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A glass ceiling in the online age? Explaining the underrepresentation of women in online political news

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323117720343>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-138940>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Humprecht, Edda; Esser, Frank (2017). A glass ceiling in the online age? Explaining the underrepresentation of women in online political news. *European Journal of Communication*, 32(5):439-456.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323117720343>

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European Journal of Communication

2017, Vol. 32(5) 439–456

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DOI: 10.1177/0267323117720343

journals.sagepub.com/home/ejc**Edda Humprecht and Frank Esser**

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Abstract

In previous decades, women in Western countries have gained more influence in various social realms. The percentage of females in higher education, the workforce, boards at publicly traded companies and national parliaments has increased. However, substantial underrepresentation of women in political news has remained. To explain the reasons behind this gender imbalance in news content, we conducted a content analysis of different types of online news in six Western countries. In our study, we distinguish among three levels of analysis: (1) the story level (frequency and format), (2) the media organization level (popular vs mass and upmarket outlets) and (3) the societal level. The results indicate that female actors are most frequently covered by popular news outlets and are more likely to be depicted in a photograph. Furthermore, strong determinants of continued gender differences in political news were found at the country level. Specifically, coverage increases in countries where gender equality is progressing in major parts of society.

Keywords

Content analysis, digital journalism, gender, inequality, international comparison, news/information

Although women's participation in public life has largely increased in many countries over recent decades, women continue to receive substantially less media coverage than men (Armstrong and Gao, 2011; Shor et al., 2015). This imbalance reveals a strong media bias as news media are expected to represent relevant groups in society (Christians

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et al., 2009). Unequal reporting can have significant consequences. For instance, female politicians who receive substantially less media coverage than male candidates are at a disadvantage in terms of how many campaign donations and votes they receive (Mutz, 1995). Thirty years ago, Tuchman (1978) argued that such 'symbolic annihilation' poses a serious problem and plays an important role in maintaining the gendered balance of power, leading to an effect often referred to as 'glass ceiling'. This metaphor describes the difficulties women face when trying to advance hierarchically. Although it has been argued that digital communication enables openness and greater participation of different societal groups in public discourse compared to offline, the underrepresentation of women in news coverage still seems to be the norm today (Armstrong and Gao, 2011; Shor et al., 2015).

Against this background, the question of why women are rarely considered in online political news arises. Some authors have argued that male journalists, who still dominate most newsrooms, tend to focus on male actors in their reporting (Ross, 2001; Van Zoonen, 1998). This reasoning implies that news content would change and become more 'female' if women reached a critical mass in newsrooms (Hanitzsch et al., 2011; Van Zoonen, 1998). Others have argued that male and female journalists adopt different approaches to news reporting and, for instance, differ in their use of female sources (Chambers et al., 2004). However, as Van Zoonen (1998) noted, this explanation for the underrepresentation of women in the news is overly simplistic because it assumes that journalistic work is primarily the result of individual decisions and neglects the influence of the institutional work environment. Moreover, it implies that gender is a stronger predictor of distinctive journalistic orientations and practices than other dimensions of identity such as professionalism and ethnicity. Therefore, some authors have argued that a higher number of female journalists alone would not make a difference in either changing newsroom culture or producing news content. Hanitzsch and Hanusch (2012) confirmed this view by showing that varying gender distributions in newsrooms had no effect on journalists' professional views. Female and male journalists seem to have similar role conceptions, even in sociocultural contexts in which women have achieved a certain level of empowerment (Hanitzsch and Hanusch, 2012). Thus, the reasons behind the gender gap in news seem to be more complex than occupational inequities (De Swert and Hooghe, 2010). Shor et al. (2015) showed that predictors at the country level such as the share of female members of parliament and chief executive officers are clearly more important to explaining the proportion of female names in newspapers than the share of women in leading editorial positions. Those authors concluded that the persistence of gender gaps in media coverage is closely linked to real-world glass ceilings.

In this study, we go beyond the actor level and focus on the close relationship between societal-level inequalities, orientations of news organizations and news content. We aim to answer the question of why gender inequality continues to exist in the online public sphere. Furthermore, we want to explain differences regarding the representation of women in different types of news stories, media types as well as countries. Ultimately, our goal is to identify key factors that help to explain gender imbalances in news coverage. Specifically, we examine the gap in the relative amount of exposure of female and male actors in political news. We base our analysis on two major theoretical lines of thought originating from a media sociology perspective and a cross-nationally comparative

perspective: the interaction between media content and (1) organizational routines and (2) the societal-level environment (Reese, 2001).

Explaining the underrepresentation of women in online news: Literature review and hypotheses

Since the 1960s, gender gaps have been an important research topic in media research. The first generation of researchers developed the concept of ‘symbolic annihilation’, which implies that powerful groups suppress less powerful groups (in this case, women) by marginalizing them (Tuchman, 1978). They argued that mass media were ignoring women’s presence, trivializing or mocking them and often reducing them to a single ‘feminine’ characteristic (Gerbner, 1978). Mass media were ‘cultivating resistance’ by employing stereotyped gender images, despite the considerable changes in gender roles during the 1960s and 1970s (Carter et al., 1998; Van Zoonen, 1994). Against this background, scholars argued that complex processes were responsible for this resistance and that the reproduction of the values of dominant groups in society might be only one of them (Carter and Steiner, 2004). In the literature, we find three main reasons behind why female sources are selected for inclusion in the news. It might have to do with the style, format and topic of a news story (story level); editorial policy towards ‘soft’ news items (media organization level); and the role of women in society (country level) (Armstrong and Gao, 2011; De Swert and Hooghe, 2010; Van Zoonen, 1994; Yun et al., 2007). The first two reasons are associated with the ongoing commercialization of media systems, whereas the third is associated with the modernization of democratic societies (Reese, 2001).

Story level

A common explanation for female underrepresentation in the news is that professional selection criteria lead to a higher share of male actors in the news (Hanitzsch and Hanusch, 2012). It is assumed that journalists focus on elite positions such as heads of states and top managers, which still are mostly occupied by men. In this line of reasoning, the underrepresentation of women reflects professional standards in journalism (Hanitzsch and Hanusch, 2012). However, numerous studies on women in the mass media have shown that even influential women have been trivialized and underrepresented in news content (Armstrong and Gao, 2011; Tuchman, 1978). More precisely, women are less likely to be interviewed or cited as sources in political news (Media Watch, 1995; Yun et al., 2007). Against this background, we expect the following differences between female and male actors in political online news content:

Hypothesis 1. Female actors are less frequently quoted in online news content compared to male actors.

Previous research has found that certain topics continue to be associated with women, such as health, family matters, education, culture and social policy (Craft and Wanta, 2004; Kittilson and Fridkin, 2008; Van Zoonen, 2006). Female actors are likely to be

used as news sources on these topics but less likely to receive media coverage on topics such as public administration, defence, international relations, finance, economy and justice (De Swert and Hooghe, 2010). A well-established body of literature has shown that sex stereotypes about women's 'compassionate' nature and men's 'aggressiveness' have led people to expect women and men to possess competence in different areas of public life (Iyengar et al., 1997). These stereotypes affect expectations about the personal characteristics of women and men such as in terms of competence and integrity, which are cultivated by the news media (Kahn and Gordon, 1997). This segregation leads us to assume that women are less likely to appear in 'male' areas:

Hypothesis 2. Female actors are less frequently covered in stories on 'male topics' (e.g. public administration, defence and economy) compared to male actors.

Another body of scholarships shows that gender gaps are rooted in commercial interests of media organizations and, therefore, are part of a more general media logic (Campus, 2013). In this line of reasoning, media outlets focus on females' appearance such as by showing photographs of attractive female candidates to boost their sales (Van Aelst et al., 2008). Moreover, the appearances of leading female politicians such as Angela Merkel's décolleté or Theresa May's shoes trigger more media coverage and public interest than such attributes of their male counterparts (Lunenburg and Maier, 2015). These patterns of media coverage may again be rooted in societal-level inequalities as strength and leadership are attributed to men, whereas women are subject to commentary and derision relating to their appearance and style (Van Zoonen, 2006). Thus, women are often covered in opinion-related and more colourful and vivid news features. This trend has increased in the online age, fuelled by social media channels and the need for clicks among online news outlets (Armstrong and Gao, 2011):

Hypothesis 3. Female actors are more frequently depicted compared to male actors.

Hypothesis 4: Female actors are more frequently represented in opinion-related news content (e.g. commentary, blogs and portraits) compared to 'hard' news content (e.g. straight news stories).

Media outlet level

Commercialization plays a role not only at the story level but also at the level of the media outlets. It has been argued that sexualized and demeaning depictions of women often appear in 'soft' news (Tuchman, 1978). Van Zoonen (2006) argued that this bias involves popularization and personalization, a reporting style that is especially pronounced in mass-market-oriented news outlets (Stanyer, 2013). Previous research shows that women are likely to appear in popular (or 'celebrity') news, primarily in a stereotypical way (Van Zoonen, 2006). Campus (2013) argued that the private life of men is mainly discussed in the media in cases of personal misconduct such as infidelity and difficulties among family members. In contrast, she contended that women in power are continuously questioned in terms of their performing their duties as mothers, wives and politicians or stateswomen simultaneously. Moreover, Norris (1997) noted that the reliance on gendered stereotypes

is greater in tabloid or popular news because stereotypical conventions provide a simple and familiar heuristic for readers. Although these findings concern offline media, online news are likely to contain similar stereotypes. It has been argued that a stronger audience orientation of online journalists leads to an increasing amount of soft news (Boczkowski and Peer, 2011). These predispositions of online communication supposedly foster the persistence of gender stereotypes. Against this background, we assume that online news organizations with a strong emphasis on 'soft' news report more frequently about women than other types of media organizations:

Hypothesis 5. Popular news outlets have a higher share of female actors in their political news coverage compared to other types of online outlets.

Country level

While our first hypotheses are derived from the general literature on gender and news media, our final hypotheses target explanatory factors at the country level. Previous studies show that societal-level inequalities are the dominant determinants of continued gender differences in media coverage (Shor et al., 2015). Those results suggest that news reports help to maintain the status quo of an unequal power distribution in top positions between men and women instead of representing a variety of relevant groups in society. A common explanation of this situation is that the media merely operate as a 'mirror of society'; however, even female leaders receive less coverage compared to their male counterparts (Campus, 2013; Norris, 1997). While research has shown that the underrepresentation of women in the news is a common pattern across borders, several authors have highlighted cross-national differences (Kittilson and Fridkin, 2008). Schein and Mueller (1992) show that women in the United States are perceived as being equally likely to possess requisite management characteristics, while in Great Britain, Germany, China and Japan management characteristics are more strongly associated with men. However, the authors conclude that the attitude 'think manager, think male' is widespread in many countries (Schein et al., 1996). In the area of journalism, studies have shown that considerable cross-national variance exists in the ratio of male and female journalists per country. While in the United States the number of women working in newsrooms is comparatively high, the respective number in Germany and Switzerland is noticeably lower (Hanitzsch and Hanusch, 2012). Against this background, we argue that societal-level inequalities can be measured on different dimensions. In this study, we focus on the dissemination of masculine values within a society as well as on the level of social inclusion of men and women.

Hofstede (2001) argued that a society's general tendency in terms of the distribution of gender roles is linked to the prevalence of masculine values within it. According to him, masculinity refers to the extent to which social gender roles in a given society are clearly distinct. Men are supposed to be assertive, tough and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life (Hofstede, 2001). Femininity is pronounced in a society in which social gender roles overlap. Hofstede's (2001) masculinity index indicates the level of gender differentiation in a society. Furthermore, it can be assumed that higher levels of gender

differentiation are reflected in the news. The media operate as an amplifier of gender stereotypes and, thus, reinforce stereotypes among their audiences. These norms and values of the audiences, in turn, shape social reality and are again reflected in news content (Iyengar et al., 1997). This favours an environment in which women are further stereotyped and outnumbered in key places, including the news. Based on this argument, we assume that the role of masculine values in a society can explain the representation of women in media coverage:

Hypothesis 6. The higher the masculinity index (Hofstede, 2001), the fewer female actors appear in news content.

The second country-level variable that is associated with the coverage of women is gender equality or, more precisely, equality of opportunities in terms of social participation. Therefore, we come back to Shor et al.'s (2015) argument, which states that societal-level inequalities are crucial to the persistence of gender gaps in media coverage. The authors analysed longitudinal data and showed that indicators such as the proportion of women in top political and economic positions could explain gender inequality in media coverage to the greatest extent (Shor et al., 2015).

In this study, we rely on data provided by the World Economic Forum (2015) on 'Global Gender Gaps' measuring gender equality in health, education, economy and politics. It is argued that this operationalization represents gender equality in general, rather than gender empowerment only, which may result in media coverage that only focuses on females in elite positions (World Economic Forum, 2015). Building on the previously discussed research, we assume that gender equality is an important driver of news production in regard to reporting on male and female actors:

Hypothesis 7. The more developed gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2015) is in a country, the higher the share of female actors in political news content.

Data

To ascertain what factors determine the likelihood that a female actor will be present in news content, we sampled online news from outlets in countries with different levels of masculinity (Hofstede, 2001) and gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2015): the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland, France and Italy (see Table 1).

Furthermore, we sampled online news from outlets with varying professional orientations, including those with mass-market orientations and public service orientations as well as those pursuing a mid-way route between these two perspectives. As Table 2 shows in more detail, we consider online versions of tabloid newspapers and commercial broadcasters, public broadcasters, quality newspapers with various types of ownership and, finally, publications that were made for the web. In every country, we selected the news outlets with the highest reach in each of these categories to ensure a certain level of social relevance of the content under study (Alexa, 2012).

Table 1. Means of basic sample parameters.

	Masculinity (Hofstede, 2001)	Gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2015)
France	-2.13	0.15
Germany	0.35	1.03
Great Britain	0.35	0.00
Italy	0.78	-1.57
Switzerland	0.78	1.32
United States	-0.08	-0.88

Values are z-standardized.

Table 2. Sample of online news outlets.

Type of medium	France (n = 279)	Germany (n = 279)	Great Britain (n = 280)	Italy (n = 276)	Switzerland (n = 267)	United States (n = 279)
Popular (n = 206)	<i>Le Parisien</i>	<i>Bild</i>	<i>The Sun</i>	<i>Leggo</i>	<i>Blick</i>	<i>NY Daily News</i>
Public (n = 245)	France 2	ARD	BBC	RAI	SRF Swiss Info	NPR
Private (n = 173)	TFI	N-TV	Sky GB	Sky IT		CNN
Corporate (n = 412)	<i>Le Figaro</i>	<i>Die Welt</i>	<i>Daily Mail</i>	<i>Repubblica</i>	<i>Tagesanzeiger</i>	<i>Washington Post</i>
	<i>Ouest France</i>	<i>Der Westen</i>	<i>The Times</i>	<i>Corriere della sera</i>	<i>Südostschweiz</i>	<i>LA Times</i>
Independent (n = 417)	<i>Le Monde</i>	<i>Frankfurter Allg Zeitung</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>Il fatto quotidiano</i>	<i>NZZ-</i>	<i>NY Times</i>
	<i>Libération</i>	<i>Sueddeutsche</i>	<i>The Telegraph</i>	<i>Unita</i>	<i>Landbote</i>	<i>Tampabay Times</i>
Web based (n = 207)	Rue89	Spiegel Online	Open Democracy	Linkiesta	News.ch	Huffington Post

Measures

The content of 48 online news outlets from six countries was analysed over a 7-week period of routine political reporting. Using a constructed week sample in June and July 2012, we captured five political articles per outlet at 2 p.m. local time, yielding a total of 1660 stories or 280 stories per country (see Table 2 for details).

Political news stories are defined as items containing at least two mentions of one political or politico-economic actor – just as in a study by De Vreese et al. (2017). We required that the political actor be mentioned twice to ensure that we sampled only politically relevant articles. Six bilingual coders were trained intensively over a 6-week period and supervised closely during the actual coding (from October 2012 to February 2013)

to ensure that they understood the reporting styles of the selected outlets and followed the detailed coding instructions. To examine inter-coder reliability, a test was completed at the conclusion of the coder training and at the beginning of the actual coding. The test showed substantial agreement and satisfactory values of Cohen's kappa ($k \geq .76$).

To investigate the share of female actors in the news content, we coded both the gender of up to five actors in each news story and whether they were quoted verbatim and depicted in a photograph. Using this information, we constructed an index to reflect how extensively female actors were included in a given news item. However, we quickly realized that the news outlets under examination usually presented quotations and photographs for main actors (who were mentioned several times) only but not peripheral actors (who were mentioned just once). Consequently, we based our subsequent comparative analysis of male and female depictions and quotations on the main actors only.

We also coded the main topic of each story as observed in the headline and first paragraphs. Based on Jones and Baumgartner (2004), we compiled a list of 20 key issues including relevant political issues potentially covered in the news. If two or more topics were mentioned but one was clearly dominant, the news item was classified under the dominant topic.

To determine the level of masculinity, we used Hofstede's (2001) masculinity index, which measures gender differentiation within a society. Hofstede's (2001) research on work-related cultural dimensions has been regarded as a paradigmatic milestone in the field of cross-cultural studies. He collected survey responses from employees at a multinational corporation, IBM, which had offices in 40 countries. Based on his findings, he concluded that 'organizations are cultural-bounded' (Hofstede, 2001). To analyse cultural values in different countries, he identified work-related cultural dimensions, including masculinity. This dimension defines the gender roles in organizations. For instance, high levels of masculinity indicate that very few women can obtain higher level and better-paying jobs. Hofstede et al. (2010) argued that masculinity represents a

preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success. Society at large is more competitive. Its opposite, femininity, stands for a preference for cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life. Society at large is more consensus-oriented.

For gender equality, we used the Global Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum (2015). The index aims to measure gender-based gaps in access to resources and opportunities in countries, regardless of their overall level of resources. Indicators include economic participation and opportunity (e.g. share of female labourers, wage equality, income, number of females in leadership positions), educational attainment (female literacy rate, female enrolment rate), health and survival (sex ratio at birth, life expectancy) and political empowerment (seats in parliament, females at the ministerial level, number of years with a female head of state) (World Economic Forum, 2015).

We used multivariate ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to understand what factors predict the presence of female actors in news content. Independent variables were entered in blocks in order of their relative explanatory power: (1) county-level characteristics, (2) media type and (3) story-level predictors.

Table 3. Quotation and visual depiction of main actor.

	Female actors (<i>n</i> = 153)	Male actors (<i>n</i> = 722)	<i>t</i>
	%	%	
Quotation	.54	.58	<i>t</i> (873) = −.764, <i>p</i> = .204
Visual depiction	.72	.68	<i>t</i> (873) = .942, <i>p</i> = .045

Collective actors excluded from analysis.

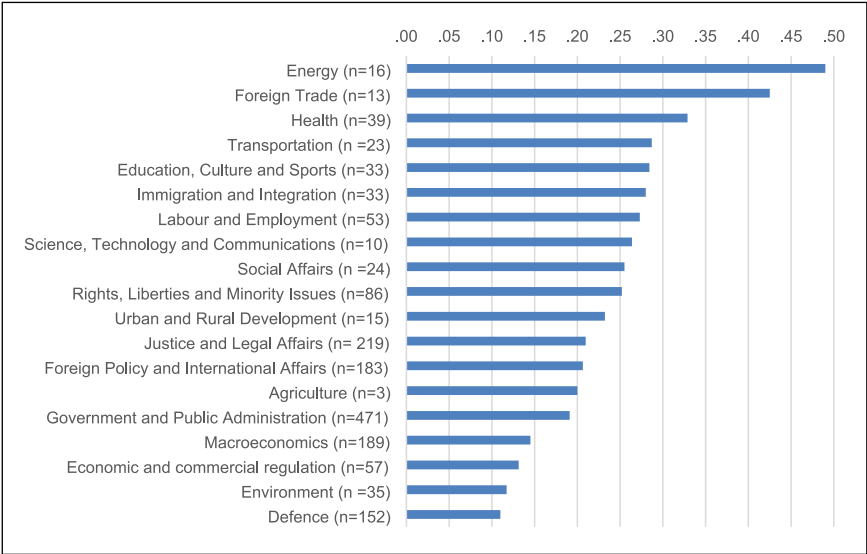


Figure 1. Share of main female actor per main story topic.
N = 1660 news stories. Collective actors excluded from analysis.

Findings

Our first hypothesis stated that female actors are less likely to be quoted in the news. To test this hypothesis, we focused on the main actors in each news story. Although men were quoted slightly more often than women, we found no significant gender difference. In other words, female actors generally were covered less often, but their opportunity to be quoted was not lower compared to male actors once they were selected to appear in a story (see Table 3). These findings refute Hypothesis 1.

The second hypothesis predicted low female presence in male topic areas such as institutional policy, foreign policy and economic news. To measure the main topic of each story, we used a list of 22 policy issues presented by Jones and Baumgartner (2004). Next, we disregarded all collective actors and calculated the ratio of female to male actors. As shown in Figure 1, female actors appeared most frequently in news stories on

Table 4. Gender of main actor per story type (%).

Type of news story	Female actors (%)	Male actors (%)
Straight news story (<i>n</i> = 1307)	.18	.82
News feature (<i>n</i> = 141)	.13	.87
Blog (<i>n</i> = 76)	.13	.87
Commentary (<i>n</i> = 74)	.29	.71
Interview (<i>n</i> = 29)	.06	.94
Other story type (<i>n</i> = 22)	.12	.88
Portrait (<i>n</i> = 11)	.20	.80

Collective actors excluded from analysis. Cramer's $V = .063$; $p = .088$.

Table 5. Female actors per media type and country.

	Popular	Independent	Public	Web based	Private	Corporate	<i>F</i>
Index	.22 ^b	.21 ^b	.20 ^a	.20 ^a	.20 ^a	.17	$F(5, 1654) = 34.499$, $p = .000$
	France	Germany	Switzerland	Great Britain	United States	Italy	<i>F</i>
Index	.24 ^a	.23 ^a	.21	.18 ^b	.18 ^b	.16	$F(5, 1654) = 139.657$, $p = .000$

Means with the same superscript within a row are not statistically different (based on post hoc Games–Howell test for unequal group variances).

‘energy’ (49%) and ‘foreign trade’ (43%), followed by ‘health’ (33%). In contrast, women received little consideration in stories on ‘defence’ (11%), the ‘environment’ (12%) and ‘economic and commercial regulation’ (13%). We found significant gender differences based on topic area (Cramer's $V = .228$, $p = .000$); however, these findings did not clearly support Hypothesis 2. Therefore, we ran an additional test to make a final judgement; details are provided in Table 6.

We were also interested in the editorial treatment of news sources (i.e. how female sources were embedded in news stories). Previous research has shown that a tendency to stereotype and trivialize coverage of women by focusing on their appearance and subjecting them to judgemental remarks (Carter and Steiner, 2004). Against this background, we assumed that women would appear more frequently in photographs (Hypothesis 3) and opinion-related stories (Hypothesis 4) than men. Hypothesis 3 was clearly confirmed. When they were the main actor in a news story, women tended to be shown more often in a photograph (see Table 3). Concerning the type of news story, women were mostly included in commentaries (29%) but were rarely chosen as a partner for an interview (6%; see Table 4). Even in straight news stories, the most common story type in political affairs coverage by far, men outnumbered women 4:1 (see Table 4). This seems to lend support to Hypothesis 4; however, these differences were not significant at the .05

Table 6. Predicting change in amount of female actors in political news.

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Constant	-54.23	4.36		-54.33	4.30		-55.10	4.32	
Global Gender Gap Index	111.88	5.64	.41***	111.64	5.56	.41***	112.33	5.57	.42***
Masculinity	-0.17	0.01	-.29***	-0.17	0.01	-.29***	-0.17	0.01	-.29***
Popular outlet				2.41	0.34	.15***	2.51	0.35	.15***
Opinion-related story type							0.47	0.30	.03
Male topic							0.20	0.23	.02
Adjusted R ²			.26			.28			.28
N									1660

Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions. Entries are unstandardized coefficients, standard errors (SEs) and betas. Opinion-related story type included commentary, blogs, news features and portraits. 'Male' topic included government and public administration, defence and macroeconomics.
*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

level (Cramer's $V = .063, p = .088$). Therefore, we ran another test to come to a final decision; details are provided in Table 6.

Our next hypothesis involved the media organization level. The argument from which Hypothesis 5 was deduced states that women are more frequently covered in stories from popular outlets due to their greater use of soft news angles. Again, this expectation was confirmed by our results. An analysis of variance (ANOVA, presented in Table 5) showed that popular online news outlets were significantly more inclined to include women in their political affairs coverage (.22) compared to public (.20), web-based (.20), private (.20) and corporate outlets (.17). Moreover, we found significant country differences. French and German news sites were considerably more likely to include female sources and viewpoints than, for instance, Italian news sites (see Table 5).

The third set of hypotheses focused on predictors at the country level. These predictors were tested in a multivariate OLS regression with predictors at the organizational and story levels. This was done to compare the relative weight of factors at the different levels of analysis. Table 6 presents the results of the three models that were tested. The first model included a block with two country-level predictors. In the second model, popular media predictors were added. In the third model, a set of story-level predictors were added. Model 1 had a good fit to the data, as expressed by an explained variance of 26%. The fit further improved to 28% in the comprehensive models 2 and 3.

We started with model 1, which examined the effects of masculinity and gender equality. As presented in Table 6, the results provide clear support for Hypotheses 6 and 7. We found a significant main effect of the dominance of masculine values in a society on the share of women represented in political news content ($\beta = -.29, p \leq .001$). Furthermore, we observed a strong main effect of gender equality on the representation of female actors in news content ($\beta = .41, p \leq .001$). A bivariate regression of the isolated factor of gender equality (measured using the Global Gender Gap

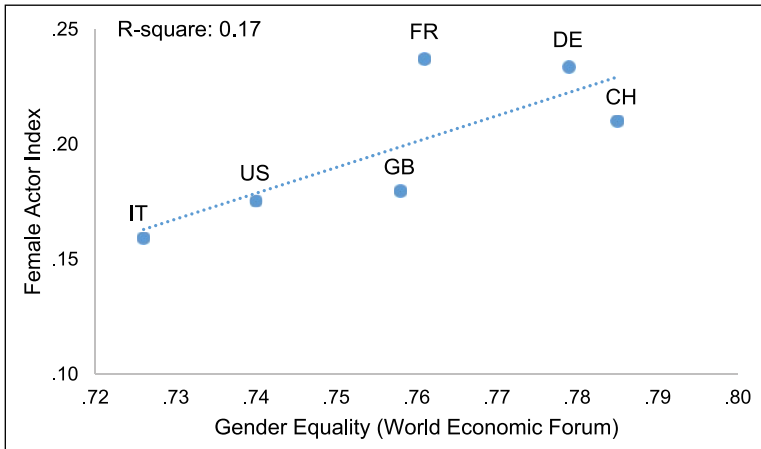


Figure 2. Gender equality predicting female actor index.

Index) revealed a significant effect ($\beta = .17$, $p \leq .001$), which is further illustrated in the scatterplot in Figure 2.

Model 2 supported our finding from the ANOVA used to test Hypothesis 5. Popular news outlets are likely to include higher levels of female actors in their news reporting than other types of media organizations. Even though differences in media types had less explanatory power than country-level differences, there was a clearly recognizable significant main effect ($\beta = .15$, $p \leq .001$).

For model 3, which is presented in Table 6, we also included two story-level predictors: opinion-related stories (including commentaries, blogs, news features and portraits) and 'male' topics (including government and public administration, defence and macroeconomics). The results showed that story-level predictors had considerably less explanatory power than those that were entered previously. The effects of opinion-oriented story genres as well as male topic contexts failed to reach standard significance levels. What does this mean for Hypotheses 2 and 4? When other relevant variables are taken into consideration simultaneously (as in model 3), the individual effects of 'opinion-driven stories' and 'male topic contexts' decrease in explanatory power without completely disappearing. In sum, we considered Hypotheses 2 and 4 to be only slightly supported.

In summary, the results of the analyses showed that *country-level* as well as *organization-level* factors affect the coverage of women in political news to the greatest degree, with masculinity values and gender equality in society (our two country-level factors) being the strongest predictors. This finding confirms how important it is for scholars to employ *comparative* designs that consider a variety of countries and outlet types. It further illustrates how influential the national societal context is in which news organizations are embedded. However, even news organizations that are embedded in the same society display remarkable differences. In Italy, for instance, female actors receive very little attention in *Linkiesta* (7.5%). Nevertheless, they receive three times more attention from the public broadcaster RAI (24%). Figure 3 underscores the importance of

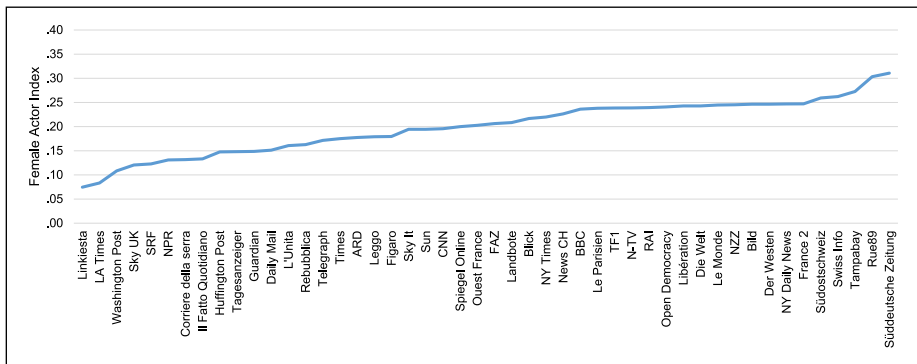


Figure 3. Female actor index per news outlet.

newsroom culture by showing the substantial variation among all the online news outlets in our sample. As a positive example, we would like to note that in Germany's quality newspaper *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, women account for almost one-third of all actors mentioned in political news.

Discussion

Our main objective was to assess various theoretical explanations for the persistent gender gap in political news coverage online. The literature suggested that a gender gap continues to be maintained and reproduced in news organization, even during the transition to online news (Armstrong and Gao, 2011; Shor et al., 2015). However, with the wide adoption of new media technology across societies, it is hoped that the Internet can help to modernize traditional journalistic work routines, including the habit of relying primarily on male actors in news content (De Swert and Hooghe, 2010). Scholars have argued that media coverage of women and men is not merely a reflection of existing gender inequalities; media practices exacerbate and artificially magnify factual inequalities (De Swert and Hooghe, 2010; Gallagher, 2010; Tuchman, 1978; Zoch and Turk, 1998).

Building on a content analysis of online political news, we examined several commonly held but rarely tested assumptions in the literature. To account for the plurality of potential influences, we included predictors at the story level (topic area and story genre), organizational level (outlet type) and country level (gender equality and masculinity values in society). Our results confirm the suspicion that mass media continue to cultivate gender stereotypes in the online age. Women and men appear in different types of stories, and women are likely to find themselves in an opinion-heavy item. The focus on visual appearance likely explains why women are more frequently covered by popular news outlets. Overall, the political affairs coverage of the news sites examined here is characterized by significant inequality. Specifically, the majority of news protagonists are male. This may not be surprising, given the dominance of men in high and potentially news-worthy positions across many societal sectors.

This situation could mislead individuals into assuming that it is useless to advocate for the critical reflection and possible revision of journalistic routines in this regard. However, this would involve a misunderstanding of the motivation of gender approaches in communications, which is to question how these gender imbalances and asymmetrical power situations have emerged (Robinson, 2005). As such, gender analyses have an activist agenda, namely, promoting equity and social change as well as encouraging self-actualization among all members of society (Buzzanell et al., 2009). Any attempt to understand and improve the persistence of gender gaps in online news media, therefore, must go beyond the use of long-established news selection routines by individual journalists and raise awareness of recruitment patterns as well as training and employment conditions in newsrooms and society at large, including in the field of politics.

In particular, our analyses reveal the crucial role of newsroom cultures (organizational level) and social values (national level) in explaining the stark differences in the representation of women in contemporary political news. Journalistic routines seem to be heavily shaped by the gender inequality in a nation. Shor et al. (2015) found that when women occupy high-level positions in higher numbers, newspaper coverage of women increases. This finding highlights the clear link between societal-level conditions and reporting patterns as a result of changing cultural values that permeate all spheres of society, including news organizations. Our own study seems to confirm this mechanism. It also reveals an interaction effect of social values, newsroom values and reporting practices. While Shor et al. (2015) only focused on indicators that related to women in executive positions, we base our analysis on a broader set of indicators that represent societal gender inequality in a more differentiated way. Our results show that the underrepresentation of women in the news is embedded in organizational and societal structures. Thus, changes in the representation of women in the news are the result of a protracted process. For now, the political arena in the six Western countries under examination here remains a masculine terrain, and masculine values remain dominant. The 'symbolic annihilation' of the news media seems to tell only one part of the story; the other part is determined by the societal gender inequality. However, in times when a male US presidential candidate openly expressed sexist and misogynist attitudes during the campaign, this issue may be more relevant than ever.

Nevertheless, our findings are also subject to a number of limitations. Our analyses examined the quantitative representation of female actors in online news content, but they did not allow us to inspect closely the specific ways that women are portrayed when they are mentioned. Previous research suggests that women's underrepresentation in the news media is accompanied by subordinating, belittling and demeaning ways of reporting (Fiske, 1996; Ross, 2007, 2010; Van Zoonen, 2006). As discussed earlier, the media often focus on women's physical attractiveness and portray them in a personalized way. Our data seem to support these claims, as evidenced by differences in the roles that men and women were portrayed as holding. Of 50 actor types, we found only 24 different female actor types (compared to 36 male actor types). As Figure 4 shows, women were less often portrayed as members of the national government (26.8% of all female actors, $p=.001$), national parties (1.3%, $p=.001$) or national head of state (9.8%, $p=.001$). In contrast, we found significantly more celebrities (e.g. actors, artists and athletes) who were women (5.9%, $p=.003$).

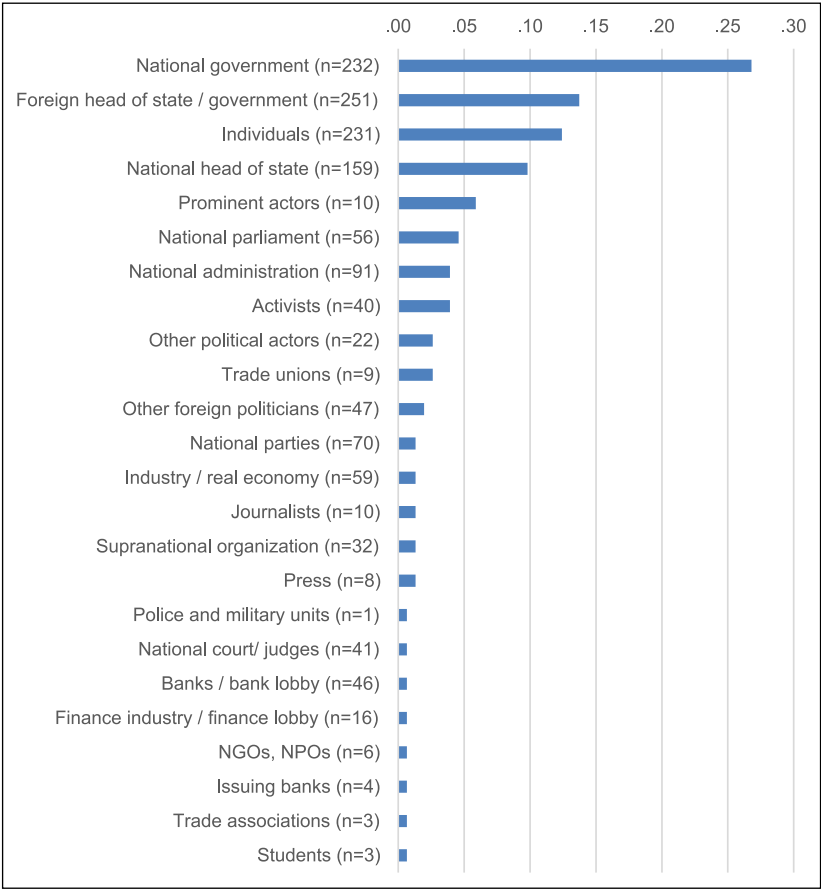


Figure 4. Share of main female actor per actor type.
N = 1660 news stories. Collective actors excluded from analysis. Figure only shows actor types occurring $\geq 5\%$.

However, our quantitative analysis cannot speak to the concrete differences in how female and male actors are presented. It is insufficient insofar as it does not capture the context in which women are portrayed. Future research, therefore, should continue to examine how female actors are framed in news media. However, since our goal was to examine and explain the extent of the gender gaps in news content from a comparative and cross-national perspective, we are confident that our analyses can serve as a valuable starting point for this endeavour.

A second limitation is that we were only able to capture a specific moment in time. Since online news media are in constant transition, longitudinal studies can help to trace developments that might shape future public spheres. At the time of our fieldwork, web-based news outlets did not vary significantly from traditional news media outlets. Future researchers might attempt to answer the question of whether these purely digital players

develop a distinct journalistic culture that is more inclusive of women and independent of the societal context in which they are embedded.

Finally, future studies should move beyond the representation of women in journalistic reporting. For instance, qualitative research should focus on the representation of women in online discussions that are occurring in the comments sections of news media stories as well as in social media. Some cases of sexism in the political sphere have triggered intense online debates, with hashtags trending for weeks on Twitter (e.g. *#everydaysexism* and *#aufschrei*). Analyses of these debates will help us to understand more fully how gender inequalities are manifested in different societies and how they are linked to national media portrayals, stereotypes, discrimination and trivializations of women.

In conclusion, one of our key findings was that a glass ceiling for women in terms of representation remains largely intact in the age of online news. Our study is the first to our knowledge to comprehensively examine the gender gap in online news from a comparative perspective using data from different Western countries and various types of media organizations. We identified influential factors at various levels of analysis and found that social values related to gender equality were the most predictive in explaining women's representation in political news. To improve the current situation, media organizations may reflect on their own practices and conclude that, in some instances, they want not only to follow but also to contribute to the acceleration of social change by altering people's perception of social reality.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study is part of a project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation [grant number 100018_140678].

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