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SPECIAL REPORT: DIVERSITY

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On balance: The journalism of gender

BY JACK KAMMER

Women's activists and their male advocates have made a big point lately that the media do a poor job of "representing" women. Men, on the other hand, have expressed little dissatisfaction with the way they are treated in the press. Before we conclude that women must therefore be suffering a severe indignity and that men are being treated well, we should observe that sometimes a complaint tells us more about the demands and expectations of the complainer than the worthiness of the claim. We might

take time to observe whether any of America's unsqueaky (male) wheels might be in need of some media-fairness grease.

Feminism attempts to prove anti-female media bias by tallying the gender of people pictured and quoted in newspapers. Since there are more men than women in the news, their reasoning goes, newspapers are exhibiting a sexist bias against females. A recent example of this allegation can be found in an April 8, 1991 press release from the Women, Men and Media Project, which observed critically that "the vast majority of [Gulf War]



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stories were about men, their jobs, their weaponry, their opinions.”

But consider the nature of those stories. Were they about men(!) or about selfless servants whose gender is essentially irrelevant — except that it induces them to put themselves at risk for others? Moreover, is a story about an electricity rate hike a “male story” simply because the Public Service Commission executive who announces it is a man?

And aren't a significant number of the men in the “male stories” the same few men being counted over and over again?

Furthermore, why did Junetta Davis' landmark *Journalism Quarterly* article, one of the first to use story counts to substantiate a claim of anti-female bias, not mention — except in a table of numbers — that in every one of the eight papers she studied men were portrayed unfavorably proportionally more often than women?

Before we resolve that women — and only women — need and deserve better treatment from the media, let's take a more careful look at the journalism of gender.

Imagine for a moment that you are an editor who assigns a reporter to cover the bankruptcy proceedings of a major department store driven to insolvency by shoplifting. Your writer returns with the fact that the judge decided to let the store stay in business, but only with the requirement that all women — and only women — sign a police log upon entering. That's it. End of report. Would you not demand that the reporter re-open the story at least to mention the issue of the judge's colossal sexist bias? Would you not suggest that perhaps the ACLU, a law professor, or a local women's group might have something to say about the judge's discriminatory ruling and the egregious prejudice that underlies it?

You might be dismayed, then, with the way the *Baltimore Sun*, a large, well-respected, totally orthodox, mainstream American daily handled the story of a day care center plagued by allegations of child sexual abuse. The state wanted to shut the center down pending the investigation. The judge allowed it to stay open, but only with the requirement that all men — and only men — sign a police log upon entering. *The Sun*, in stories spanning several weeks, was absolutely oblivious to the issue of prejudice against men.

Failure to handle men's gender issues creditably is not always based on such ignorance and insensitivity. Sometimes it is rooted in gullibility and misplaced sympathy. CBS News correspondent Bernard Goldberg told me that “when it comes to gender issues, journalists generally have suspended all their usual skepticism ... We accept at face value whatever women's groups say. Why? Because women have sold themselves to us as an oppressed group and any oppressed group gets a free ride in the press ... I don't blame feminists for telling us half-truths and sometimes even complete fabrications. I do blame my colleagues in the press for forgetting their skepticism.”

Authority by repetition

The absence of media skepticism has been especially glaring in the recent reporting of “studies” claiming variously that 15 – 25 percent of all college women have been victims of actual or attempted rape and that nearly half of all women will be victims of rape sometime in their lives. Kathryn Newcomer, a professor of statistics and public policy at George Washington University, warns us in *Insight* that these statistics are unreliable: “No one cares what the real numbers are. They just want to make political statements.” The unfortunate result is that our editors and writers swallow the assertions whole and regurgitate them for public consumption. As Berkeley professor of social welfare Neil Gilbert wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*, the misinformation has been “so widely cited that it has gained authority by repetition.”

Untested by appropriate journalistic scrutiny, women's activists have used political statements masquerading as fact to manipulate public attitudes not only on rape, but also on divorce, child custody, child support enforcement, domestic violence, pay equity, and sexual harassment — in general: men. The idea that men are enriched by divorce, for instance, is now a “fact” that “everyone knows”; statistical evidence to the contrary — such as the thorough analyses published in law and sociology journals and circulated to the media by fathers' and children's organizations — goes unnoticed.

Similarly, the notion that full-time working women earn 59 percent of the money earned by full-time working men is firmly installed in the American mind as

evidence of male chauvinism. There are at least three important ways in which this “fact” has been misrepresented by women's activists and inexplicably unchallenged by the American press:

1) The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics uses “full-time” to refer to everything from 910 to 3700+ hours per year. Men are far more likely to work the fuller of the two types of full-time job schedules.

2) As Dr. Warren Farrell, author of “Why Men Are the Way They Are,” points out, “Both sexes have equal knowledge that engineers will average a higher income than a French literature or art history major. Yet even in 1986, more than 90 percent of engineering majors are male and more than 90 percent of French literature and art history majors are female.”

3) Dr. John Gordon, author of “The Myth of the Monstrous Male and Other Feminist Fables,” says he wrote to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and requested clarification for the famed 59 percent figure. He reports that the commission's response referred him to a study called “Discontinuous Labor Force Participation and Its Effects on Women's Market Earning,” which explains that the main reason for the gender gap in earnings is that women are many times more likely (Farrell says 43 times more likely) than men to opt for the joys and burdens of parenthood over the joys and burdens of paid jobs.

Moreover, as Farrell asks, “If women really earned 59 cents to the dollar for the same work as men, what business could compete effectively by hiring men at any level?” Presumably, the media are capable of asking such questions. Presumably, they are capable of gathering facts from universities and government agencies. Evidently, when such scrutiny might reveal the inaccuracies of feminist propaganda, they are reluctant — or afraid — to do so.

One of the first men with the courage to acknowledge feminist-inspired fear is gay writer and historian John Lauritsen. At the Gay Academic Union conference in New York City in 1976, Lauritsen said, “It has become almost taboo to criticize anyone who identifies herself as a ‘feminist’ ... Why have feminists enjoyed this virtual immunity from criticism? ... Because feminists have so often demanded that things they disagree with be censored, and have so often gotten their way, that some men frankly are afraid of them.” I called Lau-



ritten earlier this year to ask if he still finds those words true. He does.

Cheering on the rapists

Three notorious news stories further illustrate the readiness — even the eagerness — of the media to accept whatever women say as truthful, accurate and complete. First we'll look back to the infamous New Bedford gang rape of 1983.

Dr. Eugene August, a professor of English at the University of Dayton, wrote, "For months after the gang rape occurred in a New Bedford bar, lurid stories of a bar-room full of male patrons who cheered on the rapists were circulated in the media ... [T]he press went on one of its periodic man-hating binges, endlessly re-telling the story of the cheering patrons and augmenting it with righteous denunciations of the average man as secret admirer and bloodbrother of the gang rapist."

But those cheering men — though they are now indelibly etched into America's Understanding of Maleness — never existed. In a March 5, 1984 story on the rapists' trial *Time* magazine quietly, unobtrusively, belatedly, and impotently reported the fact "that aside from the six defendants and the victim, only three people were in the bar, and that the bartender and a customer sought to call the police, but were prevented from doing so by one of the six."

Professor August is rightly unimpressed with the truth so timidly applied to such ferocious myth. "To my knowledge," he writes, "no one in the media has bothered to ask why reporters were so willing to believe and disseminate stories of male fans cheering the rape or why the media engaged in such an orgy of sexist caricaturing. Certainly, no apology or expression of regret for the misinformation has been forthcoming."

The Lisa Olson-Boston Patriots locker room incident is the second notorious case in point. There seems no doubt that Olson was the victim of some rather rude behavior. But in the *Boston Herald* Olson published an article in which she said, "several [players] approached me, positioned themselves inches away from my face, and dared me to touch their private parts." The NFL investigation of the incident concludes, "This description does not fully accord with the account she later gave the investigators," and "The stories attacking the Patriots did not let up. There were sub-

stantial exaggerations of the facts as we believe them to have been."

Appropriate journalistic skepticism might cause us to say, "Well, what do you expect from the NFL's own report? The league wants to minimize the incident." But that objection should be balanced with another: "Well, what do you expect Lisa Olson to say? Now that the story has gone public, she has to make those guys look as bad as she can." Given the fact that the NFL investigative team included an impressive array of former federal investigators and the deputy director of Harvard Law School's Center for Criminal Justice, none of whom have an apparent personal stake in the outcome, we might grant them at least as much credibility as we afford Lisa Olson, who was obviously interested in shielding her career.

Harvard Law School Professor Paul Weiler followed the Olson case closely and expressed grave disappointment over the media's coverage. "The way the press played it was a total vindication for Lisa Olson," he says. "I was astounded at the disparity between Olson's story and the results of [the NFL] investigation. But there wasn't a word in any of the papers about it."

Boston Globe sportswriter and NBC commentator Will McDonough says, "It was like a cover up. The most gripping part of her story was that sexual equipment had been put in her face; the NFL's report said her story was inaccurate, but you'd be hard pressed to find that in any paper."

McDonough notes that male reporters are frequently harassed by athletes in locker rooms, but with Olson, "everybody wants to be Sir Lancelot. It was definitely overdone chivalry." On the power of feminist intimidation of journalism, McDonough observes, "NBC did not want to pursue the story. Everybody runs scared."

Then there is the case of Gwen Dreyer, the Naval Academy student who will live forever as the woman who was deprived of a glorious naval career by male beastliness. *The Washington Post* initially covered the story with balance and perspective. On May 30, 1990 that paper reported: "In interviews, several midshipmen said that although what happened to Dreyer was unusual because the men who handcuffed her were of a higher rank, it was not extremely different from common occurrences. For example, they said that upperclassmen are often tied to chairs and put outside or have their heads put in toi-

lets as retaliation by plebes they command. They also doubt Dreyer was targeted because she is a woman, but instead think the episode, while wrong, grew out of Dreyer's involvement in a spirited snowball fight." By July 19, however, the language in the *Post* had become disturbingly New Bedford-esque: "Dreyer was chained to a urinal in a men's room before a jeering crowd of her male classmates."

"Nobody in the media wants to look like a Neanderthal," CBS's Bernard Goldberg summarizes sarcastically, "so we just accept the feminist agenda."

Feminist censorship

Another factor which cannot be ignored is some women's manifest hostility to points of view which challenge feminism. The case of a free-lancer for a weekly paper in a major California city clearly illustrates the problem. Late in 1989, the writer, who asked me to keep him anonymous, took an assignment to write about a man who has built a national reputation as a spokesman for men's issues. In his story the writer tried to be objective, merely stating that his subject maintains that men are not responsible for all the world's ills, that women do in fact have considerable power, that we should challenge what we have been told to believe about men and women. When the writer presented his draft to his editor, a woman about 38 years old, she said he had failed to give her what she wanted. According to the freelancer, she said she expected him to "infiltrate" the men's group and "blow these guys out of the water." "To me it was kind of surprising," the writer says. "I was shocked. She hasn't looked into any of this herself, yet her attitude was already firm. She wanted to do a hit piece. And it was all the more shocking because this was an alternative newspaper, supposedly challenging cherished beliefs. I was naive. I expected women to be supportive. But I think women are afraid. I think it's a matter of power. It really opened my eyes. It's been an awakening."

Kay Haugaard, a well-respected writer who has been published in over 140 periodicals, has a similar story. "The only things I have trouble selling," she says, "are things in which I'm the least bit critical of women. In 1988 or 1989 I wrote a piece on rape [suggesting that rape, like murder, should be evaluated and punished by degrees with

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all the circumstances taken into account], sent it to the *L.A. Times* and a woman editor wrote back to say 'I've received this type of rubbish from men, but it never occurred to me that a woman would submit something like this.' It was so irrational and emotional," Haugaard says, "that it clearly shows her bias."

Like Haugaard, syndicated columnist D.L. Stewart has learned that suggesting that women are less than perfect can be problematic. Stewart says that his work "is intended as the exact flip side of Erma Bombeck. For instance, she can make the joke that her husband goes into a coma during football season until after the Super Bowl. On the other hand, I can't safely joke that my wife doesn't know the difference between baseball and football. I must take care that I wind up being the butt of the joke, that I'm even more benighted than my wife; Erma doesn't have to do that. I think there's a double standard and it's certainly not improving."

Harry Stein is a well-known magazine writer who served several years as the Ethics columnist for *Esquire*. "It's generally understood among people who write for women's magazines," he comments, "that there is a certain line which you just don't cross. Basically it's that women are right and men are wrong. It's a personal view on the part of a lot of editors; it's also what they believe their readers want. They want to be re-assured that their way of looking at the world is right."

Along the same lines, Jon Ryan, an activist who seeks to protect single fathers from being coerced into surrendering their children for adoption, had a particularly telling experience with *Family Circle*. He accepted an assignment to write his own story of surrendering his baby daughter, but his editor originally rejected the piece because, factuality notwithstanding, he

had painted too bleak a picture of his daughter's mother and her willingness to give the baby up. The editor told Jon to re-write the story and emphasize that the experience for the mother needed to be as painful for her as it was for Jon. According to Ryan, the editor said the re-write was "fantastic," but she later killed the story after higher editors unanimously rejected it on the grounds that "no one could possibly believe that a mother would act that way."

Brotherhood of man

Feminists will no doubt object to all of this by saying, "But the media are run by men." The unspoken assumption here is that men are always looking out for each other, that in disagreements with women or women's aims men will always band together and never allow themselves to be swayed by chivalrous pangs of protectiveness or shallow efforts to curry feminine favor. The assumption, of course, is at odds with reality.

The behavior of former Gannett chairman and *USA Today* founder Al Neuharth may be a perfect case in point. Indeed, Neuharth's own paper reported that while speaking to a predominantly female audience at the 1989 Women, Men and Media conference, Neuharth took a shot at *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee. When asked why some men aren't comfortable with women as equals, Neuharth said Bradlee is "uncomfortable with anyone better or smarter than he is."

There are at least three other reasons why men in high journalistic places do not guarantee full and fair treatment of men and men's gender-based concerns. One is that top male editors are in traditional male roles. Expecting them to have an awareness of and commitment to men's sexual politics is like expecting Betty Crocker to be in the vanguard of feminism. Number two is explained by writer Nicholas Davidson: "Taught that they were 'op-

pressors' responsible for the ills of society and the crimes of history, men simply crumpled." They are, in other words, quite ready to capitulate to women when women insist that they are right — especially in matters of family, children, sex, relationships, and other issues of gender. Third is what we might call the Sexual Stockholm Syndrome, in which an editor, staring down the barrel of the "equal rights for women or else" gun leveled at his head, begins to identify with his captors and develops a fervent, unreasoning self-protective commitment to women's causes to the exclusion of those of his own gender.

Sometimes the media's anti-male bias is active and purposeful; at other times it is based on ignorance and intimidation more than on prejudice. But either way the media have contributed to what writer Davidson has called "a serious impoverishment of public discussion" on the societal issues arising from the politics of gender, not the least of which are the crucial questions surrounding the deteriorating American Family.

What is the remedy for all of this? Several steps seem warranted. Journalism's professional conventions should include workshops and presentations which recognize gender bias against men. Journalism schools and associations should educate their students and members to be aware of anti-male bias as they are of any other kind. Foundations — such as the Freedom Forum which has provided financing for Women, Men and Media — should fund projects designed to identify and eliminate sexism against men. And most importantly, editors, reporters, and writers on the front lines must develop the confidence and determination to assert that journalistic fairness includes fairness to men and requires no "free ride" or special treatment for women.

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Jack Kammer is a free-lance writer in Baltimore who specializes in gender-based social problems.