

ARTICLES

Why Women Must Be Counted: News Media Monitoring for Empowerment and Change

Sally McLAREN

Department of International Studies,
Faculty of Liberal Arts

Abstract

The Fourth Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) has just been completed and the results will be announced later this year. The GMMP is a content analysis research project that has been held every five years since 1995 and monitors international news media, namely print, broadcast and the internet, from a gender perspective on one randomly selected day. The GMMP aims to achieve fair and balanced gender representation in news media. Research results from the first three GMMPs have shown only a 4% increase, over time, in the number of women appearing in news media as news subjects and sources. This paper examines the significance of the 15 year development of the GMMP, the largest and longest global study of gender representation in news media. The GMMP is also noteworthy because it includes diverse participation - from grassroots organisations and civil society, as well as universities and media practitioners. This paper also poses the question that, with the results so far indicating such little "progress", what is the value of the GMMP as a research project? To what extent does the GMMP tell us what we already know?

1. Introduction

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is an international one-day study of gender representation in news media, namely newspapers, radio, television and the internet. It aims to achieve fair and balanced gender representation in news media. The GMMP is important in two main ways; not only is it the largest longitudinal study of gender representation in news media to date, it is also the most inclusive and diverse, functioning to both de-mystify (Hernando &

del Novo, 2000, p.5) and de-Westernise (Van Zoonen quoted in Ross, 2004, p.3) research on media. The GMMP involves voluntary participants from grassroots organisations and civil society, as well as academics and media practitioners, in both rural and urban areas on all continents. Essentially, it can be likened to a giant media literacy workshop, providing an opportunity to expand local perspectives on the global media environment (Suzuki, 2005, p.16).

The first GMMP in 1995 found that only 17% of news subjects were women. Ten years later in 2005, the third GMMP reported a mere 4% increase in this statistic. The fourth GMMP took place in November 2009 and

participants from over 120 countries monitored their local news media. The results will be announced in September, 2010. With the findings from the previous three GMMPs so far indicating such little 'progress', this paper poses the question, what is the value of the GMMP as a research project? As the marginalization and trivialization of women by the media has been well examined and documented through decades of research in this area, to what extent does the GMMP tell us what we already know?

This paper examines the significance of the development of the GMMP over the last 15 years, by discussing the background to the project, the limitations of the methodology and the challenges it faces as an advocacy tool in changing the gender-imbalanced and stereotypical representation of women in news media, and creating awareness about more gender-fair news journalism.

2. Background

2.1 The Problem of Media and Gender

In 1978, Tuchman, Daniels and Benet compiled reports by American social science researchers that examined "sex-role stereotypes" in the media, and the effect of the mass media upon women. Tuchman's overview was entitled "The symbolic annihilation¹ of women in the mass media" (Tuchman, 1978), and argued that the absence and trivialization of women in news media was damaging and limited the possibilities and potentialities of women's roles in society (p.5). More than 30 years later this is still frequently referred to in the research literature on gender and media as a "foundational work" (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p.40) on the media's marginalization of women. For the purpose of this paper, it is interesting to consider Tuchman et al.'s conclu-

sion from the perspective of the 1970s women's movement, which was that if women could "begin to exercise their powers as owners, the effect on the media's image of women could be profound" (Tuchman et al., 1978, p.271).

From a 21st century perspective, this conclusion now seems like a naïve and simplistic solution, however widely touted it was as one way to achieve equality (Byerly & Ross, 2006, p.40). Yet this argument has endured; if only more women were not only owning, but working in media, then we could expect the representation of women, and also news values, to improve (Mills, 1997, p.54). As Gallagher (2005), has pointed out, many activists in the field of gender and media have, for decades, operated on the mistaken belief that that the potential exists for the media to contribute towards the advancement of women. Instead, she argues, the media is where gender inequality is actually created (Gallagher, 2005, p.8).

Even though Tuchman et al.'s conclusion does not compare favourably to today's more sophisticated and extensive research techniques and conclusions (Gallagher, 2001b), it cannot be ignored that decades later, "symbolic annihilation" is not history, nor is it a redundant phrase, as might be expected at this point in time. As Van Dijck notes, "the absence of women in the media is closely tied to our ideas about social success and social status" (2002, p.1). Thus, representation is still a pertinent issue. Additionally, feminist newsroom interventions, though widespread and well-documented, have not automatically produced positive long term effects (Byerly, 2004, p.126), and can impact negatively (Ross, 2004, p.157) or even paradoxically. As Holland (1998) notes, "the first women to become editors of national newspapers... have run the

most scandalous of scandal sheets” (p.29).

It is clear from decades of research as diverse and comprehensive as the representation of women in Hollywood movies (see Mulvey, 1975; Kaplan, 1983; Humm, 1997), to the media representation of women in politics on all continents (Sreberny & Van Zoonen, 2000; Ross, 2002), that mainstream media reinforce dominant gender norms which show extremely narrow and problematic definitions of what it is to be a woman. In addition, research on women working in media, at all levels, has shown that Tuchman et al.’s conclusion from 1978 has not fulfilled its expected promise for improvement and positive change.

2.2 The Beijing Platform for Action

In 1995, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, China. It came 10 years after the United Nations International Decade for Women, (1975-85). One of the outcomes of the conference was the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPA). Significantly, the BPA recognized the importance of media. As Gallagher points out,

In the early years of the international women’s movement, media issues had generally been regarded as secondary in importance to the cardinal problems of poverty, health and education for women. The media were barely been mentioned in the strategy documents of the first three UN conferences on women. (Gallagher, 2005a)

The BPA identified 12 critical areas of concern that were preventing the advancement of the world’s women in social, economic, cultural and political spheres. One of these critical areas was labeled “Section J. Women

and Media”, and it dealt with media and communication issues from a gender perspective, reflecting both the advent of globalised media systems and new information technologies, and their impact on women. The BPA is essentially an agenda for the empowerment of women and it is aimed not only at governments, but also public and private institutions, and non-governmental organisations. Therefore, Section J also targets media industries, practitioners and professional media associations, with two main strategic objectives:

- J.1 To increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication
- J.2 To promote a balanced and non-stereotypical portrayal of women in the media. (United Nations, 1995)

At the time, the creation of Section J was hailed as an historic breakthrough and encouraged many gender and media activists (Joseph, 2006, p. 43). However, at the Beijing + 10 review meeting in 2005, Section J was not on the conference agenda – an “unfortunate and inexplicable absence” (Joseph, 2006, p.49). It was a “salutary reality check”, states Gallagher (2005a), that shows how “media and communication issues – Section J notwithstanding – continue to exist somewhat on the margins of the international women’s agenda” (Gallagher, 2005a). The 15-year review of the BPA is scheduled for March, 2010, and it will perhaps be possible then to see if the promise of Section J in 1995 has been completely eroded or revived.

2.3 WACC and the GMMP

Since its inception, the GMMP has been funded and supported by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC). The WACC Women's Programme organizes and coordinates the GMMP. Originally founded in the 1950s to explore guidelines for religious broadcasting, WACC has evolved into a communications rights organization promoting communication as a means of social change. Although it is guided by its "Christian Principles of Communication", WACC says it aims to "support the democratisation of communications, communication for human dignity and the right to communicate in situations of censorship and oppression" and sees communication "as the basis of understanding and cooperation between peoples of different faiths and cultures" (WACC, n.d.).

The roots of WACC's Women's Programme, and indeed the GMMP, can be traced back to 1987, when WACC started to focus more directly on women's issues, and organized a series of regional consultations on women and media (Hermano, 1996). A conference held in Bangkok, Thailand in 1994 entitled "Women Empowering Communication", was the culmination of WACC's regional activities, including media literacy workshops. The conference was a precursor to the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference, and was jointly organized by WACC, Isis International, and the International Women's Tribune Center. The "Women Empowering Communication" conference produced the Bangkok Declaration, which included the proposal to carry out a global monitoring project, and "use the data for an analysis of where women are" (WACC, 1994, p.26). The clear aim of WACC's involvement in the GMMP is as follows;

From the beginning, we were determined that the broad aims of the Global Media Monitoring Project would be to strengthen solidarity, media literacy and advocacy on media and gender issues. (Hermano & del Novo, 2000, p.5)

Therefore, it can be seen that the impetus and motivation for the GMMP is based on a partnership between academics and activists who realized that for research to have meaning, impact and use as an advocacy tool, it was important to foster participation on the geographical and quantitative scale of the GMMP (Gallagher, 2001, p.27).

3. 15 years of the GMMP

As stated above, the fourth GMMP has just been completed and the results will be announced later this year. There is no indication yet as to what the findings might be, but given the fact that the previous three projects showed only a 4% increase in the number of women as news subjects, over a ten-year period, it would seem prudent to expect that there will be no major increase. Therefore, it is important to examine the value of the previous three projects, in terms of methodology, participation and advocacy.

3.1 Previous Project Findings

Each GMMP has produced extensive quantitative data, and increasingly more qualitative data, on gender representation in the news. The main findings for each project are summarized below.

The first GMMP in 1995 is credited with providing "the first truly international picture of women's under-representation in the news" (Gill, 2007, p.115). It found that only 17% of news subjects, on a global level span-

ning newspapers, radio and television, were women. These women in the news mainly appeared as victims, mothers and wives. They were least likely to be quoted in political news (7%), and most likely to be interviewed for stories concerning health or social issues (33%), or news related to arts and entertainment (31%).

In 2000, the percentage of female news subjects rose by only 1% to 18%. Less than 10% of news had a woman, or women, as its central focus. The second GMMP confirmed again that when women do appear as a central focus in reports, news media tend to identify them in terms of their marital or family status. The 2000 project found that 21% of stories identified women in this way. Additionally, in 81% of these stories, women were portrayed as 'homemakers'.

The third project in 2005, found that the figure had risen to 21%, with men constituting 86% of spokespeople and 83% of experts in news stories. The project found that women were most under-represented in radio (17%), and still more likely to be found in 'soft news' stories (28%), than 'hard news' stories (14%). Women are also twice more likely to be portrayed as victims (19%), than men (8%).

What can be concluded from the findings of the three previous projects, is that news agendas clearly reflect male priorities and perspectives, represent women in narrow and limiting ways, and indicate the severe lack of gender awareness and indifference to gender perspectives by news producers.

3.2 Coding Method

The GMMP collects data on tens of thousand of news stories for each project. For example, in 1995, there were 49,000 data records (Media Watch, 1995, p.6). Over the last

15 years, the GMMP has followed a consistent coding method. Coders are required to monitor major newspapers, radio, television, and now also the internet, at a national, regional and local level. As the number of media organizations varies between countries, the level of media saturation in each country is calculated and coding groups follow the guidelines set by WACC. Except for newspapers, all news broadcasts and internet news pages are coded. Coding sheets are used to record information about each news story. The coding sheets focus on four areas; story, journalist/reporter, people and analysis. For each area there are specific coding requirements, looking at gender, subject, scope, role, policies, function, the centrality of women, and evidence of stereotypes.

There have been two major additions to the monitoring and coding. First of all, in 2005, a qualitative component was added to the project. This provided more context to the news stories that were coded, and asked coders in their respective countries to make their own analysis. Secondly, for the fourth GMMP in 2009/2010, coders were also given the option of monitoring the internet. This was an optional part of the coding because it was recognized that some coding groups do not have access to internet news, nor is it currently relevant to their media environment. However, the addition of internet news monitoring further provides unique data to the project, recognizing its growing importance as a source of news, and revealing "how choices made by online editors impact on gender portrayal and representation in online news" (Macharia, 2010).

3.3 Participation

Since 1995, the GMMP has encouraged

both grassroots organisations and academia to be involved in the project. Each time, hundreds of participants have contributed to the project. This has also included media practitioners and it should be noted, both women and men. Whilst the findings of the GMMP may not have shown significant change over the last 15 years, the participation rates have increased dramatically. In 1995, the GMMP started with 71 countries and by 2005 had grown to the participation of 76. The 2009/2010 project boasts an impressive participation of 127 countries.

The low cost of conducting this kind of research is another reason why the GMMP has been able to foster such increasing and inclusive participation; encouraging and empowering non-academic groups to get involved (Gill, 2007, p.44). And whilst gender and media issues may not be receiving the desired attention at the UN level, WACC is happy to note that,

The GMMP validates the argument that while attention to media and communication in the context of women's rights and gender equality may have faded away from key post-Beijing international policy instruments, the interest by those not directly involved in high-level policy-making is more alive than ever. (Macharia, 2010)

In this sense, the GMMP has achieved an important goal of media literacy, which is to empower audiences by giving them the analytical skills to read media more deeply (Tomaru & Suzuki, 2005), and become more actively involved in creating media.

4. Challenges & Criticisms of GMMP as a Project

The main criticisms of the GMMP are concerned with the methodology, and the limitations of content analysis. In its defense, content analysis is a useful approach when needing to "quantify salient and manifest features of a large number of texts....and make broad inferences about the processes and politics of representation" (Deacon et al., 1999, p.116). Since the first GMMP in 1995, the organizers have realized that the sample of quantitative data has limitations, that there are gaps in the amount of data gathered, and that there are imbalances between the amount of data collected from various media (Media Watch, 1995, p.5).

Gill (2007) outlines the main criticisms of the content analysis approach which the GMMP employs. Firstly, the idea that the media should reflect the reality of women as half the population is "at best naïve and at worst damaging" (Gill, 2007, p.44). Secondly, content analysis is based on a problematic conception of meaning, especially the focus on bias and distortion. Gill says this leads "to a problematic form of political action focused on excising 'bad' stereotypes, but leaving the rest of the media in tact". Thirdly, she says that this approach does not distinguish between levels of meaning, and only addresses the manifest content of representations, "thus ignoring the way that 'woman' can be used to symbolize an enormous variety of different meanings". Finally, she notes that this analytical approach "tends to gloss over specificities of representations" and shows instead persistence of well-worn stereotypes (Gill, 2007, p.45). However, while accepting these limitations, many academics are content to

see the value of the GMMP on a wider scale,

The GMMP, by its very nature has methodological limitations, but it remains an important benchmark study that can be used to agitate for greater gender equality in the news. (Fountaine & McGregor, 2001, p.9)

It is interesting to note that in 2005, a team of US researchers undertook a comprehensive study of American news media looking at the gender representation of news sources, and found similar results to the findings of the successive GMMPs. They concluded that “the representation of women as sources in the news has a significant distance to go toward reflecting their role in American society generally” (Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2005). That the first GMMP concluded this exactly ten years prior to the Project for Excellence in Journalism study is surely an indication of its long term value as a benchmark study.

WACC have stated that that they decided to coordinate a fourth GMMP in “response to calls from gender and communication groups worldwide” (Macharia, 2010), noting that it is important to keep providing factual data to support gender and communication activists.

5. Conclusion

As a project that employs a content analysis approach, with a huge reliance on quantitative data, the limitations of the GMMP are recognized. However, by providing evidence, facts and figures on the need for improvement of gender representation in news media, the value of the GMMP as an empowerment tool cannot be underestimated. If the GMMP is consistently telling us what we

already know, then there are good reasons to keep tracking this situation over time, as journalist Adele Horin argued quite recently in the *Sydney Morning Herald*,

Progress for girls and women has been hard-won during the past 30 years. But if women aren't vigilant, if they don't keep count of how many women are in Parliament, of how many female backbenchers are allowed to speak, of how many women get to sit on corporate boards, or make partner in law firms, or are eligible for paid maternity leave in a world undeniably run by men, progress stalls. If women don't calculate and agitate, the process of subtraction begins. (Horin, 2009)

Therefore, the value of the GMMP, which is the largest and longest global study of gender representation in news media, is ultimately as a tool for change that is based on collaboration, diverse participation and empowerment. It de-mystifies research, and de-Westernises the focus of media studies to create new knowledge about gender representation in news media, in diverse contexts. The GMMP can be seen as a successful outcome of Section J of the Beijing Platform for Action; it has created awareness about the portrayal of women in the news media, as well as advocating for greater participation of women in media. The findings of each project have been met with disappointment, and this appears to have prompted more of a focus on the participatory benefits of the project, and to see the monitoring day as a “day of solidarity” (Hermano & del Nevo, 2000, p.7). Thus, the GMMP contributes in an important way to the democratization of media research and also media access.

Note

1 Coined by George Gerbner in 1972.

References

- Byerly, C.M. (2004). Feminist interventions in newsrooms. In C.M. Byerly & K. Ross (Eds.), *Women and Media: International Perspectives* (pp.109-131). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Byerly, C.M. & K. Ross. (2006) *Women and Media: A Critical Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Cullity, J. and Younger, P. (2009). Gender imbalance in international news: a case study of the BBC. *Media Culture Society*, 31 (6), 999-1009.
- Deacon, D., Pickering, M., Golding, P., & Murdock, G. (1999). *Researching communications: A practical guide to methods in media and cultural analysis*. London: Arnold.
- Fountaine, S. & McGregor, J. (2001). Good news, bad news: New Zealand and the Global Media Monitoring Project. *Communication Journal of New Zealand*, 2(1), 55-69.
- Gallagher, M. (2001a). *Gender Setting: New agendas for media monitoring and advocacy*. London: Zed Books/World Association for Christian Communication.
- Gallagher, M. (2001b). The push and pull of action and research in feminist media studies. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1(1), 11-15.
- Gallagher, M. (2005a). Beijing's legacy for gender and media. Retrieved February 5, 2010, from <http://www.wacc.org>
- Gallagher, M. (2005b). 'Global Media Monitoring Project 2005'. Retrieved February 5, 2010, from <http://www.whomakesthenews.org>
- Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hernano, T. (1996). The legacy of Bangkok. In R. Jimenez-David (Ed.), *Women's Experiences in Media* (pp.2-5). Manila: Isis International-Manila.
- Hernano, T., & del Nevo, M. (2000). Introduction. In G. Spears & K. Seydergaard, with M. Gallagher. *Who makes the news? Global media monitoring project 2000* (pp.5-7). London: World Association for Christian Communication.
- Hernano, T. (2004, June). *Why GMMP? Media, gender and empowerment*. Paper presented at Asia-Pacific Forum on Active Audiences: The global media monitoring project and media literacy, Kyoto, Japan.
- Holland, P. (1998). The politics of the smile: 'soft news' and the sexualisation of the popular press. In C.Carter et al. (Eds.), *News, Gender and Power* (pp.17-32). London: Routledge.
- Horin, A. (2009, September 19). A gentle prod at inequality prompts a backlash of bile and vitriol. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Retrieved September 25, 2009, from <http://www.smh.com.au>
- Joseph, A. (2006). The media and gender in the age of globalisation. In A. Joseph & K.Sharma (Eds.) *Whose News? The media and women's issues* (pp.17-57). New Delhi: Sage.
- Macharia, S. (2010). Who makes the news? The Global Media Monitoring Project 2010. Retrieved February 5, 2010, from <http://www.whomakesthenews.org>
- Media Watch. (1995). *Women's participation in the news: Global media monitoring project*. Toronto: Media Watch.
- Mills, K. (1997). What difference to women journalists make? In P.Norris (Ed.) *Women, Media and Politics* (pp.41-55). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Project for Excellence in Journalism. (2005). *The gender gap: Women are still missing as sources for journalists*. Retrieved January 25, 2010 from <http://www.journalism.org>
- Ross, K. (2002). *Women, media , politics: Uneasy relations in comparative perspective*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Ross, K. (2004). Why gender still matters, or how I learned to embrace feminism and accept my place in the awkward squad. *Media and Gender Monitor*, 14 (2), 2-3.
- Spears, G., & Seydergaard, K. with Gallagher, M. (2000). *Who makes the news? Global media monitoring project 2000*. London: World Association for Christian Communication.

- Sreberny, A., & Van Zoonen, L. (Eds.). (2000). *Gender, politics and communication*. Cresskill: Hampton Press.
- Suzuki, M. (2005). On active audiences and the GMMP. *Asian Network of Women In Communication Journal*, 1(12), 16.
- Tomaru, A. & Suzuki, M. (2005). Media literacy and television news analysis from a gender perspective: The 2005 global media monitoring project (GMMP) and related activities. *Ritsumeikan Social Sciences Review*, 41 (3), 3-30.
- Tuchman, G. (1978). Introduction: The symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media. In G. Tuchman, A. Kaplan Daniels & J. Benet (Eds.), *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media* (pp. 3-38). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tuchman, G., Kaplan Daniels, A., & Benet, J. (Eds.). *Hearth and home: Images of women in the mass media*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- United Nations. (1995). *Platform for Action: J. Women and Media*. Retrieved February 3, 2010, from <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/media>
- Van Dijck, B. (2002, October). *Screening Gender: Gender portrayal and programme making routines*. United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Expert Group Meeting, Beirut, Lebanon.
- World Association for Christian Communication. (n.d.). About WACC. Retrieved February 3, 2010, from <http://www.waccglobal.org/>
- World Association for Christian Communication. (1994). The Bangkok Declaration. *Media Development*, 2, 25-26.