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Ross, Karen

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## Tricky Relations

### Exploring the Intersections of Gender, Politics and News\*

Karen Ross

In a modern democracy such as that fondly imagined to exist in the so-called civilized 'West' in the twenty-first century, most journalists would suggest that they write and broadcast in the public interest, that they serve an important function in holding government accountable and reporting on the actions of those who we elect to serve in our name. But as news media move ever further and faster towards mere infotainment, so their ability or even interest in reporting politics in any meaningful way goes at equal velocity in the opposite direction. And whilst the rhetoric of impartiality, which the news media have always insisted lies at the heart of their practice, has never been as pristine as journalists have claimed, the complicated relationship between journalists and politicians have become increasingly intertwined. Obviously, for both sets of professional actors, there is a necessary interdependence, since journalists need something to write about and politicians need to get their messages across to the public. "Sources, particularly those in government, are the lifeblood of news." (Perloff 1998, 223) The media, and television in particular, ventilate the real politics, with Presidents and Prime Ministers announcing important policy decisions not in Senate or the House of Commons but in the TV studio, live to camera (Wheeler 1997; Negrine 1998) and directly to us in our homes. Because of the media's belief that the public have an alarmingly short attention span, they tend to apply sound bite theory to both political interviews but also what they choose to cover of the events in parliament. This results in a rather distorted view of the political process, at least from the general public's view. Politicians themselves are very well aware of the news media's need to make news exciting, as the Australian Labor politician, Jenny Macklin, makes clear.

"The problem with the electronic media is, you know, it's only 10 seconds which is of course, going to come out of Question Time, because it's the only color and movement of the day. The rest is the 'normal' process of making laws, committees and there are a lot of positive things that go on but you wouldn't put it on the telly at night because it's as boring as anything." (Jenny Macklin, Labor, Australia)<sup>1</sup>

Part of the consequence of sound bite politics, practiced both by journalists and politicians, is that it is increasingly difficult for less prominent parliamentarians to secure a media profile. For women politicians who rarely occupy very senior positions or if they do, are often relegated to the less glamorous policy portfolios such as health and education, it is particularly difficult to get media attention. Unfortunately, when they are successful in making the news, it is often for things other than their political actions or manifestos.

### Gender/Agenda

The perpetuation of a hegemonic worldview of male dominance is regularly witnessed in both fictional and factual programming strands and the ways in which women (particularly but also other disadvantaged groups) are represented in the media send important messages to the public about women's place, women's role and women's lives. If it has become a commonplace to argue that news media regularly and routinely perform an affirmatory function in reinforcing dominant norms and values to "the public", it still bears repeating. The sadness and frustration is that after more than twenty-five years of documenting the media's representation of women (see for example Tuchman et al. 1978; Root, 1986; Ross/Sreberny-Mohammadi 1997; Wykes 1998), so little has changed. Importantly, part of the endurance of gender stereotypes in news discourse can be related directly to the culture of newsrooms themselves, microcosmic environments which constitute sites of considerable contestation about gender and power (Steiner 1998; Gallagher 2001; de Bruin/Ross 2004). While women have penetrated media organizations to a significant degree over the past two or three decades, they have rarely managed to secure the editorship of major dailies or broadcast channels.

When asked, women politicians themselves are clear that a specifically gendered news discourse does exist when journalists report on the political activities of women (Ross 2002). Aspects of their sex, e.g. hairstyle, clothes, and domestic arrangements, are routinely incorporated into what should be straightforward stories on policy but they are routinely framed as women first and then, maybe, as politicians. When 101 Labour women were elected to the British Parliament in 1997, the front page headlines figured them as "Blair's Babes". Although some of those women have argued in retrospect, that doing the "Blair picture" was perhaps unwise, they were unprepared for the media response: their considerable victory was trivialized instantly not just by that possessive apostrophe, but through their sexualized figuring as "babes".

The reality is that women have been elected to the "top" political job, have been presidents and prime ministers, but still their abilities to lead a country are questioned, still the media ask, can she really do it? Two good contemporary examples of this phenomenon are the election of Angela Merkel in Germany in 2005 (cf. *Scholz* in this issue) and the promotion of Margaret Beckett in the UK to Foreign Minister in 2006, two resounding "firsts" for women. In each case, the woman in question had many years of active political office but still the media questioned their competence and suitability for the job:

"....another problem for the campaign, however, was Merkel herself. Despite the orange posters and the theme song Angie from the Rolling Stones, there was not much rock-'n-roll in the Merkel camp. Its flag-bearer was mocked as a frumpish former academic unable to connect with ordinary people ..." (Matthew Campbell Templin, *Sunday Times*, 17 September 2005).

“The appointment of Mrs Beckett displays another variety of his (Tony Blair) contempt for the significance of high office. With a Minister for Europe now attending Cabinet... However, following her record of success in government – the most recent evidence of which has been her attempt to destroy agriculture by fouling up the system of payments to farmers – she is lucky to be left in charge of so much as a sweet shop.” (Simon Heffer, *Daily Telegraph*, 6 May 2006)

### Women talk back

The remainder of this article discusses the results of an extended research study that includes sets of first-hand interviews with women from the British (1995, 2000, 2006), Australian (1998) and South African (1999) parliaments and the Northern Ireland Assembly (2002, 2006). I aim to explore the dissonances between the rhetoric of news media that purport an impartial objectivity when reporting politics, and the experiences of women parliamentarians themselves in their dealings with and experiences of news workers. The findings from this study are set out below as a set of thematic concerns highlighting the similarities in women’s experiences across several countries. I suggest that the media’s reaction and response to women who dare to cross the gender line and do “men’s work” are punished by a male-dominated media whose possess a set of shared routines (which masquerade as “regular” journalism, but) that transcend simple geography but instead operate within a Western model of patriarchy as practiced in the newsroom. Women parliamentarians themselves argue that the media often appear to be operating double standards when considering women politicians, almost as if they expect “better” standards of behaviour, higher moral values, more honesty, integrity, loyalty. What seems to happen is that women are often set up as paragons and are then “unmasked”, almost as quickly, as being less than perfect, but they never claimed such a perfection – the media made it up. Ironically, although the media mostly ignore backbenchers, the very novelty of women parliamentarians provides a reason to include them.

“Women politicians, particularly at cabinet level, tend to be knocked, judged, assessed, by a criteria that is incredibly harsh, relative to their male counterparts ... it’s not that the media wouldn’t want to focus on men when mistakes are made but it is more relentless and with women, it’s personalized in a way that it isn’t with men.” (Janet Love, ANC, South Africa)

If women transgress the normative gender expectations that society (and the media) have of them, then sadly they must expect to overly scrutinize. When Carmen Lawrence (Labor) became Australia’s first State Premier (of Western Australia), she experienced what she describes as the “sore-thumb” phenomenon: “I just stuck out and so your actions, for good or ill are often exaggerated and they are seen as more significant than they really are, which means that you can fly higher but you can also fall lower.”

### Our bodies ourselves

News stories about powerful women are just as likely to use frames of analysis which privilege biology rather than politics. In my previous work with women politicians (see Ross/Sreberny-Mohammadi 1997; Ross 2002), most of them believe that their outward *appearance* is the focus of both more column inches and airtime than anything they might *say*. This focus is much more likely to be used on women than their male colleagues. Women mentioned repeatedly the ways in which the media always include the age of women politicians, what they look like, their domestic and family circumstances, their fashion sense and so on. Fiona Mactaggart (Westminster, 2000) believes that the media's fascination with sartorial style is partly because there is a view that how women dress is a much more important indicator of who they are and what they stand for, than is the case for men. The emphasis on style is made to undermine women; it is *not* an unconscious process. In an interesting poacher-turned-gatekeeper analysis, the Women in Journalism<sup>2</sup> undertook a study of newspaper photographs which revealed that although it is clear that "men outnumber women in public life ... the analysis shows that the way newspapers use images of women is at best old-fashioned and at worst complacent." (Women in Journalism 1999, 12).

"Women are never the right age. We're too young, we're too old. We're too thin, we're too fat. We wear too much make-up, we don't wear enough. We're too flashy in our dress, we don't take enough care. There isn't a thing we can do that's right." (Dawn Primarolo, Labour, UK)

The ways in which the media frame women politicians, how and where they position them for photographs has an impact on the implicit messages conveyed by such strategies. Cartoons are also used to undermine women's effectiveness. When Cheryl Kernot crossed the floor of the Australian Parliament in 1997, giving up her leadership of the Australian Democrats to become a Labor candidate, the media responded, in picture-form, with cartoons of her in bed with Kim Beasley (the then Labor Party Leader). Whilst men are also the subject of cartoonist's humour, women are much more likely to feature in cartoons which emphasize aspects of the sex. A woman politician is always described as a *woman* politician in the media, her sex is always on display, always the primary descriptor. She is defined by what she is *not*, that is, she is not a "typical" politician who in principle, bears no gendered descriptor but who is clearly marked as male (Ross/Sreberny 2000).

If elections are won or lost in the public gaze of the media, as the media itself has often claimed, then it is easy to argue that the privileging of form over function, presentation over policy, means that *all* politicians are subject to the tyranny of telegeneity and must surrender to inappropriate sartorial scrutiny, not just the women. While this is, in principle, true, the objectification of male politicians is noticeable because of its infrequency. With women politicians on the other hand, it is almost the rule. Pippa Norris (1997) argues that a number of frames exist which position emergent women leaders

as breaking the mould, as outsiders winning against the odds, and as agents of change. These are all very “positive” frames at a superficial level but the first two at least are unsustainable over the lifetime of a woman leader’s career, once she is an established rather than a “new” leader. The third frame is equally problematic since it could, by its emphasis on change (challenging the barren desert of “politics as usual”) set women up to fail as they prove unable to achieve the unrealistically high expectations. Beyond the media obsession with the physicality of women politicians, the gendered assumptions about politicians are manifest in the discourses used. The differential use of language signals the media’s opprobrium against women who transgress the orthodox boundaries of what “real” women are and what “real” women do. What they don’t do, apparently, is become politicians.

“If a woman goes out at 6 o’clock in the morning to clean offices to keep her family together, to raise her children, she will be presented as a heroine. If she wants to run that office she will be presented as an unnatural woman and even worse, as an unnatural mother.” (Glenda Jackson, Labour, UK)

### **The democratic deficit – where are the women?**

The media’s largely stereotypical portrayal of the relationship between women and politics is symptomatic of this wider news perspective which rarely strays outside the conventional frame of male-political-public and female-personal-private. Notwithstanding the generalized tendency of the news media to use their own interpretative lens through which to analyze politicians *per se*, male (rational) politicians receive coverage on what they say and what they believe while women (emotional) politicians receive coverage on what they wear and what they feel, in the gender-dependent articulation of style vs. substance politics (cs. Kahn/Goldenberg 1997; Whittaker 1999). Part of the answer to the “why is it a problem for democracy?” question is that many women (and men) who could make an important contribution to the democratic project are put off pursuing a career in politics because of how they think the political process works and this perception is largely grounded in the media’s coverage of politics and politicians. Women parliamentarians are particularly poorly treated by the news media and this harms democracy itself. Jeannie Ferris (Liberal, Australia) worked as a journalist for many years before entering politics and she laments the direction which reporting has taken with regard to women:

“If you look at what has happened to some of the high profile women in the last five years, the media has been very very tough on them. I think that many professional women who see that think, ‘why should our families have to endure that scrutiny?’ I don’t find it hard to believe that women are reluctant to come forward for that reason. It must be difficult for younger women with children in primary or high school where they are vulnerable to peer contact.”

The kinds of stories, perspectives and interests we see and read in the media are irresistibly bound up in the socio-economic relations existing in news organizations themselves, as sites of news production. The political economy of the newsroom provides a strongly gendered context in which the traditional power plays of patriarchal relations – men on top and women underneath – are played out in abidingly conventional, for which read, sex-stereotyped, ways (van Zoonen 2002; Riordan 2002). It seems clear that the ways in which women are represented in the media are inextricably linked with who produces those media outputs which in turn is linked with who owns those means of production.

### **Gender, media and affect**

If the public is to be able to discriminate between different candidates and their policies and thus make an informed choice about who they want to lead and govern them, then they must “acquire sufficient information about matters under public discussion to avoid being easily duped about the facts by self-interested candidate misinformation or distortion.” (Buchanan 1991, 22) What Bruce Buchanan is implying here, although not quite saying, is that the political “default” position is one where the category “politician” (i.e. that they’re all pretty much the same) is more rather than less likely to manipulate the voter/public, so the latter needs to be awake to evidence of wilful intent to deceive. The agenda-setting power of the mass media has been well documented over the past few decades (Iyengar 1987; Entman 1989; Ansolabehere et al. 1991) to a point where it is now recognized that the media’s impact is less about actively changing values and beliefs than about determining what issues are important, and the extent to which media scholars cede power to media organizations has also shifted considerably.

That agenda-setting push is important to understand in general terms, but the everyday power play which is a routine part of the politico-media dance is thrown into even sharper relief when the stakes are raised as they are in dynamic situations such as elections. Recent research studies exploring more precisely the contours of that relation and the media’s potential and actual role in influencing voting behaviour have identified a complex set of effects with several variables such as gender, party, education and ethnicity all playing a part (LeDuc 1990; Kahn/Goldenberg 1991; West 1991). What is a little less clear cut, though, is the specific identification of cause and effect relations between exposure to political campaigning and actual voting decision, although most studies suggest that the media is more likely to reinforce existing attitudes than change them and therefore has a negligible real effect on influencing final outcomes.

Successive studies of the media’s portrayal of women politicians and political candidates are unequivocal in their findings that the gender of politicians is an important factor in the differential coverage that women and men politicians receive at the hands

of the media and that this differentiated coverage may have important effects on how candidates are evaluated by the electorate. Caroline Flint, one of the so-called “Blair’s Babes” who was elected along with 100 other Labour women MPs in the 1997 British elections, is exasperated with a media discourse which is only interested in her views on facilities in the House of Commons.

“(I am) ready to throttle the next journalist who asks me about toilets and crèches in the House of Commons...there are enough toilets for women MPs...and as for the crèche – there are very few women with children under five. They (the media) should focus on the diversity of women in Parliament. We are a mixed bunch and hopefully in many different ways represent the variety of women in Britain.” (Flint cited in McDougall 1998, 79)

The ways in which women candidates and parliamentarians are covered by news media find obvious parallels with the way in which women and women’s issues more generally are marginalised as legitimate topics of media discourse: whilst a particularly “gendered” item might make the women’s page in daily newspapers, it will rarely feature as a news item in the mainstream sections (Kahn/Goldenberg 1997). The media’s persistent domestication of women parliamentarians and the power of media workers to frame their female subjects as constantly in thrall to their bodily functions send out clear messages to the public that this is indeed what preoccupies our women politicians. In Kahn’s (1994) comparative study of American Senate candidates during the 1982 and 1986 elections, she found that women generally received less media attention than men and that this could adversely affect their chances because less information about candidates could mean that intending voters had little to inform them about the specific policy positions of women candidates and therefore voter recognition of women candidates is weak. Kahn also found that the substance of media coverage was qualitatively different, for example, more time was devoted to the “horse race” element of women candidates than their policy positions and more time was spent discussing negative “horse race” elements than was the case with male candidates.

In an interesting study comparing media coverage of candidates from Northern Ireland standing for the 1997 British general election and the local elections in Northern Ireland (which were held simultaneously), Whittaker (1999) suggests that women candidates for both elections were significantly and consistently under-reported across the 22 newspapers which were monitored for her study, that women were virtually absent from leader comments, and that women candidates themselves were overwhelmingly dissatisfied with their treatment by the media. The image and language of “media-ted” politics supports the status quo (male as norm) and regards women politicians as novelties, viewing strategies which encourage even more of them into elected office with considerable hostility.

As all the old certainties about women’s roles and men’s roles are increasingly brought into question, the privileged position of white, middle-class men is being challenged. But strangely, there appears to be a marked antipathy amongst many

women parliamentarians to the implied suggestion that their sex might yet cause their political undoing, even as women accept that the media *do* operate a gendered reporting practice which *can* undermine their credibility as serious politicians. In other words, no publicity is bad publicity although some of the more astute politicians can easily see the dangers in adverse publicity, particularly that which undermines the authority of women's political voice. A case in point is the departure of the highly successful Cabinet Minister, Mo Mowlam, from politics in 2001, after which she claimed that a vicious whispering campaign, begun by own colleagues and slyly articulated by an eager media, made it impossible for her to continue to do her job effectively, hence her decision to leave politics. In January 2000, for example, an article appeared in the British *Independent on Sunday* newspaper which stated that senior government sources thought Mowlam did not have the "intellectual rigour" to do her job.<sup>3</sup>

### Conclusion

Even taking the most generous view of the media's role in the articulation of a normative social world order which privileges men and male concerns over those of women – i.e. as unwitting agent of control – it is nonetheless irresistible to contend that there must be *some* element of complicity, some sense of collusion with the circulation of words and pictures which routinize what it is to be female and male in contemporary society. And it is precisely the "packaging" of politics (following Franklin 1997) and in this current context, the "packaging" of women politicians which we need to read more carefully. If news is a commodity and we are all consumers, then how women politicians are "sold" to us in qualitative terms is as important as how often they appear in the news: volume matters but context matters more. With a greater critical mass of women in many Western Parliaments as we move through the early years of the new millennium, perhaps the best sign of success for women politicians will be when the media criticize them for their politics rather than their personalities. Some women *are* making a difference – but the media seem disinterested in reporting their achievements.

### Notes

- \* An earlier version of this article was published as "Women Framed: The Gendered Turn in Mediated Politics", in Carolyn Byerly/Karen Ross (eds.), 2004: *Women and Media: International Perspectives*, and I am grateful to Blackwell for permission to reprint parts of the original chapter.
- 1 From here on, all the quotations from women parliamentarians are taken from the four sets of interviews I undertook with women in the Westminster (UK), Cape Town (South Africa) and Canberra (Australia) Parliaments and the Northern Ireland Assembly during the years 1995-2002. After each parliamentarian's name, I include her party affiliation and the national parliament or assembly in which she sits or, in the case of some women, where she sat before resigning or being defeated in an election subsequent to being interviewed.

- 2 *Women in Journalism* is a British network group comprising women journalists from all UK media which provides support for members and undertakes research on their own profession's practice, particularly focusing on issues of gender.
- 3 Mo Mowlam in *Mo Mowlam: Inside New Labour* (dir: Nick Kurwin, Channel 4 Television, 6 May 2002).

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