**Manmade Media? The Muffled Voices of Women**

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## Introduction

News content is dominated by what men consider to be newsworthy (Melki and Mallat, 2013), marginalising both women’s interests and issues relating to gender equality (Edstrom, 2013). Women are stereotyped, rendered invisible, or excluded (e.g. Ponterotto, 2014; Fawcett Society, 2015). Their voice is unheard.

This developmental paper focuses on newspaper pages of letters to the editor (LE), with the example of the Financial Times (FT).

Such letters function as arenas of public discourse which may be claimed as valid reflections of the concerns of contemporary society (Reader et al, 2004). Richardson (2007. p. 150) contends that “letters to the editor are primarily argumentative: they are designed to convince readers of the acceptability of a point of view and to provoke them into an immediate or future course of action”.

Wahl-Jorgensen (2002, p. 183) suggests that the importance of LE pages derives from their status as “among the few outlets available to the public for voicing opinion”. However, in the current digital age, this is no longer the case. Everyone with access to the internet is able to express their views on any subject and to make those views globally available on social media platforms, on sharing websites, and in the form of comments on the content of online newspapers such as the Guardian. These digital forums tend to provide contributors with a cloak of anonymity – the reader has no way of knowing their affiliation, whether they are likely to know what they are talking about, or, indeed, their gender. What the LE pages continue to do, however, by dint of letters being selected by the Letters Editor (rather than posted willy-nilly by their authors and only deleted if they fall foul of regulations concerning defamation, decency etc) is to “*include* readers” by validating their views of writers by The FT “one of the world’s great newspapers” (Kynaston, 1988, p. 517;Richardson, 2007, p. 149 emphasis in orignal).

The FT is a British daily newspaper specialising in business and financial news, which has been published since 1888. Its editorial stance is “socially liberal, pro‐free market and pro‐European” (Bye, 2010, p. 8). The LE page is therefore seen as respectable enough for writers to identify themselves by name and affiliation. The FT publishes approximately ten letters per day on topical business and political issues.

In a BBC (2014) Radio 4 discussion of the dearth of women’s letters in the letters pages of serious newspapers, the comment was made that, “people who write into newspapers also make history”. Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2002) finds in a summary of a number of studies that letters pages do not represent the views of the general population, characterising the LE writers as “overwhelmingly, male, conservative and elderly”. History therefore is being made by men; and it is men who most often feel *included.* Research both on LE concerning specifically business and management issues and on women’s participation generally as newspaper LE writers is generally lacking. Extant research interest in LE tends to focus on issues such as linguistic strategies used in biomedical journals (Magnet and Carnet, 2006), expressed values and emotions (Doury, 2010), the anonymity of writers and access by members of certain social classes (e.g. Silva and Lowe, 2014).

This subject area of women LE writers links to The Beijing Platform for Action which was launched in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women (Fawcett Society, 2015). At that conference governments agreed that the “continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications […] must be changed”. They pledged to support actions including: “Support research into all aspects of women and the media so as to define areas needing attention and action and review existing media policies with a view to integrating a gender perspective”, “[…] ensure women’s equal access to all areas and levels of the media”; and “to see to it that women’s needs and concerns are properly addressed” (United Nations, 1995). Despite limited information with only 35% of countries providing monitoring data, the Key Messages of the 2015 twenty-year review find that although women’s participation in the media has improved “the persistence of negative and stereotypical portrayals of women and girls” poses risks of online abuse (UN Women, 2015, p. 138).

Research in many countries over the past forty years has found continued discrimination against women working in the news media and that a “hard news/soft news”; “public-sphere and private-sphere”; “’fact’ vs opinion” binary favours male journalists in assigning them to cover serious news stories about business and politics whilst pigeon-holing women as the writers of features and news about cultural events (e.g. North 2012; 2016; Ross and Carter 2011).

Wahl-Jorgensen (2002) uses data from a literature review of more than 60 articles from a media trade journal and primary data from interviews conducted with 23 American LE editors in1999 to create four rules for letters to be included in an LE page. She finds that letters should be relevant or newsworthy within the “community” served by the newspaper (however “community” might be defined); they should be entertaining, or well-written; letters should be brief in order to include as many as possible on the page, various limits such as 250, 300 word are suggested; letters should include evidence of “authority” over the subject, which is alternatively expressed as “cultural capital as an entrance requirement” (p. 76). This last “rule” seems to be the most controversial as it may violate measures to ensure diversity.

Drawing on a critical discourse analysis of letters published in the FT over the past two years (2015 and 2016), and interviews with an LE editor and prolific writers of published letters, this study investigates the gendered distribution of subject matter and language. It reveals those subject areas which are of interest to women (as evident from the c2% of women letter writers) and some of the reasons why their participation is low. The FT LE page is thereby taken as a case of an informal cultural arena where men are dominant and women’s voices are marginalised. This is symptomatic of the under-representation of women in national and international business and management discourse, as well as in the fields of finance, politics and economics. This research thus seeks to contribute to the literature and debate on women’s involvement in the media, including their silence, and the ways that they and their concerns are portrayed. What can the informal media arena of the letters page in a serious newspaper learn from more formal media environments where women’s voices are heard?

## Research Questions:

* Are women proportionately represented as LE writers in the FT?
* Are there discernible differences between letters from women and those from men?
* If so, what differences are identified?
* Are women’s issues discussed in the LE page of the FT?
* Are women stereotyped, rendered invisible or unheard?

## Method

To study the contribution made by women who write to the FT LE page, we will adopt a mixed methods approach. Firstly, Quantitative Content analysis of LE pages of the FT throughout the two-year period 2015 and 2016 will show the gender mix of LE writers and their topics. Secondly, qualitative discourse analysis will explore how gender issues and the different genders ‘act’ in the arena of LE. Thirdly, semi-structured interviews with the LE editor of the FT and some prolific LE writers of both genders will reveal the aims of these groups and their perspectives on the letters published.

This developmental paper represents the first step in this process by carrying out the analysis of one month of LE pages, the 22 weekdays (Monday to Friday) of March 2015.

The method of content analysis will follow that used by Richardson (2007) to study LE pages and is developed from the Aristotelean approach of rhetorical theory. It is described as a triangle in which three “foci”, the “arguer”, “audience” and “argument” each act on the other two to produce an argument. For this triangle to be effective the argument needs to be “persuasive” but this will only occur if the audience understands and engages with it; the arguer will win over the opposition if they deploy convincing evidence; and the audience will be won over if they find the arguer trustworthy (p. 151).

To pursue the theme of silencing of women we add the issue of position on the page to the issues that have been addressed by earlier researchers.

Figure 1 provides a scheme for labelling the positions of letters

Top centre

Left middle middle right

Figure 1. Positioning of letters to the editor in the Financial Times

Thus a letter that is located “top centre” is the most prominent on the page, others are numbered from top to bottom if (as usual) there is more than one on that side. Additionally, the pages contain a topical illustration (cartoon, photo, diagram etc) in the top half of the left middle.

The following data are recorded for each letter: gender of writer, any reference to official capacity, profession, workplace etc (authority); country/city of residence, location of letter on the page, theme (e.g. finance, environment, foreign affairs), genre (argument, observation, thank you, humour), scheme of arguments (symptomatic, comparative, causal) and a brief summary of the subject of the letter.

Most of this data is very clear. When names did not clarify gender, that information was found by searching for the online presence of writers.

## Findings

The initial quantitative analysis of the 22 weekday FT LE pages of March 2015 shows that 175 letters were published with 192 signatory authors. 17 (9%) of the authors were women. Two were unknown.

Gender: 16 letters were written by women. One of these letters was by two women and another by a mixed group including one woman.

Authority: 88 (46%) authors claimed a position to convey authority of some kind over the subject Six (35%) of the 17 women did so compared to 82 (47%) of the 173 men.

Location on the page: Only once was a female writer located in top centre, this was the letter written by a large mixed group of petition writers.

Theme: 38 (20%) of the 175 Financial times letters specifically focused on the finance industry. Five (38%) of these were written by women or: four (25%) of the 16 woman-authored letters were on the theme of finance. Five (3%) letters concerned themes of discrimination, diversity and employment, one of these was written by a women and four by men.

Thus, so far our analysis is showing that a large majority of FT LE letters are written by men. Women authors reach “centre-stage” only when accompanied by a number of men. Men are slightly more likely than women to claim authority for their views. According to the two themes analysed so far, women are not more likely than men to be writing about “female-interest” topics.

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