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Public Journalism And The News Gender Agenda

Public journalism, with its citizen-centred approach, has been positioned as a way of changing journalists' sourcing patterns. It is also supposed to be a method by which traditionally under-represented groups, such as women and indigenous people, can achieve a voice in the media. Some academics suggest it might even provide a way of addressing traditional journalism's over-reliance on male sources. This paper examines a New Zealand newspaper's use of public journalism to give voice to the voiceless. It focuses on how female sources fared during the project when compared to their male counterparts.

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Traditional forms of journalism have been shown to rely heavily on elite sources, and in particular male sources (Zoch and Van Slyke Turk 1998, Brown et al 1987, McGrath 1993). Public journalism,¹ with its focus on representing the voices of ordinary people, may provide a way of redressing journalism's traditional gender sourcing imbalance. Preliminary research into the impact of public journalism on gender diversity in the news (Massey 1999) indicates that public journalism has, to date, had limited impact on the gender imbalance in journalistic sourcing practices. Indeed, Massey (1999) warns that public journalism is unlikely to improve the representation of women in the media because of entrenched gender biases in the sourcing practices of male reporters, even those working in civic journalism newsrooms.

The hypothesis of this paper, given all that has been written about the aims of public journalism, is that this new form of journalism should result in parity between the use of female and male sources. Put more simply, this paper proposes that public journalism will redress traditional journalism's gender sourcing imbalance. This article presents some preliminary results of a larger study involving a tri-continent² investigation of public journalism.

This paper takes the case study approach, focussing on one newspaper's use of public journalism and its journalists' sourcing

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practices. The recommendations resulting from this case study can be extrapolated to other newspapers practising or intending to use public journalism. The findings of this research are also relevant to the wider use of public journalism as a mechanism for representing ordinary people and as a method by which traditionally under-represented groups might be given a voice in the media.

This research examines the use of elite and non-elite (also known as dominant and non-dominant) sources. It does so because public journalism attempts to be more representative of ordinary members of the public (Rosen and Merritt 1994, Merritt 1996) and move away from journalism's traditional reliance on elite sources. Although, as Rosen (pers comm) explains, public journalism is not about using fewer elite sources. Rather, he suggests it is a way of increasing the representation of ordinary members of the public in the media. His point is supported by recent research (Massey 1999) which indicates that a majority of journalists who use public journalism approaches to reporting continue to rely mainly on elite sources as part of their routine news work, although the number of non-elite sources used by these journalists frequently increases.

As well as focussing on the representation of elite and non-elite sources this paper also seeks to determine whether public journalism changes the gender balance of non-elite sources. It does so by examining how one newspaper's use of public journalism has dealt with traditional journalism's under-use of, and therefore under-representation of, female sources. It takes these approaches because of Massey's (1999) assertion that: "One short coming of traditional journalism that has yet to be fully explored from a civic-journalism perspective is that of the under-representation of women in the news."

Therefore this paper begins from the point that traditional forms of journalism while typically under-representing non-elite sources, also use fewer female than male sources (Massey 1999, McGrath 1993, Shoemaker and Reese 1991, Brown et al 1987, Tuchman 1979). Thus, an examination of newspaper articles produced during a public journalism project should reveal the following:

1. Whether female sources achieve overall parity with male sources in a public journalism project;
2. Whether elite female sources are used in the same proportions as elite male sources during a public journalism project; and
3. If non-elite female sources are used in the same proportions as non-elite male sources during a public journalism project.

Before discussing the results of the case study chosen, it is useful to briefly revisit some of the research in the two key areas covered by this paper - public journalism and journalistic sourcing practices.

Public journalism arose in the United States of America in the early 1990s in response to increasing public dissatisfaction with the media and a growing sense of public disenfranchisement with political process, democracy and the level and quality of public debate (Rosen 1994, McGregor et al 1998, Glasser and Craft 1998). Public journalism has, to date, been positioned primarily as a method of reinvigorating public participation in democratic process (Merritt 1996, Rosen and Merritt 1994). An equally important task of this new form of journalism is to represent ordinary citizens and ensure their voices are heard in the media (Lambeth 1998). Of more importance, to this paper, civic journalism has been posited as an antidote to the under-representation of minorities, for example women and indigenous peoples (McGregor et al 1998, Massey 1998). There remains considerable disagreement about the success and future of public journalism despite the hundreds of public journalism projects that have been tried in the United States and more recently in New Zealand and Australia.

A key area of public journalism research, because of the nature of this form of journalism, involves journalists' sourcing practices. While a significant body of research now exists which examines traditional journalists' sourcing practices, there has been much less research into the sourcing practices of public or civic journalists. Early studies into traditional journalistic sourcing practices provided a more general examination and overview of such practices including Tuchman (1979), Gans (1979), Soloski (1989), Ericson et al (1987) and Brown et al (1987), while later studies McNair (1998), Massey (1998), Hallin, Manoff and Weddle (1993), McGrath (1993), Zoch and Van Slyke Turk (1998) focussed on more specific aspects of source use by journalists.

While Ericson et al (1989, 1991) documented the heavy reliance of journalists on elite sources, Zoch and Van Slyke Turk (1998) revealed the preference journalists have for elite male sources. Shoemaker and Reese (1991) found that despite the increasing number of female journalists, and large number of female journalism students, disparities in the representation of women in the media continue. They suggested that although women make up the majority numerically "When it comes to

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Sourcing Practices

gender treatment in news, most of the people shown are men” (1991:56). A parallel body of research indicates that it is important to study journalistic practices. Amongst those practices is that of sourcing, because it determines “not only what information is presented to the public, but what image of society is presented” (Soloski 1989:864). The significant impact of journalistic practices on information content and the way we imagine ourselves and others (Anderson 1984) ultimately provides meaning for the type of research presented in this paper. Because researchers have consistently found that in traditional journalism “male voices dominate the telling of the daily news” (Massey 1999) it is vital to determine the influence of new forms of journalism, such as public journalism, on the voices represented and the images portrayed in the media.

Applying some of the key findings of this body of research to a specific public journalism project provides a way of determining whether public journalism meets its two key challenges. They are: to improve the interaction of ordinary members of the public with democratic process and public debate; and to extend and improve the variety of voices which are heard in the media.

The Case Study

Although public journalism has been primarily located in the United States of America, it has made some, albeit small, inroads into other western democracies, specifically New Zealand and more recently Australia. Significant commentary, and a lesser but growing body of research has characterised its practice in the USA. Outside of public journalism’s home, research has been limited to studies by McGregor et al (1998) in New Zealand and in Australia research by Blood (1998), Griffin (1998), Lloyd and Hippocrates (1997) and McKnight (1997). However, Australian research into public journalism is slowly increasing, with one group of academics and practitioners planning an edited collection on public journalism in the Pacific. Australian’s first public journalism project involving Queensland metropolitan daily newspaper *The Courier-Mail* and Queensland University of Technology is under increasing scrutiny by the research community.

It is the combination of both public journalism and journalistic sourcing practices that provides the impetus for this research. This case study focuses on one of New Zealand’s daily metropolitan newspapers *The Press* located in Christchurch, on the South Island of New Zealand. Its public journalism project was undertaken over a five month period from June 1996 to October 1996 and revolved around New Zealand’s national

elections. At this time New Zealand introduced a new proportional system known as Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) and while the public journalism project dealt with this issue, its focus was on issues, rather than 'horse race' polling (*The Press*, 1 June 1996: Weekender 1). Traditional election coverage by *The Press* had centred on 'horse race' style coverage, where reporting revolved around the popularity of individual politicians and political parties. At the time of the project *The Press* had a circulation of about 98,000 and served the city of Christchurch as well as surrounding regional and rural areas. *The Press* commissioned Waikato University to undertake a poll of 416 residents of Christchurch and surrounding districts to identify the issues residents wanted to see discussed during the election campaign and associated media coverage (*The Press*, 1 June 1996:1). However the focus of the coverage was always portrayed through *The Press* as being on voters and what they wanted to discuss and see discussed during the campaign.

I use the case study approach to this research because as Real (1989:70) suggests this approach is useful in dealing with a problematic. In this case the problematic is traditional journalism's under-representation of female sources and the specific approach is to examine public journalism's position as a means of improving under-represented voices, such as those of women. Real's (1989) case study approach allows examination of an issue or problem on a small scale, with the findings being extrapolated, for example in this case recommendations from this case study may be applied to other newspapers practising public journalism. For the purposes of this paper, elite sources are defined as those individuals or organisations who are in positions of power in society, while non-elite sources are those individuals who, when cited in the news, are not linked to positions of power.

Elite sources were categorised as politicians and political candidates, as well as those individuals who spoke on behalf of government bodies, large private organisations, businesses, and lobby groups which had significant political power and funding. Non-elite sources included those sources who were not connected to any organisation or business, and spokespeople for smaller grassroots organisations. The status of sources was believed to determine their use and treatment.

Sources were categorised as elite if: they were introduced in a story through credentialling such as the provision of organisational affiliations, job titles or other speaking credentials; they were associated with a large institution, business or organisation for example political, government or business. They

Method

were categorised as non-elite if they were introduced as a member of the public, reader or citizen. Community and grassroots groups were considered to be, for the most part, non-elite organisations and therefore the sources who spoke on their behalf were treated as non-elite sources except where it was obvious that the organisation had significant societal power and resources.³

This study used a basic quantitative approach to gathering the data. This involved categorising and counting sources according to their status and their gender. All articles published in *The Press* as part of its first public journalism project were collected. Publication dates included the period between 1 June 1996 and 14 October 1996. These articles were identifiable because they were either accompanied by a specially designed logo which read Election '96 or they appeared in the newspaper under the folio Election '96.⁴ All sources appearing in these articles were categorised and counted according to status and gender. Sources were counted once for each article in which they appeared, for example a source might appear in the first part of a story and then again later in the article, but was counted only once. This assisted in determining the range of voices or sources which were used during the project, rather than the number of times a specific source was used. A source's voice was treated as being heard if that source spoke directly or indirectly in the article, or if they were paraphrased by a journalist.

Each source was identified as male or female on the basis of personal pronouns which appeared in associated with their names such as he or she, or through their given names. In some cases personal pronouns were not cited in a story and it was not possible to identify a source's gender from their given name. In these cases the source's gender was categorised as unidentifiable. Gender categories therefore included female, male, and unidentifiable. A computer data base which listed all stories and the various coding categories was developed. Data was entered into the computer data base and then cross checks were performed between printed data base material and newspaper clippings. Coding was performed by a sole researcher and intra-coding accuracy checks were performed on three separate occasions during a three month period. The intra-coding accuracy tests were performed with minimal variation between the results across the three separate checks.

The Data

For ease of access to, and comprehension of the data, the findings have been presented using the five major categories adopted for categorising and counting sources: elite, non-elite, male, female and unidentifiable.

Table 1: Use of Elite Sources

Month	Female	Male	Unidentifiable	
June	8	27	54	89
July	9	49	32	90
August	12	46	5	63
September	43	165	26	234
October	28	114	15	157
TOTAL	100	401	132	633

Elite Sources

In total 633 elite sources were used during *The Press's* public journalism project. Of those fewer than 16 per cent were identifiable as female⁵, 63 per cent were identified as male and gender was non-specific or unidentifiable for 21 per cent of the total elite sources used. Less than 9 per cent of the sources used in June were identified as female, while 30 per cent were categorised as male and 61 per cent were of an unidentifiable gender. Female sources fared little better in July, when only 10 per cent of the total sources used were identified as female, compared to 54 per cent who were categorised as males, while 36 per cent were non-gender specific.

In August female source use appeared to increase over previous months with 19 per cent of the sources used in that month categorised as female, while 73 per cent were identified as male and 8 per cent were unable to be identified as a specific gender. September saw relative stability in the number of female elite sources used with women being identifiable as 18 per cent of the total elite source use. The percentage of male sources identified remained almost the same as the previous month at 71 per cent, while 11 per cent were non gender specific.

A huge 73 per cent of the sources used in the last two weeks of the pre-election coverage were identifiable as male, with 18 per cent categorised as females and 9 per cent unidentifiable in gender.⁶ While the percentage of identifiable female elite sources used in *The Press's* public journalism project increased slightly each month until it levelled out in September, the overall percentage of identifiable female elite sources used compared to the total number of elite sources used was significantly low at less than 16 per cent, while those sources who were identifiable as male dominated this category of sourcing at 63 per cent. Gender was unidentifiable or non-specific in 21 per cent of the elite sources used in the coverage. For every elite female voice heard in the Election '96 public journalism project, there were three elite male

voices and one voice whose gender was not specified. These figures would have altered significantly if the gender of the sources categorised as unidentifiable had been able to be allocated to a specific gender category. However, even if all elite gender non-specific sources had been female, a significant disparity would have remained between the treatment of elite female and male sources.

Non-Elite Sources

Table 2: Use of non-elite sources

Month	Female	Male	Unidentif-iable	Total
June	82	95	84	261
July	44	64	31	139
August	60	65	16	141
September	74	89	27	190
October	34	38	2	74
TOTAL	294	351	160	805

A significant number of non-elite sources were used during *The Press's* public journalism project. Non-elite source use is significant in this case because their use during this project outweighed, at least numerically, that of elite sources. Sources identifiable as female made up just over one-third or 36 per cent ⁷ of the total non-elite sources used, compared to 44 per cent identifiable male non-elite source use, with the remaining 20 per cent of sources being of unidentifiable gender. The data presented here concerning the overall use of female and male sources may have been significantly affected if the gender of those sources categorised as unidentifiable had been signified within the newspaper articles.

During this public journalism project eight per cent more male non-elite sources were used than female non-elite sources, which compared favourably with the huge gap between the use of male elite sources and their female counterparts. Another important point to emerge from the data is the significant changes in the numbers of sources used from month to month. The large number of non-elite sources used at the beginning of the project could be due to an initial focus by reporters on this new style of reporting with its tendency to use citizens or members of the public as sources. The data reveals a sharp rise in the number of elite sources used in September and a smaller rise in the use of non-elite sources in the same month. One possible explanation for the

disparity between elite and non-elite source use in September was that as the election neared, the newspaper's coverage shifted to a more traditional political campaign, where elite voices dominate the telling of the news.⁸

A total of 1439 sources were used in *The Press's* public journalism project. A significant percentage of those sources, 56 per cent, were non-elite sources, while the remainder, 44 per cent were elite sources. This meant the use of non-elite sources statistically out weighed elite sources during this public journalism project, although the difference between the use of these two groups was relatively low at 12 per cent. Another issue, which is not taken up in this paper, but which requires further examination, is how both elite and non-elite sources were used within specific articles during this public journalism project. Such research might focus on whether one group of sources gained prominence over the other through the type of stories in which they were used and the placement of those articles both within the newspaper and within individual pages.

Just over one quarter, or 28 per cent, of the total sources used in the project were females. This compared poorly to the large percentage of male sources at 52 per cent, or more than half of the total sources used. Sources of an unidentifiable gender accounted for 20 per cent of the voices represented in the project. This meant that for every identifiable female voice represented in the coverage, there were almost two identifiable male voices present, and one voice of unidentifiable gender. Of note was the number of gender non-specific sources used. If the gender of these sources had been identifiable the outcome of this study may have altered.

At the start of this paper it was suggested that answers to the questions posed should be revealed through an examination of newspaper texts produced as part of a public journalism project. Those questions were:

1. Whether female sources achieve parity with male sources in a public journalism project;
2. Whether elite female sources are used in the same proportions as elite male sources during a public journalism project; and
3. If non-elite female sources are used in the same proportions as non-elite male sources during a public journalism project.

While the public journalism project run by *The Press* appears

Comparisons - Overall Treatment Of Sources

Conclusion

to have had a significant impact on source diversity, giving non-elite sources parity with elite sources at least on a numerical basis, women remained underrepresented.

However, the project appears to have resulted in a wide range of source use, which is often lacking in traditional journalism. This study also highlights the success of *The Press's* public journalism project in involving the public in public debate and democratic process. Although *The Press* did not state that it was setting out to improve the representation of women in its election coverage, it did suggest that: "Our aim is to give readers, the voters, more of a voice in the election process (1 June 1996: Weekend 1)". Therefore, it could have been expected that voices of both genders would be heard equally during the coverage. Despite the under-representation of women during the project, *The Press's* first attempt at public journalism should be seen as a success because of its inclusion of a large number of non-elite voices. As well, it improved the parity of female and male voices amongst non-elite sources.

Although it could have been expected that this public journalism project would raise female source use amongst both elite and non-elite sources to similar levels as their male counterparts, the results are not surprising given the entrenched gender bias in journalistic sourcing practices (Massey, 1999). Future public journalism projects might take a number of steps to address this gender sourcing bias including a more proactive recruitment and use of female sources and involvement of more female reporters in public journalism projects, although as Massey (1999) explains this later tactic does not always ensure that more female sources will be used. A cultural shift is required amongst journalists where sourcing practices are concerned.

For journalists using public journalism approaches this means ensuring traditional journalistic attitudes about the gender of sources are recognised and challenged, rather than being transferred in tact to the practice of public journalism. In combination with a focus on public journalism's mantra of representing more ordinary people, tactics such these might assist in redressing such gender imbalances as those identified by this study.

Newsrooms using more traditional journalistic approaches might also learn from the experiences of public journalism in this respect. Because public journalism, as Rosen (pers comm) suggests, is not about the number of elite and non-elite sources used, but rather the way they are used, future research on public journalism projects might compare both the treatment and prominence of non-elite sources during the coverage associated with these projects and afterwards. In those newsrooms where

public journalism has moved out of the project stage and into daily reporting, research could focus on the treatment of sources before, during and after public journalism's entry into the newsroom. In the area of gender, research might focus on the importance the voices of women are accorded during such projects, to discover whether their voices are raised in prominence.⁹ ■

NOTES

- 1 Also referred to by many practitioners and researchers as civic journalism.
- 2 The tri-continent study involves New Zealand, Australia and the United States of America.
- 3 There is room for further work on the treatment of elite and non-elite sources within individual stories and further statistical analysis of this data could be undertaken.
- 4 The majority of articles were gathered from clipping files of The Press, while some were collected through the online archives of The Press. Articles contained in the online archives were identifiable as part of the public journalism project by the phrase 'Election '96' which was attached to all relevant articles.
- 5 All percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole figure, except where indicated.
- 6 Sources of non-specific or unidentifiable gender were categorised as 'unidentifiable'. These included sources cited in stories where personal pronouns were not provided for them and those whose first names were gender neutral.
- 7 This figure was rounded down to the nearest whole percentage to ensure the totals equalled 100 per cent.
- 8 It is important to note here that New Zealand's election was held half way through October and The Press's public journalism project finished on the day of the election.
- 9 Thanks to The Press's Election '96 reporting team, especially Dave Wilson for assisting with the provision of information for this project. Thanks also to Dr Michael Meadows for his assistance. Part of this research was made possible by a Central Queensland University Seed Grant. Thanks to Jeff Young for proof reading assistance. Special thanks to the anonymous reviewers for their comments which have considerably strengthened this paper.

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