. In highly varied ways, each of them draws upon the rich resources of feminist and gender-sensitive critique with the aim of providing fresh insights into a vigorous set of debates. A common thread running throughout the collection is a recognition of the need to rethink the organising tenets of earlier research with an eye to facilitating new work in this rapidly developing area of enquiry.

In this introductory essay, we would like to briefly highlight a series of important research problematics which underpin many of the themes later taken-up in a substantive way across a range of the chapters. Although we can offer only a sketch of several of the attendant conceptual and methodological issues here, it is hoped that the general contours of distinct modes of enquiry will begin to emerge as they inform the multiple interconnections between 'news', 'gender' and 'power'. Accordingly, we can identify, in schematic terms, eight interrelated problematics as follows.

1 Ownership and control

Feminist and gender-sensitive studies of journalism are becoming increasingly concerned with the changing patterns of news media ownership, especially with regard to the growing levels of concentration, conglomeration and integration, within local, national and global contexts. The dynamics of ownership are directly linked to a range of issues associated with control over journalistic content: media power is being restricted to an ever smaller number of (white

male) hands; the corporate priority of profit maximisation is leading to a commercialisation of news formats whereby content becomes ever more uniform and the spaces available to articulate dissent are being reduced; and, fears over 'the bottom line' are reshaping news values in ways which frequently define feminist concerns as 'controversial', and thus potentially threatening to 'market sensitive' news organisations and their advertisers. The implications of reducing news to a commodity form like any other are profound, particularly when women's voices are struggling just to be heard within the confines of ideological parameters conditioned by these competing logics of capital. Proposed strategies for change call for a fundamental re-organisation of the current dynamics of media ownership and control, a process to be achieved through the radical re-structuring of state regulatory frameworks (see Domhoff 1978; Gallagher 1981; Jallov 1996; Mattelart 1986; Riaño 1994; Simonton 1995; Soothill and Walby 1991; Valdivia 1992; Wasko 1996).

2 Employment

At this level, and in light of the developments described above, new investigations are focusing on the changing nature of women's occupational status within news organisations. In general, the growing commodification of news has led these organisations to 'trim back' the number of journalists they employ, just as women are beginning to make serious inroads into the profession (a language of 'efficiency' is similarly used to justify a shift away from investigative reporting so as to focus on 'pre-packaged' news events which are easier, and cheaper, to cover). An organising assumption of much of this research is that the increased presence of women in the newsroom will necessarily encourage substantive changes in newswork practices: women, it is often argued, are more inclined than men to endorse informal, non-hierarchical management structures and to support collectively-based decision-making processes. In terms of news content, more female reporters means that the lines between 'hard' and 'soft' news will continue to blur, leading to a news agenda defined more closely with 'human interest' news (see Beasley 1993; Buresh 1984; Christmas 1997; Cramer 1993; Deakin 1984; Dougary 1994; Fritz 1979; Gallagher 1995; Grist 1984; Higgins 1997; Lafky 1993; Mills 1990, 1997; Norris 1997; Schulman 1995). At the same time, however, other researchers have questioned the extent to which arguments such as these can be supported as a general rule (see B. Smith 1989; van den Wijngaard 1992; van Zoonen 1991, 1994). Many are sceptical of the claim that there is a 'woman's perspective' which female journalists inevitably bring to their reporting. In any case, as Jane Arthurs contends in her discussion of the televisual industry in Britain: 'More women in the industry is not enough: there need to be more women with a politicised understanding of the ways in which women's subordination is currently reproduced, and with the will to change it' (Arthurs 1994: 100).

3 Professional identity

Feminist studies of the processes of socialisation, which reporters undergo when learning the skills necessary for their job, continue to raise awareness of how gender relations underwrite journalism as a profession (see Baehr 1996; Epstein 1978; Foote 1995; Gill 1993; Lafky 1995; Makins 1975; Mata 1994; Molotch 1978; Rhodes 1992, 1995; Schultz-Brooks 1984; Smith 1980; Stott 1973; van Zoonen 1994; Weaver 1997). In the 1930s, Emilie Peacocke (1936) told aspiring female journalists that reporters learnt their craft through a system of reward and punishment. Rewards included being given the 'good assignments' ('serious' news stories), peer acknowledgement, praise, promotion and acclaim; punishments included increased demands for story re-writes as well as the outright rejection of their work, being given less prestigious assignments ('Society news', the women's department, obituaries), and being relegated to 'trite' beats such as 'Lifestyles'. Today, feminist researchers have sought to elucidate how certain 'common sensical' attitudes, values and beliefs about gender inform the criteria underpinning what counts as 'professionalism' and how they, in turn, shape the forms of sexism regularly encountered by female journalists both in the newsroom and in the field (see Bradley 1995; Christmas 1997; Coles 1997; Dougary 1994; Elwood-Akers 1988; Graham 1997; Higgins 1997; Hoffman 1970–1; Kaufman 1995; Mills 1990; Sanders and Rock 1988; Sebba 1994; Skard 1989; Skidmore 1995; Smith *et al.* 1993; Steiner 1997b; Walkowitz 1993). As much of this work suggests, it is the very taken-for-grantedness of the professionalised norms that govern journalistic routines and conventions which makes them difficult to identify, let alone challenge.

4 News sources

News sources, routinely organised by the journalist into a 'hierarchy of credibility' (Hall *et al.* 1978), are encouraged to speak the social world in certain preferred ways. Studies of media-source relations show that journalists tend to rely primarily upon white, middle-class, middle-aged, professional males as sources, particularly when 'expert' opinions are being accessed (see Beasley 1993; Bridge 1995; Croteau and Hoynes 1992; Holland 1987; Rakow and Kranich 1991). 'News is not simply mostly . . . about and by men', John Hartley writes, 'it is overwhelmingly seen through men' (1982: 146). When women are included as news sources, as several feminist researchers have argued, they tend to be defined in terms of their status *vis-à-vis* the principal (typically male) news actor in a particular story. As Patricia Holland points out, women are routinely presented:

> either as an anonymous example of uninformed public opinion, as housewife, consumer, neighbour, or as mother, sister, wife of the man in the news, or as victim – of crime, disaster, political policy. Thus not only do they speak less frequently, but they tend to speak as passive

> reactors and witnesses to public events rather than as participants in those events.
>
> (Holland 1987: 138–9)

This gendered division is linked, in turn, to an alignment of 'serious' news values with public-sphere events deemed to be of interest to men, whilst so-called 'women's issues' are more likely to be framed in relation to the 'private' or domestic sphere (see C.F. Epstein 1978; Finn 1989–90; Hanmer and Saunders 1993; Lees 1995; McCormick 1995; Meyers 1994; Nava 1988; Norris 1997; Pingree and Hawkins 1978; Robinson 1978; Rupp 1980; Simpson 1979; Skidmore 1995; Tuchman 1978a, 1978c; van Zoonen 1991, 1992; Voumvakis and Ericson 1984).

5 Representation

Feminist research has long been concerned with how women are portrayed in news media texts, and much of this work has employed the notion of 'stereotypes' to advantage (see Allen *et al.* 1996; Baehr 1980; Baehr and Spindler-Brown 1987; Barr 1977; Benedict 1992; Caputi 1987; Davies *et al.* 1987; C.F. Epstein 1978; Gist 1993; King and Stott 1977; Koerber 1977; Lang 1978; Luebke 1989; McNeill 1996; Robinson 1978; Root 1986; Soothill 1995; Steenland 1995; Stratford 1987; Tuchman 1978b; Tunks and Hutchinson 1991). It is often argued that the journalist's deployment of these stereotypes, far from being harmless, is instead likely to result in 'negative and undesirable social consequences' for women (Lazier and Kendrick 1993). Stereotypes are usually defined as standardised mental pictures which provide sexist judgements about women such that their subordinate status within patriarchal society is symbolically reinforced. Demands to reform these types of stereotypical practices in journalism have tended to centre on the need to make news texts more 'accurate' or 'true to real life' in their depiction of women's experiences. At the same time, however, some feminists query the value of this notion of 'stereotyping', arguing that it succeeds in obscuring the fluidly contradictory, and often contested, dynamics that it should otherwise be at pains to render visible (see Beetham 1996; Brake 1994; Cirkensa and Cuklanz 1992; Creedon 1993; Douglas 1994; Ganguly 1992; Holland 1983, 1987; Houston 1992; Macdonald 1995; Rakow 1992; Shevelow 1989; Steeves 1987; van Zoonen 1994; Wykes 1995; see also Adam and Allan 1995; Weedon 1997; Women's Studies Group 1978). Much of this work has initiated a conceptual shift to rethink the attendant issues of representation in terms of the ideological gendering of news as an androcentric form of discourse.

6 Narrative forms and practices

Another line of feminist research, as suggested by the problematic above, has

sought to argue that news discourse constitutes a 'masculine narrative form'. Lana F. Rakow and Kimberlie Kranich maintain, for example, that in these masculinised narratives, women function not as speaking subjects but as 'signs'. In examining these narrative structures, they argue that 'since women are found so infrequently in news stories, and since they always sign as "woman" (unlike men, who do not ordinarily carry meaning as "man" because the culture assumes maleness as given), their function as sign is unique' (Rakow and Kranich 1991: 13). Moreover, they point out that the meaning of the sign 'woman' is similarly bound up with the assumption of whiteness: 'Both race and gender depend on linguistically categorising people, ostensibly to reflect biological (e.g., skin colour) differences but actually to create a political and hierarchical system of difference' (1991: 19–20). Also relevant here is John Fiske's critique of televisual news as 'masculine soap opera', where he observes that news and soap opera share several characteristics, including 'lack of final closure, multiplicity of plots and characters, repetition and familiarity' (Fiske 1987: 308). It follows from these modes of analysis that the narrative forms and practices routinely held to constitute 'news' will have to undergo critical reconsideration if the imperatives of male hegemony are to be challenged (see Carter and Thompson 1997; Clark 1992; Cuklanz 1996; Holland 1987; Kitzinger and Skidmore 1995; Meyers 1997; Rakow and Kranich 1991; Sanders 1993; Steiner 1992; Valdivia 1992; van Zoonen 1988; 1991; see also Tolson 1977). The same is true for the research process itself, as certain alternative forms of news discourse which often claim to speak more directly to women's experiences, such as talk shows, documentaries, magazines, and breakfast television, have tended to be overlooked – frequently being dismissed by male researchers as being 'infotainment' rather than 'proper news', and hence unworthy of scholarly attention.

7 Feminisation and sexualisation

'There is a move right across the media towards making the news more fun, more sexy, more entertaining', writes British journalist Suzanne Moore, 'as though there is an implicit understanding that news on its own is just too straight, too dull and too boring to attract those peculiar minorities, women and young people' (1997: 21). It would appear that for many different news organisations the division between 'hard' ('serious'; 'fact-based') news and 'soft' ('light' or 'human interest'; 'interpretation-based') news is slowly being dissolved or 'feminised', in part as a response to demands from advertisers that female readers be more actively pursued as a distinct audience-demographic group (see Branston 1993; Christmas 1997; Dougary 1994; Grindstaff 1997; Hartley 1996; Mills 1990; Rapping 1995; Shuttac 1997; Squires 1997; van Zoonen 1991). Several researchers maintain that this process of feminisation is dramatically recasting 'mainstream' (or 'malestream') news narratives. One recent example of such a shift has been the coverage of the death and global mourning of Princess Diana. Specifically, some argue that it illustrates the ways in which the

representation of certain highly privileged news celebrities allows a range of feminist debates to be articulated, and in a way which retains an emphasis on expressive feelings and emotions that would otherwise be disallowed under the constraints of 'objective' reporting or 'dispassionate' and 'detached' commentary. Feminised forms of reporting this tragic event elicited worldwide tributes from women for whom certain personal concerns (bulimia, the experience of divorce, very gender-specific feelings of worthlessness) had been given a greater public voice.

8 News audiences

Researchers interested in investigating the actual ways in which people relate to news discourse have drawn upon a range of methodological strategies, including interviews, participant observation and ethnography (see Bird 1997; Brunsdon and Morley 1978; Gillespie 1995; Grindstaff 1997; Hobson 1980, 1990; Morley 1980, 1986; Philo 1990; Reid 1989; Schlesinger *et al.* 1992; see also Allan 1998, 1997b). Evidence drawn from these ethnographic accounts often indicates that how people watch televisual news, for example, is much less determined by the actual programming than it is conditioned by the social relations of its consumption. In tracing the contours of the social contexts of viewing within everyday domestic life in the household, a range of studies have highlighted the need to explicate the gendered nature of both televisual technology and the practices by which it is negotiated. In an early study, entitled 'Housewives and the mass media', Dorothy Hobson (1980) examines how a range of factors inform a sexual division of household labour which, in turn, conditions a gender-specificity with regard to programming preferences. Her female interviewees (young working-class mothers of small children) revealed a tendency to demarcate televisual news into a 'masculine' domain. In Hobson's words:

> There is an *active* choice of programmes which are understood to constitute the 'woman's world', coupled with a complete *rejection* of programmes which are presenting the 'man's world' [predominantly news, current affairs, 'scientific' and documentary programmes]. However, there is also an acceptance that the 'real' or 'man's world' is important, and the 'right' of their husbands to watch these programmes is respected: but it is not a world with which the women in this study wanted to concern themselves. In fact, the 'world', in terms of what is constructed as of 'news' value, is seen as both alien and hostile to the values of women.
>
> (Hobson 1980: 109)

The social world, as represented in news discourse, is generally seen by the women in this study to be 'depressing' and 'boring'. Still, Hobson points out that