

Gender and the news industry: Why it's important to focus on mainstream newspapers



Marina Franchi will take part in the panel discussion [The Tycoon and the Escort: the business of portraying women in newspapers](#), hosted by LSE Business Review, Women in Journalism UK and Catalyst.

In her [blog post](#), Allyson Zimmerman identifies the press as a site where stereotypical representations of women leaders are circulated. Drawing on research undertaken by Catalyst, Zimmerman discusses the importance of a focus on gendered stereotyping to further understand women's exclusion from leadership positions. This resonates with the argument put forward by [Helena Liu, Leanne Cutcher and David Grant](#), who draw attention to the role of the news media in constructing a notion of leadership that relies on and reinforces gendered societal norms and expectations. This stigmatises women as less capable leaders, especially unsuitable in uncertain times.

Elaborating on these previous posts, and in anticipation of the event this [Tuesday](#), September 19th, I turn again to newspapers as a crucial site of analysis. The news media are a socialising agent in contemporary societies, which contributes to the (re)production and circulation of gendered societal norms and notions. The media, and the news media in particular, also participate in those particular political moments where circulating norms are challenged. As such, engaging with newspapers deepens our understanding of the perpetuation of discourses that marginalise and exclude, but also has the potential to point us to possible areas of intervention.

In my [research](#) I investigated the role of two mainstream Italian newspapers, *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera*, at a particular moment in Italian politics (2006-2008) when attempts were made to provide legal recognition to relationships outside marriage (an institution which, in Italy, is accessible only to heterosexual couples). Three unsuccessful bills were proposed before a fourth bill was successfully passed in 2016. The different bill proposals put forward by the centre-left coalition government in power at the time generated heated debates in which heteronormative understandings of family, sexuality and kinship clashed with the claims for legal recognition of same sex couples. These conflicts generated spaces where the transformation and displacement of exclusionary and discriminatory discourses could take place not only at the level of laws, but also at the level of norms and cultural values. The media, I contend, were a central participant in these tensions and hence affected the potential transformation of circulating norms and discourses.

The news media, and newspapers in particular, (especially in contexts like Italy, where the news media are characterised by high political partisanship) can be interpreted not just as a space where political debates are reported, but also as actors that actively participate in the debates that they report. By granting space to certain voices and positions, by framing those positions, and by selectively representing the grounds of conflicts between opposing groups, the news media generate discourses that affect the issues that they report. In particular, they routinely emphasise conflict between opposing groups; conflict enhances the newsworthiness of an event and allows the media to strengthen their role in, and relevance to, political disputes.

This search for 'drama' and conflict' inevitably lends more space to those positions that can sustain controversies, perhaps exacerbating heated reactions and perpetuating the centrality of the issues reported. Drawing on my research to illustrate this again, a lot of media coverage was granted to those religious representatives and conservative politicians that fiercely opposed the legal recognition of same-sex couples on the ground of morality and traditions. Other actors were hence represented as responding to, contrasting with, and critiquing/agreeing with these conservative positions. This meant that newspaper coverage of all sides abided to the terms of the debate set by its most vociferous participants, de facto side-lining questions of citizenship and human rights.

However, the close scrutiny of newspapers' texts also revealed the ambivalence of the media analysed. While perpetuating exclusionary discourses, the news coverage also opened up a space where these frames could be disrupted and alternative discourses could emerge. In the context of my research, a space for the representation of families outside heterosexual norms became available in newspapers, and it became newly possible to vocally denounce structural homophobia.

Newspapers therefore can be investigated not only as the space where dominant discourses circulate but also as active participants to crucial debates. Notwithstanding the changes brought by the ongoing loss of readership, their online presence, the increasing concerns generated by new news outlets, and 'fake news', it is crucial not to lose sight of the enduring role of mainstream newspapers in shaping contemporary issues.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the author's thesis [Mediated tensions: Italian newspapers and the legal recognition of de facto unions](#), LSE (2015).
- The post gives the views of its author, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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Marina Franchi is an LSE fellow at LSE100: The LSE Course. Her research focuses on the media and the news media in particular. She is interested in questions of intimate and sexual citizenship and in the media's role in sustaining and disrupting normative notions of family, sexuality and kinship.