

**Increased Legitimacy, Fewer Women? Analyzing Editorial Leadership and Gender
in Online Journalism**

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Abstract

Building upon a previous study on women online journalists, this paper analyzes the narratives of upper-level women online news editors at well-known online publications and their experiences over the past decade. Although new media promised to revolutionize both the news industry and in many ways, the newsroom itself, fewer women than ever before appear to serve as executive editors or editors-in-chief of the top online news sites, and only a handful of women comprise their top-level editorial teams as senior projects editors or managing editors. According to the current and former women senior editors at national online news publications interviewed for the piece, there are myriad reasons for the lack of women making top-level editorial decisions. Keeping their narratives in mind, this qualitative study uses feminist theoretical approach to understand how Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital works in the editors' stories, and it examines the conflicting phenomenon that new media may function as a new paradigm while still maintaining gender disparities from the traditional newsroom.

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In Sept. 2003, more than half of the people in the United States, 150 million people, learned how to use and log on to the Internet, and at least 70 percent of that number, or approximately 80 to 105 million Americans say they go to it at least sometimes as a news source (Jupiter, 2003, Pew Research Center, 2000). The online news sources receiving most of the traffic unsurprisingly represent the largest and most prestigious news organizations in the nation: USA Today.com with 3.7 million unique users per month (ASNE, 2003), NYTimes.com with around 9 million unique users per month (ASNE, 2003), MSNBC with more than 21 million unique users per month (ASNE, 2003), CNN.com with about 20 million unique users per month (ASNE, 2003), and washingtonpost.com with more than 7 million unique users per month (ASNE, 2003). All of these online publications went online in the middle 1990s, and as they reach their 10-year anniversaries, they are known for their rich content that draws both from their traditional newspaper and TV counterparts and their own additions, such as interactive chats, photo galleries, and multimedia components. By combining these, they have, in essence, revolutionized the online news industry.

Despite the revolutionizing online news media, these organizations seem to have missed an opportunity to revolutionize newsroom organization and culture, particularly with regard to gender equity in leadership: None of the executive editors or editors-in-chief of these news sites are women, and only a handful of women comprise their top-level editorial teams as senior projects editors or managing editors. By looking at interviews with current and former women senior editors at national online news publications, this paper examines the conflicting phenomenon that new media may

function as a new paradigm and yet mirror gender disparities from the traditional newsroom, right up to its glass ceiling.

Gender and Identity in the Newsroom

According to the annual newsroom demographic study by the American Association of Newspaper Editors for 2004 (which surveys only traditional newspaper newsrooms rather than online newsrooms), 65.8 percent of the supervisory roles in newsrooms of all sizes are held by men (ASNE, 2004). Although there is no data available on the numbers of online editors, a quick glimpse at the mastheads of MSNBC.com, CNN.com, NYTimes.com, washingtonpost.com and USAToday.com shows no women in the most senior rank of editor-in-chief or executive editor; in all, only a few employ women in such positions managing editor or editor of special projects (Journalism.com, 2004).ⁱ

Now filling close to half of all professional roles in the workplace, women may produce power differentials based on gender both in the workplace and in culture at large (Walby, 1997). Feminist inquiry into journalism holds that the culture of the profession often is gendered in masculine ways (Gilwald 1994, Ross, 2001). Ross (2001) says "newsroom culture that masquerades as a neutral 'professional journalism ethos' is, for all practical purposes, organized around a man-as norm and woman-as-interloper structure (p. 535). Melin-Higgins and Djerf Pierre (1998) and Ross (2001) say that women often cope with this masculine newsroom culture by co-opting male norms and values into their own behavior. Studies have shown women journalists often walk a fine line between embracing what van Zoonen (1998) refers to as a feminine news identity, which primarily entails a stronger identification with the audience, and falling in as "one of the boys,"

which entails fitting in with the status quo system of presenting the facts with less regard for the reader – as well as falling in with institutional newsroom norms (p. 31).

Revisiting Women Online Journalists: They're 'Up or Out'

In a past study conducted in 2001 that was published in *Feminist Media Studies*, I interviewed 11 women who were working in online journalism at that time and two who had worked in online journalism for a number of years and decided to leave the field -- one for academia and the other for a public relations career. Many of the women interviewed for the study said they viewed the online landscape as a space that not only facilitated experimentation and an opportunity to "pioneer" a new medium, but a place where career advancement opportunities abound for women in journalism. Several had left "traditional" television and newspaper newsrooms when their publishing companies advertised new positions working on their Internet counterparts, and they felt they could not only enter at higher-level positions but more quickly advance to even more senior levels. Of the women interviewed, only two who were senior editors have maintained their positions or stayed at the same level as when they were first interviewed. Juneⁱⁱ continues her vice president role at a national online entertainment site, where her job has remained essentially the same, though she has taken on a more public role for the site by participating in media panels on the topic of online journalism. Rachel switched from her prestigious national online newspaper to another national online newspaper; now an executive producer instead of a managing editor, she is still considered to be among the top-level editors at her publication.

Of the other 11 women, two are in exactly the same position as when they were interviewed four years ago. Sheila, who still is on the online staff for a national trade

publication dealing with education, decided to attend graduate school while she continued to work full-time. Although she finished her M.A. in 2004, she continues to work in the same position; a position above her was filled sometime ago by a man who worked in the offline part of the publication. Another, Maya, continues in her role as a content developer for a West Coast online newspaper; although she is happy with her position, advancement opportunities have not arisen in her five years there.

I only was able to locate and reach five of the remaining nine for an update. (However, my inability to find these four women does suggest that they are not working at an online publication in any noteworthy role, or a Google search most likely would have turned up their byline or name on a masthead.) Two of the others -- Michelle and Karen -- had been laid off from their large national news sites in the downturn of the economy in 2001; both decided to work from home as freelance writer/editors and have both found steady work in that time in such work as textbook editing and publishing in hobby magazines. Patricia, another senior editor at a national publication, received a fellowship earmarked specifically for journalists and has since become an adjunct professor at a large university. Wendy was a managing editor of a large national business publication until several months ago when it was sold to a new company and underwent management reshuffling. She had decided "take a break" from journalism and the Web, but recently she was offered a "dream job" working in online projects for a publishing company and says she will probably accept it, though the title is less glamorous.

Although this paper looks primarily at women in upper-level editorial roles, it is important to locate particular times and circumstances when women in the lower-level positions (producers, content developers, section editors, and others) decide to exit the

online journalism profession. When interviewed again recently, Rachel said much of this may be attributed to the lack of senior -- and even middle management -- positions within the newsroom, so often, the young, talented producers often work for years on end as producers or section editors or they leave online journalism all together.

"There's no place for a talented young person to go up, so they go out," she said. "Obviously, we cannot afford to pay the huge salaries that they might get within private industry, so if there is not a vertical career move within, then it's out."

Women Online Editors and Cultural Capital

In order to understand the experiences of several senior-level women editors in online journalism, it is crucial to listen to their stories. From these stories, one can then focus on the *cultural narratives* that manifest themselves in each, specifically looking for clues about how gender is played out within the workplace. Through narratives, people give meaning to their lives and construct themselves; narratives are crucial to shaping personal and social identity and crucial to understanding and constructing the identities of others, and this often plays out in gendered ways (McLaren, 1993).

Few women have held upper-level editor positions at the best-known national online publications since their launches over the past decade or so, according to the women interviewed for this study and previous studies (Thiel, 2004). Because of the relative lack senior-level leaders, I interviewed women who worked at the national publications, and at well-known national trade publications as well as a senior editor at regional online newspaper that receives one million unique users per month. Their narratives illuminate challenges and successes they have experienced as online editors.

In my initial study on women online journalists, a majority of the women interviewed said they left reporting and lower-level editing positions in traditional newsrooms in order to gain new technological skills that might propel their careers in different directions (Thiel, 2004). They also expressed hope for swifter promotion as a result of these skills. They felt the acquisition of technical savvy and the opportunity to demonstrate how these skills would shape a new medium for journalism would grant them *cultural capital* that would result (at least eventually) in respect, raises, and promotions (Thiel, 2004, p. 22-23).

In this discussion of gender, I borrow from McCall (1992) in her analysis of Pierre Bourdieu and gender as a type of embodied “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1973). McCall says certain forms of capital "have gendered meanings because they are given form by gendered dispositions" (1992, p. 842). Bourdieu’s essay on cultural capital (1973) sees the “gendered disposition” as a form of capital though it is rarely recognized as holding the same value as economic or cultural capital and therefore, gendered dispositions are often seen as less than legitimate (1973, p. 245). To combat the notion that their skill sets are somehow rendered less legitimate, many women online journalists learned technical skills -- skills that seemed more valuable in terms of cultural capital (Thiel, 2004, p. 22).

However, there is a marked difference between most of the women who actually became senior-level editors at online news publications and the ones who remained within lower positions: Those at the senior editor level in most cases already were editors within the traditional newsroom -- sometimes for many years -- and therefore, already carried a certain level of cultural capital among decision-makers in the organization.

Most did not have to go the traditional route of applying for an open position as editor within the online newsroom; instead, they often were approached by upper-level managers to join the online news editing team.

"I had started conversations with the assistant managing editor for (the Metro section of a national newspaper) about new opportunities when a former colleague of mine asked whether I would be interested in working at the Web site," said Kimberly, who had worked as a reporter and then editor for a total of more than 15 years before being named the managing editor of one of the top national online newspapers.

Linda, a former executive editor of one of the top national online newspapers, expresses her story in similar language to describe her entrance into online journalism after more than 20 years in a traditional newsroom.

"My bosses noticed I was showing more interest in the World Wide Web than my colleagues were back in 1995, when the Web was still new," she said. Her senior editors at the newspaper placed her on a special committee overseeing development of the newspaper's online service, which was still being developed for the Web but already employed a staff of editors and producers. "When the newspaper's managing editor decided the newsroom needed a full-time liaison to our fledgling Web site, he picked me. My role evolved from there (to taking over as executive editor several months later)."

Similarly, Wendy, who had worked as a reporter and editor for a large local newspaper for a decade was asked by her publisher to create and oversee a Web site for the newspaper in 1996. After a number of increasingly more visible positions over the past nine years, she was hired as managing editor for one of the largest national online business-oriented publications.

This sense of "being approached" by members of the organization who already hold a great deal of cultural capital is somewhat in contrast with the women online journalists who leaped at the opportunity to be "entrepreneurs" or "pioneers" by starting as producers or content developers in the new media with the hope of eventually being promoted to the editor level (Thiel, 2004). Other women online editors were overlooked for promotions both within new media and traditional media: Katharine, now the founding executive editor of an online publication that covers policy and issues facing women (with 3 million unique users per year), realized that she might have to forge her own path early on. As the assistant managing editor of a well-known national trade publication in the mid-1980s, she instigated a system to train reporters to use modems and upload their stories to an online bulletin board, which would eventually become an online news service for their publication. Still, she officially was never approached to become the editor of this news service.

"On the very day that we launched the news service, we learned from an internal announcement that a guy had been hired as editor of the (trade publication's) Online News Service," Katharine said. "No one ever even asked me about whether I was interested." Although she continued to work there and other publications for the next decade, she said she did not earn the position that she wanted until she founded her current publication.

At-Work Role Modeling: Cultural Capital or Detriment?

While the women online editors do feel strongly about "shaping" the new media, they refer more often to their positions as role models and mentors rather than their honed technical skills.

"A lot of the section editors were grateful they finally had a woman manager," said Rachel. "They were thirsty to have a woman manager -- in part because it offers a glimmer of hope of being able to ascend."

Kimberly said the producers who work for her also seem to appreciate the opportunity to be managed by her because of her willingness to mentor them and represent their needs to the higher management.

"In senior management, you are a role model to many people. They trust you to represent them and to be their voice in leadership," she said. "Many of them turn to me when they need to talk through their own workplace challenges or career decisions."

The women in the study see the online newsroom as a more "flexible" and "cooperative" environment than the traditional newsroom, adjectives that are often associated with women.

"Women are great at getting support and getting people to cooperate together, so this should be a perfect job for a woman," said Sylvia, who has worked as a senior editor at a large regional online newspaper publication since 1996. "I think of online as a more feminine thing to do. We don't have that paternalistic 'You can't do that' mentality."

"(The online newsroom)... was a great place to be a female manager, was that Web newsrooms tend to be less hidebound and rule-dominated," said Linda. "Ours was much more open to new ways of doing things than the print newsroom was, and as a woman I really loved that aspect of Web journalism."

Katherine, whose newsroom is entirely staffed by women editors, said there is less aggression in her newsroom than she remembers at past traditional publications.

"There is no place like this. The default is female," she said. "There is not a lot of shouting like there was in newsrooms where I used to work, and that doesn't mean that we don't have conflict and hold hands and work it out, but the screaming matches I recall -- we just don't have anything like that."

This attention to mentoring, role modeling, and cooperation by the women online editors may be seen as part of the idea that women are nurturing or giving in to an "ethic of care," the way in which a majority of women attempt to solve problems in a way that causes the least disruption in relationships among people and represents their "very strong sense of being responsible to the world" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 21). Role modeling might be seen as a type of mothering, and mothering is often culturally construed as natural and as a normalized identity for women (Ruddick, 1989, p. xi). Although care is valued culturally, it is overlooked politically and economically, especially considering the fact that women -- culture's ascribed care-givers -- are neither paid nor figured into the Gross National Product for caring for their families and homes (Tronto, 1993, p.180).

In this view of care as a gendered ideal, these women editors may be marked as care-givers -- and valued less for it -- when they facilitate cooperation and act as mentors. A few women in the current study remarked that online newsrooms appear to employ even fewer top-level woman editors than they did 10 years ago, which makes this idea more troubling. In a field that has struggled to find legitimacy, particularly among its peers in traditional newsrooms (Singer, 2004), an ethic of care might be seen as a liability to professionalism among managers who embrace more masculine, traditional ideals.

Professionalism and Legitimacy in Online Journalism

In a time span between 1995 and 1998, women editors headed such online publications as washingtonpost.com, NYTimes.com, National Public Radio, Associated Press Online, and *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* site. Today, the highest level editors of all of these sites -- as well as CNN.com, MSNBC.com, LATimes.com are men. And while the senior editing staffs of many of the best-known online publications employ women, they are the minority on the senior editing staff. At washingtonpost.com, one senior editor is a woman. At USAToday.com, three women are part of the 11-person senior staff of editors (but the publisher, managing editor and editor are men).

"I was just at the annual ONA (Online News Association) convention, and I was the only woman at my table of 10, which was really different from when I first started attending these conventions," said Sylvia.

Katherine added that she recently quit the ONA "in a huff" after several years of membership because none of the panels at the convention addressed women's issues nor did any of the keynote speakers reflect actual women online journalists (blogger/pundits Ariana Huffington and "Wonkette" Ana Marie Cox were the female keynote panelists).

Sylvia said she guesses that the increasing professionalism associated with online journalism may be the reason more men appear to be taking up positions of leadership in the online newsroom. "As it becomes more acceptable, stable, and prestigious, it attracts men who might not have done it ten years ago."

Those practicing journalism online in the past have been placed in the position of defending their jobs against those who think of the Web as a space where only nerds converge and where anyone can publish a Web page and call him or herself a reporter. Online journalists have increasingly strived to be taken as seriously as their counterparts

at traditional newspapers and radio and television stations; they may do so by hiring only persons with advanced college degrees in journalism or crafting codes of ethics that apply specifically to the new media (Singer, 2004). The drive for professionalism must be working: Online newspapers even win Pulitzers now. Linda said many people from the traditional newsroom at her national newspaper recently applied for the open executive editor position at its dot com counterpart, which a decade ago was difficult to fill.

"...One reason might be that as the Web came of age, it gained more respectability and prestige, which made it more competitive," Linda said. "Men who once turned up their noses at leading a Web publication today actually consider some of those jobs to be plums."

Implications for the Future of Women in Online Journalism

Despite the hope of many women online journalists for a new paradigm with less gender disparities (Thiel, 2004), traditional news editors find new homes in the new media and often bring along old habits and notions of how newsrooms work. While some of the ensuing clashes might be a result of gender inequalities, the majority of the women interviewed for this paper refuse to discuss the possibility. Instead they wish to focus on the field of journalism as a whole, or a culture in which traditional journalists infiltrate a new media space once inhabited by young idealists.

"Since I've been at the site, we've always had one woman in upper management in the newsroom ... That said, at times, I have been critical of what I've seen as a lack of female voices in key newsroom positions," said Kimberly. "During different cycles of management, the tenor has sometimes felt very much like that of old school journalism -- unabashedly combative and therefore, restrictive. That style was very intimidating to

some of the women in the newsroom and with a lack of women in senior management, many felt locked out of the conversation. Let me be clear that not all of the men managed that way or embraced that style, but I heard from many producers who felt voiceless.

“I suppose that because of the dynamics in new media -- many times newsroom leaders are veterans of traditional media while the producers are much younger with little or no real experience -- that atmosphere can be more of a problem than in traditional newsrooms where the gap isn't as large,” she said.

Wendy said she believes there just aren't enough good positions to go around.

"I've seen a lot of male friends lose their jobs, so I wouldn't say it was a male vs female thing. I think the question '*Is it a viable, sustainable career*'" for anyone is what we should be asking," she wrote in an email. "I think the top jobs are so few and hard to come by that I would say there isn't enough pie to share".

However, women online journalists might already be predisposed to wanting to carve their own niche -- "pioneer" their own future; the ones who have left their prestigious positions as online editors at national publications often have gone to jobs that seemed more rewarding, often despite holding less prestige. Moreover, they each admitted to being exhausted by online journalism with its constant development and 24-hour news cycle. Additionally, a few who left their positions referenced a general disgust for the corporate management challenges.

Linda left her position as executive editor to become a reporter and columnist. "As for why I moved back to print journalism, I was a tad tired of the management challenges, which were formidable during the Internet's go-go years," she said. "And I had always wanted to end up writing again anyway -- it was a long-time goal."

"I feel like I've been fighting a war all these years." Wendy, who left her managing editor position several months ago. She said she was often made to feel inadequate for her lack of management background and "not having an MBA"

Pauline, who was one of the founding editors of one of the largest national online newspapers in the early 1990s, now is a publisher of a local online newspaper in a small city. "I'm happy to be back in newspapers, especially at a small, independent family-owned newspaper where I don't have to deal with corporate crap all the time," she said.

Perhaps online journalism finally appears to hold all the professionalism and legitimacy as its offline counterparts, but as it mirrors the gendered hierarchies of these predecessors, one must ask how much is actually new in this new media. As the women online editors leave to find more rewarding careers and are replaced by the old guard of the newsroom, a new medium may be left looking very much like an old one.

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ⁱ It should be noted that a number of the sites, however, including washingtonpost.com and Tribune Interactive, recently hired women in general manager and publishing roles, which demonstrates a significant advancement for women media managers (fewer than 20 percent are publishers of newspapers, according to ASNE's 2004 numbers), but this study is concerned primarily with those who directly oversee the editorial content and direction of their Web sites; because of their focus on business and advertising, general managers and publishers are often disconnected from the day-to-day operations of the newsroom and major editorial decisions.

ⁱⁱ The names of all of the women in the study and their publications have been changed to ensure their privacy, though most of the women gave permission for their full names to be used.