

# Best and worst practice: a case study of qualitative gender balance in Irish broadcasting

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**Abstract**

This article focuses on the gender of voices chosen as sources and presenters of radio news coverage in Ireland. The study examines the best and worst case studies across public and private sector broadcasters and argues that the question of gender balance in broadcasting goes beyond the simple issue of quantitatively proportionate participation to require a more complex and qualitatively fair and balanced presentation of women within news programming. We find a very clear gender bias with male-dominated coverage in both public and private sectors but with greater stereotyping by the latter.

**Keywords**

best practice, broadcasting, gender, radio, representation, women

Women's appearance in radio and television current affairs media generates gendered frames that both define and constrain women's autonomy. 'Women remain under-represented as subjects of news stories, as sources for them, as experts commenting on them and as reporters of the stories' (United Nations (UN) Women Watch, 2005: 4). But the problem is not just quantitative. Women are also qualitatively encoded in a gendered manner in the news. So while the amount of time allocated to their voices is less than that given to men (O'Brien, 2014), they are also presented in a stereotypical manner (Van Zoonen, 1998) associated with traditionally 'feminine' topics (Craft and Wantan, 2004), all of which serves to reproduce gender inequality and discrimination. This misrepresentation of women

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serves to 'reinforce and reproduce their marginalisation' (Carter and Weaver, 2003: 41) and to constitute a form of symbolic violence against women (Wolf, 2011: 44).

This article gives special attention to a qualitative analysis of the 'extreme' cases of 'best' and 'worst' gender proportionality in radio programmes observed during the course of an Irish national media monitoring project conducted in February 2013, where women's participation rate in media was found to be 33%. The article reveals that while a programme can have a quantitatively strong gender balance, it does not automatically follow that the qualitative presentation of each gender is fair and equal. Similarly, the 'worst' offenders for proportionate presentation of women on air can also reveal significant cases of best practice through the qualitative nature of women's representation. This article demonstrates the importance of triangulating qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to refine and improve the current state of research on gendered representation.

### **Framing women in media**

Feminist communication scholars have examined how gendered news frames are constructed through the institutionalisation of particular ways of representing women in the media. In this context, frames are understood as the interpretative practices that set events in a broader structure (Entman, 1993). Framing women in the media operationalises persistent patterns of selection, emphasis and exclusion, which, over time, furnish a consistent interpretation and effectively a social evaluation of women (Gitlin in Norris et al., 2003: 2). This article argues that the framing of women in media can be understood as arising from these three patterns of selection, emphasis and exclusion, which form the overarching, interpretative structures that serve to institutionalise how women can be seen or understood through the media.

With regard to patterns of selection, rather than being presented in the whole of their humanity, women are selectively represented through practices of under-representation, typecasting, stereotyping and domestication. As the literature notes, women are usually numerically under-represented across all media platforms (Norris, 1997; Ross and Carter, 2011; Tuchman et al., 1978). Men are more likely to be presented as expert sources (Armstrong, 2004; Ross, 2007) and so their views are presented as more important and legitimate (Kim and Weaver, 2003). Huddy and Terkildsen (1992) found that women are assumed to be sensitive and warm and so more competent in dealing with 'soft' issues such as education, health and poverty rather than hard issues such as the economy or defence.

With regard to patterns of emphasis, production practices in broadcasting – in the sense of the way that journalists observe phenomena and the types of sources they use – combine to create 'conventional' or dominant media frames. Conventional frames are important because they generate 'predictable, simple and powerful narratives that are embedded in the social construction of reality' and they cluster 'key concepts, stock phrases and iconic images to reinforce certain common ways of interpreting developments' (Norris et al., 2003: 2–6). Framing, in terms of emphasis, effectively selects and prioritises some facts, images or issues over others, and thus promotes a particular vision or interpretation of phenomena, in this case women.

Frames constitute patterns of exclusion when they present only one meaning out of multiple possible meanings. Exclusionary frames serve to simplify, organise and structure what amount to highly gendered narratives, while claiming 'neutrality'. When

repeated over time, what are in fact exclusionary frames become invisible in their gendering of subjects and instead become the 'conventional' way to define women in the media. The article below outlines how the patterns of emphasis, selection and exclusion are activated in Irish media, through a case study examination of best and worst practices in Irish radio current affairs programming.

## Methodology

A case study of Irish radio's 'best' and 'worst' cases in depicting women on current affairs magazine shows was conducted by the authors in February 2013. The specific radio shows selected for examination were *Saturday with Claire Byrne* (1 p.m.–2 p.m. Saturdays) which airs on Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ), the state-owned public broadcaster, and *The Sunday Show* (1:00 p.m.–2:00 p.m. Sunday) which is transmitted on the privately owned Newstalk. They have a combined audience of almost 258,000 people. The quantitative data were obtained through coding each show using the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) methodology (see Beyerly, 2010). The results of the monitoring research showed that the public sector station had quantitatively equal gender participation on its programme, while the commercial station had an 80:20 proportion of men to women.

However, within each of the 'best' and 'worst' cases, the qualitative nature of the presentation of women at times confirmed and at other times challenged the programme's status as either the best or worst case of gender framing. The implications of this finding for gender representation research are that it is important to contextualise accounts of the presence or absence of women on the airwaves with a critical analysis of the qualitative nature of both appearance and invisibility. Within this case study, the analytical device of examining how women were framed in news involved three subcategories of analysis, those being the patterns of selection, patterns of emphasis and patterns of exclusion that constitute the institutionalisation of gendered frames (Norris et al., 2003: 2), and which underpin women's depictions in Irish news media. Each of these is examined in turn below.

## Patterns of selection

Discussing selection as a framing mechanism begins with examining the extent to which women were included in each of the programmes. In the national monitoring research, women's participation rate in news programmes on radio was found to be 32.9%, with men participating at a rate of 67.1%. The age cohort in which women dominated on air was in the younger 13- to 18-year category, where their participation was at 87.5%. This is in line with global norms. For example, Ross (2007) noted in her study of English newspaper coverage during the 2005 British general election that men were more than twice as likely to be used as news sources than women. The GMMP 2010 found that women make up 24% of news sources and just 20% of expert voices in the 1281 newspapers, television and radio stations monitored in 108 countries.

If we delve more deeply, some interesting patterns emerge. In Ireland in 2013, the age cohort in which women dominated on air was in the younger 13- to 18-year category, where their participation was at 87.5%. Women's participation was closest to parity in

**Table 1.** Roles by sex.

	Female	Male
News presenter	51.13	48.87
Weather reader	41.67	58.33
Sports presenter	5.21	94.79
Reporter/news analyst	38.7	61.3
Voice over	33.33	66.67
Intepreter	25	75
News subject	37.07	62.93
Expert	22.3	77.7
Politician	26.19	73.81
VIP/celebrity	16.67	83.33
Ordinary person	45.61	54.39

the 19- to 34-year cohort at 44.7%, but in the 35- to 49-year cohort, women's representation on air declined to 31.6%, and in the 50- to 64-year cohort, it fell further to 21.2% only rising to 34.5% after 65 years. In the variety of staff roles available to women in radio output, they came closest to parity in the category of programme presenter, with women dominating slightly in a 51:49 ratio (Table 1). Their participation was lowest in sports presenting with a mere 5.2% of female voices heard and female reporters constituted only 38.7% of the total reporting staff.

With regard to programme participants, women came closest to parity of participation in the category of 'ordinary person' where they were 45.6% of the total, but they were least represented in the category of 'celebrity or VIP' where there was only 16.7% female participation. In total, women were 37% of news subjects. Female politicians participated in a 26:74 ratio and female experts were on air in a ratio of 22:78. In short, women were systematically under-represented by both commercial and public service stations at a national level. As well as imbalance in the extent of their representation in some programmes, there was an imbalance regarding which women were selected to participate.

As well as examining women's quantitative presence on air, the question of women being selected to participate also involves considering which women were included and whether certain 'favoured' women are selected to participate on air. Ben Salem's (2010) finding that the media shows 'a tendency to profile women in government and government departments by granting them more time and coverage compared to female activists, women in political parties or women who are ordinary citizens' (p. 181) is borne out in the context of the radio cases. On 'The Sunday Show', the dominant participant was the female Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton. In total, the programme had seven male participants and two female participants.

The second woman was an expert commentator on gun control who did a short phone interview from South Africa. She spoke for a total of 1'55" and was cut short to go to a male sports reporter who reported exclusively on men's sports. On 'The Sunday Show', the female minister's voice was very much the favoured one. On a panel with four men, including the male presenter, she spoke for a total of 29'50", while the presenter spoke

for 20'32". Each of the three other male experts, a news editor, spoke for 7'46", a political correspondent, spoke for 11'35", and a businessman, spoke for 4'20". The Minister's contributions quantitatively outnumbered the entire contribution made by all of the male panellists. As a Minister, she was certainly a favoured female participant.

'Saturday with Claire Byrne' constituted the 'best' quantitative case of gender balance, which was in a 50:50 ratio with five men and five women participants. The programme had two female journalistic participants, the main presenter and a female Industry and Employment Correspondent. As guests, the programme included a female economist, a female Minister for State and a female children's rights advocate. The male participants included audio clips from the UK Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Deputy Prime Minister (Táiniste). In studio, three men – a workers union secretary, the Director of the Penal Reform Trust and a newspaper assistant editor – participated in discussions. With regard to the balance of time given to female voices, in this 'best' case scenario of an hour-long programme, women outweighed men, with the women occupying 29'44" and the men 21'43" of airtime. If the female presenter's contribution is discounted, only then do the women get less airtime than the men at a total of 18'41".

However, as well as quantitative presence and airtime allocated, the qualitative manner in which women are selected to participate on programmes is relevant to the question of balance in representation. A pattern emerged in the 'worst' case examined, whereby the selection of women was connected to the news topics to be discussed:

In the literature, we find three main reasons why female news sources are selected to be heard in the news: this might have to do with the topic ('female topics'), with the gender of the reporter, but also with an editorial policy towards 'soft' items. (De Swert and Hooghe, 2010: 71)

On the question of topics and 'soft' items, some issues are traditionally associated with women including 'consumer news, health or family matters, education, culture or social policy' (De Swert and Hooghe, 2010: 71). Female news sources are often allocated these topics. Female politicians as sources receive more coverage on these issues than on 'hard' topics such as economics, defence or foreign policy (Kahn, 1994). Importantly, as De Swert and Hooghe (2010) found, 'the main determinant of the presence of female news sources proved to be the gendered nature of the topic of the news item' (p. 80).

In the 'worst' Irish radio case, on 'The Sunday Show', the connection of the sole female panellist to discussion of soft topics such as social policy is in evidence. In the lead item on the programme, the Minister for Social Protection, Joan Burton, discusses in depth the soft topic of Child Benefit payments in terms of impacts on child poverty, family diversity and the importance of this direct payment to women in the home. During the discussion, the Minister makes many comments from the perspective of Irish women generally, such as for instance 'there is not a woman in the country that doesn't value a universal payment'. In effect, the minister becomes the spokesperson for all Irish women and so an effect is created whereby the only woman on the panel becomes the representative of all other women but the men are there as individuals who are quoted to represent business, farming interests and as journalists.

As the programme continues, the Minister participates centrally on the topic of taxing high-earner pensions and pay talks with unions, but as the remainder of the topics

discussed become less 'social' or 'care' based and more hard and political, the minister participates less and is no longer the lead speaker. Her presence on the panel is linked to the two dominant care issues of child benefit and state compensation for residents of Magdalene Laundries and thereafter she is not the first speaker on other topics, which include political polls, a horse-meat scandal and Ryanair potentially buying Aer Lingus. After the panel discussion section of the programme ends, the remaining topics covered on the show include a more detailed discussion of the business story about Ryanair, which has two further male participants in studio, a gun control story with one female participant and sports stories with a male reporter.

With regard to the gendering of 'hard' and 'soft' topics in the 'best' case radio programme examined, 'Saturday with Claire Byrne' offers a template of best practice with regard to avoiding the ghettoisation of women in soft topics. The programme includes a female Director of European Economics with Roubini Global Economics as its expert commentator on a story about a ratings agency downgrading the United Kingdom's credit status. Similarly, the Minister of State Jan O'Sullivan is included in the discussion of a 'hard' topic, Union talks on public sector pay reductions. The female reporter covers a conference of medics who are engaging on the issue of public service pay reforms. In short, female voices are very central to the programme's coverage of hard stories.

With regard to the programme's coverage of a 'soft' or care issue, that of representation for people in care or penal institutions in Ireland, a female children's rights advocate and the female minister participate but this is not an exclusively female domain, a male Director of Penal Reform also participates in the discussion. Moreover, the Minister speaks about the politics of reforming and monitoring the institutions and speaks about her party, Labour's, policy reform in this area, rather than speaking only on the issue of care. A key finding from this analysis of the qualitative nature of gender in Irish broadcasting is that by including women's voices in the discussion of 'hard' topics, 'Saturday with Claire Byrne' manages to achieve gender balance not only in quantitative terms but also in qualitative terms, whereby women are as likely to speak on economics, pay talks and union conferences, as they are to speak to softer care issues.

## **Patterns of emphasis**

Patterns of emphasis are established in the way that journalists observe phenomena. A central failure in contemporary mass media is the failure to adequately emphasise the importance and relevance of social and political issues to women and vice versa. As Tuchman et al. (1978) notes, annihilating women's presence involves denying their humanity, trivialising them and reducing them to a single 'feminine' characteristic. Part of the process of marginalising women in media output involves trivialising women in their social roles. This method of marginalising women in society and in media is in evidence on the 'worst' case of 'The Sunday Show' where the minister's work is trivialised. In response to Minister Joan Burton's point that a report is needed on the optimum means of delivering child benefit payments, another panellist, political correspondent John Drennan, is, as the presenter describes it, 'mischievous' in arguing the minister would commission 'a committee working group on the issue, a Green Paper, a White Paper, a consultative paper on the White and Green paper'. Drennan is furthermore

dismissive of the politics of child benefit payments to women commenting, 'In the good days ten years ago one might have spent it on Manolo Blasnicks (sic) or whatever stilettos are to be found'.

The question of child poverty and the empowerment of women through a payment of social welfare benefit directly to them is trivialised by the male panellist who in his comment reduces women to a single 'feminine' practice of shoe-consumption. On a second occasion, the presenter reads out listeners' texts and an audience member asks 'Is Joan Burton not herself she hasn't interrupted anyone else?' a reference to other media performances where the minister is perceived to have interrupted fellow panellists. The context for this point is that Joan Burton is usually the only woman on many male dominated current affairs panels on radio but particularly also on television in Ireland, and her robust participation is obviously seen by some as overly forceful. The irony is that during the discussion of child benefit, the Minister was herself interrupted nine times by the presenter.

By contrast, 'Saturday with Claire Byrne' emphasises the relevance of women to questions of credit ratings downgrades, to public service pay talks and to medical unions responses to the pay talks, purely by having female experts or reporters speak on these issues. The central role played by the female presenter's voice across the additional hard news topic of development policy for the Dublin Docklands Area places women at the centre of the news agenda and deconstructs the normalisation of privileging masculine perspectives and voices on such social and political issues. On 'Saturday with Claire Byrne', women are not trivialised, reduced to singular feminine care issues nor are they silenced, their full humanity is presented, complete with an active and engaged participation in politics, economics and society.

## **Patterns of exclusion**

Patterns of exclusion include the manner in which 'The dominant apply categories constructed from the point of view of the dominant, thus making them appear as natural' (Bordieu, 2001: 35 – in Wolf). In the 'best' case scenario, women are adequately represented as expert commentators and as reporters on 'Saturday with Claire Byrne'. The programme uses a female reporter to cover a story live from pay negotiations and an expert economist and minister of state. However, on the question of sources for and subjects of the news, the programme falls down, particularly with regard to the topic of vulnerable people in institutional care. In this section, two women and one man speak eloquently on the issue of people slipping through the cracks of care systems in the state.

However, this section frequently discusses female inmates of Magdalene Laundries but does not include their voices in the programme. This is equally the case for the discussions of homelessness, prisoners, people using psychiatric services, and young adults who were formerly in residential care. All of these issues were discussed by elites with no inclusion of the voices of the women and men who actually experienced these issues. This omission highlights a broad tendency, evident in both the best and worst case programmes to facilitate elites in speaking about women but not to use women as sources or subjects of news stories. This latter issue is a highly problematic one that remains to be

addressed for any true qualitative balance to be achieved in programme productions. It is inadequate to include women's voices as presenters, as reporters and as experts but to exclude their voices as sources and subjects of the topics covered.

Interestingly, on the supposedly 'worst' case studied in 'The Sunday Show', a more direct testimony into the life of women in the Magdalene Laundries was in evidence in the programme. Minister Joan Burton spoke personally about visits as a child to a Laundry, visits by one of the women to her childhood home, and the question of the restrictions placed on the women's personal freedom by the laundries. Each of these perspectives was recounted by the Minister from the perspective of a child in 1960s Ireland. She was allowed to speak at length and in detail about these recollections, and appropriate questions were added by the presenter, which served to present the perspective of a woman recalling her exposure to the Laundries at the centre of a national scandal.

Although it was still the case of an elite voice being aired, it was nonetheless someone with direct, albeit second-hand experience of the story and it was a female voice. In this way, the programme worked somewhat outside of the normativity of the masculine. The Minister went on to mention her experiences of the redress board where the women gave account of their time incarcerated in unpaid labour at the laundries and she addressed the political question of an apology to the women. While still delivered by a member of the social and political elite, the 'ordinariness' of this point of access to the story gives priority to the subjective woman's voice, over the usual male objective perspective, and is striking in that context.

In a similar fashion, towards the end of 'The Sunday Show', Minister Joan Burton also speaks about forthcoming Irish abortion legislation, again this question can be seen as a 'women's' issue but again it is at least not normalised into a male perspective on the legislation. Because she holds the political status of a Minister of the Irish government, her response comes simultaneously from a government perspective but also clearly from a female perspective. But again she becomes the representative of Irish women generally; she states,

the issue here is about women, if a woman goes into a hospital having a baby and her life becomes endangered are her doctors ... going to be able to take action to ensure that she survives? That's what the government has committed to legislate for.

While speaking for women generally, nonetheless this short input from a female minister serves to weld the political to the female in a manner that is all too rare on Irish media output and which shifts the normalcy of the masculine perspective out of the frame and puts women and politics centre stage.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

There are a number of implications from this study for the current state of research on gendered representation. First, utilising best and worst case studies from radio both updates and expands on previous Irish work in the area of gender representation. We also explore the differences between public service and commercial radio on the dimensions



of exclusion, emphasis and selection and find that the commercial sector performs worse on all three. This finding suggests a stronger need for the private sector to display balance, although previous studies of gender difference found that both public and private stations were male and elite dominated (Rafter, 2014). In terms of patterns of selection, the public service programme is gender balanced in terms of guest numbers in direct contrast to an 80:20 split in favour of the male in the commercial show. This pattern is replicated when examining emphasis with the private sector show trivialising women's issues. However, both shows tend towards the traditional paternalistic form of representation when it comes to exclusion, with victims being discussed by elites, without their voices being directly heard.

Second, while representation studies are well served by high-quality, trans-national, quantitative projects, such as the GMMP (2010) and International Women's Media Foundation (2011) reports, comparative qualitative analysis is less prevalent within the sub-discipline. Because of its generally small-scale and in-depth nature, qualitative analysis usually looks only at gender representation within particular genres and for individual states. However, despite this limitation, it is nonetheless important to continue to examine the specific characteristics of women's representation across nations, across media platforms and across programme genres in order to see, in combination, the contrasting patterns of exclusion, emphasis and selection that prevail internationally. The precise manner in which women are (mis)represented globally is as important to understand as how frequently they are represented and representation studies must rise to that challenge.

Third, the patterns in how women are (mis)represented are important to understand because of how activists, lobby groups and broadcasters may decide to go about 'solving' the problem of women's participation in broadcasting. Political or cultural intervention to address the challenge of gender bias only in quantitative terms, that is, by increasing the rate of participation, will do little to untangle the equally vexing challenge of the stereotyping, typecasting and domesticating misrepresentation of women who actually manage to get on air. It is as important to address the quality of engagement as it is the quantity. This raises a further theoretical challenge to representation studies to continuously update and maintain the relevance of the conceptual tools by which women's mediations may be described and analysed effectively, both in the context of rapidly shifting technologies and equally fluid social constructions of gender.

Finally, but not insignificantly, seeing clearly where best practice in balanced gendered representation emerges, in either a quantitative or qualitative sense, offers a positive case study or role model for broadcasters and programme producers internationally. Moreover, this article raises a challenge to analysts of gendered representations to highlight positive solutions as a central dimension of academic work, equally important to the more normative negative findings that pertain to the endeavour of examining gendered representations. To that end, the study calls for increased academic research to address the question of how media producers, regulators and activists might promote best practice, accountability and implement actions for gender equality – a challenge that could not be more vital, not just to Irish or international broadcasting, but to global society more generally.

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