



## Television news and gender: women in the television news programmes

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The communications media, and particularly television as the one with the widest impact, have become a central institution in the present configuration of the social system, since they are the only mechanism which can mediate between the public who need to find out about the social environment and an increasingly complex social reality. The television news programmes have become the most powerful agent in that process of representing social reality and a strategic meeting point between the public and the social representation of reality. In that process of social mediation, the genders are not equally represented in audiovisual information discourse. We present the most important results of a research project whose fundamental goal is to observe and describe the presence of men and women in the discourse of the peak time television news broadcasts: the evening news bulletins.

Do the news presentation formats on television reproduce social reality in all its manifestations and distortions or do they construct it according to their own selection and processing practices? That question is too complex to be answered in this article. However, we want to show how the Spanish television news programmes have represented one of the most basic dimensions of social reality: gender. It is clear that the ratio of men to women in the world today is not reflected by their relative social importance. We cannot provide an accurate, objective description of that social importance in Spain today, but we can produce a complete description of the presence of men and women in the main "window on the world" for most people: the television news.

Television and the television news have been the object of an intense, ongoing debate aimed at investigating their social influence and the scope of their impact on politics, the representation of current affairs and the shaping of public opinion and culture today. The debate has focused primarily on the effects of television on society and studies of how it is received by television audiences. To understand the social function of television, we must bear in mind two essential factors in the world of communications today: people use television according to their needs and expectations (motivations, aims, attitudes), but as users they are subject to the limitations of what is on offer (its models and formats). In other words, the origin of the social uses of television, like the other media, is to be found in the social system, but their limits are set in the communications system.

That dialogical relation between needs and supply gives rise to one of the most characteristic functions of mass communication, which is to be found at the very root of what people do with television: *mediation*. By mediation we mean the complementary function fulfilled by the media through which the audience have access to social knowledge and cultural behaviour which they could not obtain through direct experience, but which they must have in order to carry out most everyday activities. To exercise their condition as such, the citizens of today do not have free access to the political institutions or the mechanisms for shaping majority opinion; that is why they have to use the communications media to be in constant touch with the evolution of political discourse and find the foundations for an active civic attitude.

From the outset, the feminist movement has insisted on the central importance of the mass media as agents of production both of representations and the defining practices of gender. There is no doubt that television has been a central object of analysis along those lines. Throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s, there has been research into the improvement of the position of women in different spheres of mass

communication. In the 90s, there have been signs which, to varying degrees, indicate a better representation of women in non-fiction programmes and in some of the forms of fiction and entertainment on television. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go to reach an equitable media treatment of the genders.

Fortunately, there is no direct relation between media portrayals and public perceptions of gender roles (1). That limitation must always be present in any prediction to be drawn solely from television contents. That means that the methodologies used in discoveries of the effects of television on the stereotyping of genders must be qualified and set in a framework of a series of other inducing contextual factors.

To carry out the study, two types of presence in the news have been differentiated. First we have observed the presence of genders in the information format: in the presentation of the news and the hierarchy of the news-readers on the screen. Second, we have described the presence of the two genders in the news items, which give rise to a particular social representation of feminine and masculine in how social reality is represented through the events in the news. The sample analysed was taken over two weeks selected at random, with a study of the news broadcasts with the largest audiences, from Monday to Friday to guarantee the homogeneity of formats, which are those of prime time on weekdays. The sample collected the news broadcasts over the periods 25/ 29 May and 1 / 5 June 1998. Two public channels (TVC-TV 3 and TVE 1) and two private ones (Antena 3 and Tele 5) were selected to provide the sample. Altogether we have analysed a total of 27 hours and 35 minutes.

**Names have been taken as a first indicator which shows us the presence of particular people in the news who have been the focus of the item. The identification of names enables us to make an initial approach, nominal but still significant, to the presence of the male and female world in the television news.**

The name is a constant element in the television news as a reference to and recognition of the people who are at the centre of current events. On the public channels that presence is exhaustive (765 names on TVE 1 and 749 on TV 3), whilst on the private channels we find a lower number (634 on Tele 5 and 516 on Antena 3). In the case of Antena 3, we should point out that the information discourse is extremely institutional, whilst making reference to the names of people we might describe as explicitly public or likely to be easily recognised by the audience.

On the private news programmes, however, there is an increase in the presence of what is usually known as "the man in the street", the category we have labelled *anonymous member of the public who expresses her/himself on screen (testimony, opinion)* and which refers to brief remarks by members of the public who are called on to bear witness or express an opinion about an event, but without any mention of their name or surname. On the public channels there are fewer people of that kind. That observation is important, since the main presence of female social actors is precisely in the category *anonymous member of the public*.

The name enables us to observe that female and male presence in news discourse is overwhelmingly in favour of men, who generally account for 86-90%, whilst women's names account for 10-15%. Far from being a merely nominal lack, that names indicator proves the invisibility of women in the representation of current affairs. Thanks to that we can conclude that the leading figures exist when they are mentioned and, as far as current affairs discourse is concerned, men occupy pride of place.

**Table 1. Occurrence of names on the television news (expressed as a %)**

	Total names	Male names	Female names
TVE 1	765	88.23%	11.76%

TV 3	749	86.24%	13.75%
Antena 3	516	88.56%	11.43%
Tele 5	634	85.8%	14.19%

That polarisation is strictly maintained in the news bulletins. More specifically, the presence of men is more dominant in the public news programmes than the ones on the private channels. In the news summaries on the two public channels we can observe a 91% male presence, against 77.7% on Tele 5 and 83% on Antena 3, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Distribution of male and female names on the news summary**

TVE 1			TV 3			Antena 3			Tele 5		
total	M %	F %	total	M %	F %	total	M %	F %	total	M %	F %
100	91	9	108	91	8.33	59	83	17	36	77.77	22.2

The presence of women only becomes at all equivalent to that of men in the group of anonymous members of the public; in other words, those who make statements without being explicitly identified. Women are present in large numbers as anonymous witnesses to current events or as social actors expressing improvised opinions or statements given in a minimum time (which can be described as seconds on screen). In this case women are almost as important as men, although the percentage is always smaller, except in the case of Tele 5. We must also bear in mind that in the news broadcasts on the two private channels we observe a larger number of people in that category, and within that a larger number of women. One last significant element in the analysis of names: there are a large number of choral expressions of opinion or testimony by anonymous members of the public (that expression has been identified with the value *neutral*) on TV 3, where they represent a higher percentage than either gender, whilst on the other channels they are extremely few and far between.

**Table 3. Anonymous members of the public who express themselves on screen (testimony, opinion) on the television news (expressed in the number of social actors and as a %) (\*)**

	M TVE1	F TVE1	N TVE1	M TV3	F TV3	N TV3	M A3	F A3	N A3	M T5	F T5	N T5
1	15	9	2	14	10	16	33	25	2	39	41	1
2	57.2	34.6	7.6	35	25	40	55	41.6	0.03	48.1	50.6	1.2

(\*) The value *neutral* (N) refers to the choral presence of various anonymous members of the public who are not distinguished as they express themselves on screen

1. Total number in the category of *anonymous members of the public who express themselves on screen (testimony, opinion)*

2. Calculation of the percentage

**The journalists on screen are very equally divided, and on certain news programmes there is even a**

## significant majority of women in the presentation of news and the hierarchy within the format of the television news programme.

The two public channels show a larger proportion of women journalists on their news programmes than the two private ones, where the anchors are men. However, paradoxically the largest proportion of women in the news units is, broadly, from more to fewer, on Tele 5, Antena 3, TV 3 and TVE 1. Which proves that a larger number of women in the production, preparation and presentation of the news is not necessarily an unequivocal sign—it may even be the reverse— of a more equal representation of the male and female genders.

To carry out the analysis we have applied five categories: anchor, reporter, correspondent, anchor for a specific section and voice-over.

The diversity and variety of male and female presences is what most differentiates the television news programmes. Unlike the other components evaluated, we now observe great differences from one channel to another.

In the case of the anchors (the professionals who present the news programme and direct its development to the point of becoming its identifying image), the differences between channels are striking. On TVE 1 we observe exclusively female direction and anchoring through the figure of a presenter who dominates the whole news programme. That exclusively female presence is complemented by the fact that the specific section anchor (sport) is also a female journalist (except for the daily San Isidro bullfighting chronicle which is done by a male journalist; that information is not given on the other programmes). That dominant presence was only modified by a complementary male journalist who acted as anchor, though always in the role of back-up, in Paris on the final days of training by the Spanish football team, with interviews with leading figures in the world of sport. The opposite case is to be seen on the private channels, with absolute dominance of anchoring by two male journalists, with no exceptions.

TV 3 is a third case where the news is presented by a male journalist (who acts as anchor at the beginning and corresponds to the director of the news programme) and a female journalist. In this case we find virtual equality between the two genders.

As far as the other categories are concerned, we may draw the conclusion that TVE 1 has the highest number of women, with total domination in the specific section and the voice-over. However, the role of correspondent is male and the reporting also shows a higher rate of male presence.

**Table 4. The speakers on television news (by news units: global total, total male, total female)**

	<i>Total TVE1</i>	<i>Total M TVE1</i>	<i>Total F TVE1</i>	<i>Total TV3</i>	<i>Total M TV3</i>	<i>Total F TV3</i>	<i>Total A3</i>	<i>Total M A3</i>	<i>Total F A3</i>	<i>Total T5</i>	<i>Total M T5</i>	<i>Total F T5</i>
<b>1</b>	235	4	231	223	112	111	238	238	-	207	207	-
<b>2</b>	21	13	8	26	15	11	35	29	6	3	2	1
<b>3</b>	23	20	3	19	16	3	27	16	11	3	2	1
<b>4</b>	75	13	62	57	21	36	9	1	8	59	53	6
<b>5</b>	95	27	68	107	62	45	91	57	34	45	21	24

### 1. Anchor

2. Reporter
3. Correspondent
4. Anchor for a special section
5. Voice-over

**The leading figures in news units: the gender ratio in the current affairs section of the television news shows the highly unequal proportion of male to female appearances. It must be added that we can observe a correlation of female presence in social spheres and news sections which are usually considered secondary or minor.**

One initial assertion, inevitably general and imprecise, is that the television news does not talk a great deal about female social actors and that women play a very small part in most of the forty-nine categories that have been used in our analysis. There are even fewer among the social actors who appear most frequently in the news, except for the anonymous members of the public on screen, whom we have commented on in the first section dealing with the name indicator.

However, that assertion must be complemented by a second: although the male gender is fairly dominant, we must bear in mind that the group of male social actors corresponds to a very small segment of society and is concentrated in social institutions, while ignoring non-institutional social individuals or those who are to be situated in everyday life. In other words, the male sphere is dominant but refers to a minority institutional segment.

Most of the journalistic discourse is concentrated in ten social actors whom we may claim to be the centre of current events: 1. Sportsmen/women, 2. Anonymous members of the public, 3. Executive power, 4. Head of government, 5. Representative or leader of a political party, 6. Head of state, 7. Judiciary, 8. Terrorists, 9. Police, and 10. Business and finance. Those ten actors are at the centre of the news and, in different ways but within a large degree of homogeneity, constitute the highest expression of social reality as represented in the television news. One last observation: in this group of social actors, we see how sport, executive power and the judiciary, complemented by representatives or leaders of political parties, make up the information nucleus of journalistic news discourse. Their distribution and total presence is illustrated in Table 5.

***Table 5. The top ten social actors in news units***

	<i>TVE 1</i>	<i>TV 3</i>	<i>Antena 3</i>	<i>Tele 5</i>
<b>Total social actors</b>	418	419	425	496
<b>Total 10 social actors</b>	303	256	289	349
<b>% presence of 10 social actors</b>	72.48	63.24	68	70

**What are the numbers of women and men in the television news studied?**

**1. Sportsmen/women, members and representatives of teams and national or international leagues:** Total domination by men with a maximum of 93.5% on Tele 5 and a minimum of 87.6% jointly on TVE 1 and TV 3.

**2. Anonymous members of the public expressing themselves on screen (testimony, opinion):** among this type of social actor we find a larger presence of women as (anonymous) leading figures of the news.



Women are present in large numbers as anonymous witnesses to current events or as social actors expressing improvised opinions or making short statements. We should point out the notable use of this category by the private channels and especially the presence of women there.

**3. Executive power:** we also find an absolute predominance of men representing the majority actions of members of the executive on the news, a total of about 90%.

**4. Head of government:** on TVE 1, TV 3 and Antena 3 there are no women in this category at all. In the case of Tele 5, the figure is 6.6% as a result of the international news featuring foreign heads of government.

**5. Representative or leader of a political party:** also on TVE 1, TV 3 and Antena 3 there are no women at all. The only exception is on Tele 5 with 2.7% corresponding to 1 single female presence as opposed to 26 male ones.

**6. Head of state:** in this sector we find a large female presence given the importance of the Queen of Spain on the first official visit of the King and Queen to Greece, the Queen's country of origin, and with the royal family in exile after the proclamation of the Greek Republic. TV 3 is the most discreet channel, whilst the two private channels, focusing far more insistently than TVE 1 on the figure of the King of Spain, provide extensive coverage of the emotional and human interest aspects that affect the Queen.

**7. Members of the Judiciary and the legal system:** legal information occupies an important place because of the opening of the trial for the kidnapping of Segundo Marey and the GAL. Also because of the trial of 19 people accused of sedition in Equatorial Guinea, as well as three trials which made a great impact on public opinion (the hepatitis infection in the hospital in Valencia, the corruption case in Navarra and the deposit of a multi-million peseta bond by the former shareholders of Tele 5). In this whole sphere, the leading social actors are male.

**8. Terrorists:** the treatment of terrorism varies in the different news programmes according to the way in which they deal with the break-up of the Comando Vizcaya in which a member of ETA was killed.

**9. Police and members of the public order forces:** there are no women at all.

**10. Businessmen/women, members of financial groups and the stock exchange:** a world always dominated by men, except for the Koplowitz sisters, who featured in a sale of shares in Construcciones y Contratas by the elder sister.

**The news sections show an unequal distribution of the genders according to two main guidelines: fewer women in the sections considered more important, or the ones that define current affairs, and a higher concentration in secondary sections or the ones that reflect everyday life or the events closest to the social chronicle.**

The journalistic discourse is organised through spheres of audiovisual information. In our case we have established a set of categories that are the result of the addition of the classic journalistic genres to those special sections recognised by the news audiences. Hence we give status to spheres that could be grouped in broad genres so as to recognise the diversity of sections that make up the television news. Thus, to the classic genres such as the state, the economy or international, we have added others, such as the environment, legal affairs or medicine and health sciences, or science, popular science and technology.

The sections which have been considered categories for the analysis are: local, state, autonomous, supra-state, international, science-popular science-technology, medicine-health sciences, events chronicle, legal affairs, culture, economy-trade-finance, art-entertainment, sport, society, environment, weather information, religion-value systems, opinion (of current affairs) and others.

We have observed a great coincidence in the set of sections which occur in the news. With only one exception: autonomous information is only important on TV 3, whilst it is non-existent on Antena 3, almost non-existent on TVE 1 and of little importance on Tele 5. From an analysis of the news sections we deduce that television discourse tries to narrate current events through an objective discourse outside forms of opinion or any explicit assessment of events and the people involved.

Four sections turn out to be preferential in the news overall: state, sport, legal chronicle and international current events. All four make up the preferential discourse and the basic forms of social mediation and representation of reality. The presence of the genders in those three sections reproduces the situation we have described so far, with a notable concentration of men and a minority representation of women, who are shown through fundamentally male models.

**Table 6. The news sections: male and female presence expressed as a %\***

Sections (special)	<i>M</i> <i>TVE1</i>	<i>F</i> <i>TVE1</i>	<i>M</i> <i>TV3</i>	<i>F</i> <i>TV3</i>	<i>M</i> <i>A3</i>	<i>F</i> <i>A3</i>	<i>M</i> <i>T5</i>	<i>F</i> <i>T5</i>
<b>State</b>	78	11	78	9	74	14	80	14
<b>Society</b>	100	0	100	0	40	60	54	38
<b>Legal news</b>	85	6	81	7	92	2	92	8
<b>International</b>	74	5	64	5	60	8	49	20

\*The calculation has been made over the total of the units registered in the study of the news sections. Only the female and male categories have been included in the table; the neutral has been excluded.

The main indices of imbalance in the distribution of women and men in the television news occurs in the society section and, to a lesser degree, in the international section (with the exception of Tele 5).

To make the description of the gender presences in the news sections clearer, we propose an analysis focused on the sections with the largest and smallest presence of women.

**Table 7. The sections with the smallest number of social actors: the presence of female social actors expressed as a %**

	<i>TVE1</i>	<i>TV3</i>	<i>A3</i>	<i>T5</i>
<b>State</b>	11	9	14	14
<b>International</b>	5	5	8	20
<b>Legal news</b>	6	7	2	8
<b>Economy, trade, finance</b>	15	10	13	29

**Table 8. The sections with the largest number of female social actors expressed as a %**

	<i>TVE1</i>	<i>TV3</i>	<i>A3</i>	<i>T5</i>
medicine and health sciences	0	17	0	20
events chronicle	25	16	15	42
culture	14	37	24	17
society	0	0	60	38
environment	11	17	13	15
sport	3	6	6	7

The most significant number of women occurs in the sections where they frequently appear as victims; their preferential spheres are within the framework of the chronicle of events, in testimony to current events or, in general, outside any institutional or collective representation. So it may be agreed that women are more present in sections where they appear as individuals and not as organised or representative of institutional forms. Along those lines, the highest rates of presence can be identified in the society news, or the sphere of health and, to an increasing extent, in the cultural items.

### Women and everyday news discourse on television

By way of conclusion, we may affirm that the lack of coverage or priority given to women in news discourse has certain potential effects on the news audiences. Above and beyond the obvious effects of ignorance of women's affairs, the most important thing is the reinforcement of cultural stereotypes contained in the implicit messages around the insignificance of women and their natural role as supporting players. The classic division between a male public sphere and a private female one is still acutely valid from an analysis of television news.

The reasons why women are excluded from the news may be explained in a number of ways; in broad terms, two stand out: 1. Women do not have an important presence in the news as a result of their marginal participation in the public sphere in general; 2. Women are reflected from a male perspective of reality and relegated to human interest items or aesthetic, stylistic and emotional aspects.

However, those observations cannot conceal the growing number of women journalists and female themes that are, or can be, dealt with in the news programmes, the male space *par excellence*. Indeed, the representation of the public space through the news programmes is potentially an actor for social change with a capacity to articulate new formulae for the positive integration of women into public life.

The only way of setting that process in motion lies in making an issue of an inequality so explicit that it is often taken for granted. Be that as it may, the television formats are defined by their flexibility, but also by their skill when it comes to proposing and detecting social change. From the modest goal of this empirical analysis, we have portrayed a *de facto* discriminatory situation: **the invisibility of women in institutional news discourse**. Obviously, there must be other complementary stages of research in this sphere such as the intervention strategies within the reach of women in the production of television programmes or a detailed analysis of the practices of female reception of the news. Indeed, both perspectives are the ones that have received the greatest impulse in the most recent and innovative feminist scientific literature.

### Notes:

This article is a summary of the research project entitled **The presence of women in the television news** carried out in July 1998 on a commission from the **Institut Català de la Dona**. The authors were a team



from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra, the lecturers Vicenç Navarro (Department of Political Sciences at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra and lecturer at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore), Jordi Farré (Department of Media Studies and Audiovisual Communication) and Enric Saperas (Department of Media Studies and Audiovisual Communication), Universitat Pompeu Fabra.

(1) Gender is to be understood as a social concept through which a society defines as masculine or feminine a series of characteristics and behaviours through which its members are socialised from infancy. Thus, the values associated with femininity do not correspond to any (anatomical or hormonal) essence; they are constructions with a cultural and social basis which change over time and are conceived in a variety of ways outside the Western view of the cosmos.

