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Who got to Talk about it: Sourcing and Attribution in Broadcast News Coverage of the First 24 Hours of the 9/11 Tragedy

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Who got to Talk About it: Sourcing and Attribution in Broadcast News Coverage of the First 24 hours of the "9/11 Tragedy"

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INTRODUCTION

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 ("9/11") had a deep impact on notions of freedom, patriotism, racial profiling, and civil liberties in the U.S. It is imperative that we study not merely the repercussions of those events, but also the environment that existed when the events took place. One important inquiry is how news is covered, how journalists gather information and, of equal importance, from *whom* they gather information, particularly during a national crisis.

Journalists' use and selection of sources has been of interest to scholars for several years now, with research weaving in and out of journalists' dependence on official or authoritative sources, their selective use of counter sources, their biases, and their attempts at objectivity. It becomes important to record not only the choices journalists make in routine news coverage, but also those they make on their feet, when they are strapped for time and cannot make considered, responsible, and fair decisions. In other words, who are the sources toward whom journalists gravitate in the thick of the action?

The events of 9/11 provided an opportunity for breaking away from traditional news reporting norms, pack journalism, and sourcing ruts. In fact, the task of covering the attacks threw open the doors for a rich diversity of sources. The nature of the story and the nature of the cities (New York City and Washington, D.C.) made it possible, expedient, and even easy for reporters to make equitable use of sources from different races, ethnicities, and genders. This event was a tragedy with an undefined

face; thus, it mandated a lesser need to rely on authority figures and a greater need to report, quite literally, from ground zero.

This study analyzes the entire length of the first twenty-four hours of 9/11 coverage by three major U.S. television networks—CNN, NBC, and CBS—to study patterns of sourcing by journalists on the basis of gender and race. The results of this study show an overwhelming preference for male sources over female sources. The number of female sources came close to half of the number of male sources only when women were non-authoritative, such as bystanders or eyewitnesses at the scenes of the attacks. A similar bias was found in favor of white sources as compared to non-white sources. African American sources were significantly low in number, and Hispanic sources were almost absent, despite the diverse makeup of the populations of New York City and Washington, D.C. Also, the gender or race of the reporter had no impact on the gender or race of the sources they approached.

This is, therefore, the approach of this article: It first examines the existing literature regarding race and gender bias in the news media in order to establish the broad context of both normative expectations of journalistic sourcing and results of previous research on this subject, especially with regard to race and gender. Next, the article describes a study which specifically examines how three major television networks accomplished sourcing in the immediate aftermath of one of history's most avidly viewed and consumed disasters. These data are then analyzed in light of that previous research in an effort to come to some conclusions about the quality of television sourcing in the coverage of 9/11.

Literature Review

The literature on race and gender in the mass media is extensive and provides insight into both normative expectations and the results of previous research. In that sense, this literature review is designed to provide a context for the research results of the first twenty-four hours of

coverage of the 9/11 event and present the conclusions that follow herein. The literature review is divided into two principal sections. The first emphasizes previous work on race and ethnicity, and the second focuses on gender research.

News and Race/Ethnicity

In a country with a strongly mass-mediated public sphere, social, political, and cultural actors conduct their business and voice their ideas and opinions through the mass media,[3] but only certain Americans define America as we know it.[4] The dominance of the white racial majority in corporate media makes it the racial control group with regard to coverage. Media productions reveal new forms of racial differentiation, constantly reshaping the culture in which we live.[5] Even with a focus on the up-and-coming, the media still communicate long-standing cultural presumptions without consciously promoting a particular racial mindset consistently.[6] African Americans find that the onus rests on them to make the cultural leap and represent themselves in the mainstream media.

Moreover, most images of race overseas are constructed in such a way that they conform with accepted Western beliefs. The continued story of Africa as a place of war, coup, and catastrophe consistently makes its way into foreign news coverage and may be succinctly communicated to readers. The longstanding colonial image becomes the media image, which evolves to become a widespread, accepted fact.[7]

Racial divisions in thought and perceptions of other races contribute to a media focus on street violence and a lack of coverage of state and domestic violence toward minorities.[8] Kinder and Sanders argue that the biggest factor in race perceptions is attitude.[9] Media can activate these attitudes through the use of stereotypic portrayals of minorities in the reporting of common, local crime coverage.[10] In a study conducted in 1999, researchers found that crime reports involving minorities that preceded a presidential speech affected public approval of the president.[11]

Sniderman and Piazza argue that it is no longer appropriate to speak on the issue of race.[12] Consequently, politicians lack the ability to talk candidly about race and gender, so the typical quiet response condones behavior that is not necessarily accepted by anyone.[13] Race is frequently seen as a taboo and sensitive subject and a social problem without a group to blame or anyone to take the responsibility to fix it.

The news, meanwhile, reflects a sort of journalistic common sense in relation to relying on sources for information. Journalists often are unaware that their own cultural values and sensibilities might determine whom they use as sources in their stories.[14] Researchers interested in exploring journalistic practices that lead to either equitable or discriminatory representation of genders and ethnic groups have found that certain psychological processes may be working against journalists and leading to an inadvertent bias.[15]

Robert Entman refers to this unconscious stereotyping of minorities as "modern racism."[16] One of Entman's studies of news coverage revealed that violent crimes committed by African Americans were the largest category of local news.[17] Nearly half (46 percent) of national news stories involving African Americans portrayed them as threats to social order or victims of social misfortune such as crime, poverty, or bad schools.[18] Six of eight times in which African Americans were lead subjects, the news stories described violent crimes.[19] Further, African Americans were shown as being more dangerous.[20] Another one of Entman's studies of television news in Chicago showed that when blacks and whites were accused of similar crimes, black suspects were more likely than white suspects to be shown in police restraints and less likely to be identified by name.[21]

Recent literature is emerging on the biases in coverage of another racial group—Latinos. Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States, but they make up only 4 percent of regular prime-time characters on network television.[22] Even then, they are more likely to appear in sitcoms than on network news.[23]

Issues of representation of minorities in the media are focused on both the quantity and quality of coverage. Activists and scholars on diversity issues in the media have pointed out that diversity is achieved not just by ensuring adequate representation in numbers, but also by making the representation more inclusive.[24] This means that African Americans should not be used as sources only in stories about their community or "Black issues" but also routinely in other stories that do not speak to their race, permitting black sources to speak not as African Americans but as ordinary sources.

In New York City, a city known for its diverse population, such inclusion of different races and ethnicities, at least quantitatively, ought to be automatic, not merely an ideal for which to strive as an instance of journalistic integrity. In the case of such coverage, then, omission or inadequate representation, particularly of diverse racial and ethnic groups, magnifies the possibility that certain biases exist in the minds of journalists. At least one study has found that in the months after 9/11, Arab Americans were sought out as sources more than African Americans.[25] The study concluded that some racial minorities today might have to "compete" with other minorities for representation in news coverage.

News and Gender Bias

Men outnumber women as sources in news stories.[26] This imbalance is most notable in international reporting with men representing 61.5 percent of sources while women represented only 14 percent.[27] These numbers rose slightly with local news coverage, in which women represented 24 percent of sources.[28] Also, men are quoted more often in stories, especially in stories dealing with culture and education.[29] Recently, attention to gender in sourcing has surged. Women now constitute 40 percent of all civic journalism sources, a rate nearly double that found in earlier studies. [30] However, despite the recent interest in gender representation in network

news, most research tends to be centered on gender roles in television programming, rather than news.[31]

Some optimism had been generated about the adequate representation of women in news stories as more women broadcast anchors and reporters join the newsroom. However, studies have shown that even as women have progressed into positions of authority within the broadcast organization structure, they face barriers and conflicts with the dominant culture. Women are forced to either adapt to that culture or, in a few instances, challenge it.[32] Splichal and Garrison suggest that "[p]erhaps women who achieve management positions, as their male counterparts, have been rewarded for conformity in addition to achievement."[33]

A study of the impact of female editors in the newsroom found that while the gender of the editors made little difference to the issues covered, newspapers with female editors tended to focus on positive stories and treat their female reporters on par with male reporters. Both of these phenomena were less frequent at newspapers with male editors.[34] Other studies have shown, however, that several women in the newsroom feel weighed down by career barriers, of which the highest rated was an overemphasis on their physical appearance.[35]

Research on the impact of having more women in newsrooms has provided conflicting results. Peiser's survey of German reporters revealed that women ranked higher on social or humanitarian issues than men, leading to the conclusion that a higher proportion of women in newsrooms would lead to an enhancement of overall news judgment and media content.[36] Other studies show that the entry of more women into the broadcast network newsroom, overall, has done little to increase the representation of women as news sources. Studies over the past two decades have shown not only that women are ignored as news sources, but also that even when they are used as sources, they are unlikely to be approached in a professional capacity, no matter what the gender of the reporter or the topic of the story.[37]

Some researchers lay the blame for biased and skewed sourcing and other reporting inadequacies on the exigencies of live reporting.[38] Such reporting, they say, might actually thwart cohesive, thoughtful, ethical newsgathering and reporting processes.[39] The case of the 9/11 coverage makes a gender-focused study under these conditions possible. A remarkable number of reporters covering the disaster at ground zero were women.[40] Thus, the 9/11 coverage makes it possible to ask: When journalists are in the midst of a story that is making world news and involves terror, tragedy, and politics, to whom do they reach out as sources of news? This study seeks to explore whether bias was extended to the selection of sources by gender as well as race and ethnicity. The 9/11 news coverage, which presented one of the biggest challenges in recent times to journalists reporting on crisis, makes for a strong study of network news correspondents' sourcing strategies and choices.

Research Questions

This study examines the the degree to which sources used in the coverage represented the total community journalists were serving. The broad question is whether journalists who normally would be cognizant of diversity in their coverage managed to maintain that attitude when they had no time to plan. Specifically, did news networks cite sources of one racial/ethnic category or one gender more than the other? Did a relationship exist between the type of sources used (official/authoritative versus non-official/non-authoritative) and race or gender of the sources? Further, the study asks whether a relationship existed between the race or gender of the reporters and the race or gender of the sources they cited.

Methodology

Based on tapes obtained from the Vanderbilt Archives, the quantative analysis of this study began at the time the news broke at 8:48 a.m. (EST). The researchers counted the number of the particular speakers/voices on

television at any given moment. Since breaking news coverage often means journalists themselves assume roles of experts and commentators, as was particularly the case with coverage of 9/11,[41] reporters and anchors were included in the study as speakers/voices. By monitoring speaker time, the researchers hoped to determine who was "on screen" more or less often than others.

Formally, coding was done in the following categories that were designed to provide specificity about who the speakers were and the context in which they were used:

a) Type of story: This category divided the sources between the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon crash in Washington, D.C.
b) Gender of the anchor: The three possible codes in this category were male, female, and unknown. The "unknown" sub-category was most prevalent when news anchors/reporters cited unnamed officials.
c) Race of the anchor: The possible codes in this category were white, African American, Hispanic, other, and unknown.
d) Gender of the reporter
e) Race of the reporter
f) Type of source
    i. Unnamed official: This type included sources such as vague references to "A White House source" or "Pentagon sources," as well as unnamed firefighters and police officers approached for quotes on the scene.
    ii. Named official: This type included sources such as President Bush, sources in the Bush administration, Mayor Rudolph Guiliani, as well as those firefighters and policemen who were cited by name.
    iii. Authoritative: This category was devised to separate those sources approached for "expert" comment,

ranging from the first "expert" on one network—author Tom Clancy—to later comments from experts on Islam and the Middle East.

iv. Non-authoritative: This category captured eyewitness accounts, people on the streets, relatives of victims and other such sources.

v. Unknown: This category was created when coders found that anchors and reporters often suggested that information came from a source, but it was unclear whether the source was authoritative or non-authoritative.

g) Race of Source

h) Gender of Source

Apart from direct sources, coding also was done for people who were not interviewed personally but were, in a sense, given a voice in the coverage in that they were cited as the source of a certain opinion or quote. For example, a reference to former President Bill Clinton's foreign policy was coded as a source—male; white; named official.

RESULTS

The coding resulted in a count of a total of 2,219 speakers and voices, of which 778 were on CBS, 343 were on CNN, and 1,098 were on NBC. Of the total number of speakers and voices, 1,983 appeared in coverage of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City, and 236 in coverage of the plane crashing into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

The following analysis shows that of the 1,829 sources (this number excludes anchors and reporters), 1,212 (66.26 percent) of the sources were male, 250 (13.66 percent) were female and 367 (20.06 percent) were unknown.

TABLE 1					
	Race of Source				
		African			
Type of Source	White	American	Hispanic	Other	Unkown*
Unnamed official	45	5	1	7	232
Named official	413	16	1	39	120
Authoritative	259	14	1	13	80
Non-authoritative	358	28	1	12	107
*Not apparent due to type of coverage.					

When analyzing the numbers by race, this analysis found that of the 1,829 sources, 1,105 (60.41 percent) were white, 65 (3.55 percent) were African American, 4 (0.21 percent) were Hispanic, 92 (5.03 percent) came under other race/ethnicities, and 563 (30.78 percent) sources were of unknown race or ethnicity, i.e., their race/ethnicity was not apparent because of instances such as the use by journalists of unidentified sources.

As evident from Table 1, a significant difference existed between the number of white and non-white sources in each category of source importance. Forty-five of the unnamed officials were white, five were African American, one was Hispanic, seven belonged to other race/ethnicities and, in the case of 232 sources, the race of the speaker was unknown.

A definite preference in the named officials category was for white sources (413). A mere 16 were African American, just one source was Hispanic, 39 were categorized as other, and 120 were cases where the race/ethnicity was unknown. A similar pattern continues for the authoritative category, with 259 white sources, 14 African Americans, one Hispanic, 13 other race/ethnicities and 80 cases of unknown race/ethnicities. Further, the same pattern showed up in the case of non-authoritative

sources, of which 358 were white, 28 were African American, one was Hispanic, 12 were other, and 107 were unknown.

TABLE 2

	Gender of Source		
Type of Source	Male	Female	Unknown*
Unnamed official	90	17	183
Named official	481	21	87
Authoritative	297	31	39
Non-authoritative	301	178	27
*Not apparent due to type of coverage.			

When examining the relationship between the type of source and the gender of the source, we found a clear, significant division along gender lines when it came to the type of source used. As shown in Table 2, 90 of the unnamed officials were male, 17 were female, and 183 were cases in which the gender was unknown because the coverage did not specify the gender of the person being cited, which was especially prevalent when the source was unnamed. In the named official category, 481 sources were male, 21 were female, and 87 were cases where the gender was unknown, i.e., not mentioned in the coverage.

When it came to authoritative sources, 297 were male, 31 were female, and 39 were "unknown." The only source category in which females were cited close to half the time was that of the non-authoritative source—301 were males, 178 were female, and 27 were unknown.

TABLE 3					
	Race of Source				
		African			
Race of reporter	White	American	Hispanic	Other	Unkown*
White	770	43	3	66	325
African American	99	4	0	5	32
Hispanic	1	0	0	0	3
Other	0	1	0	0	0
Unknown*	65	8	0	7	58
*Not apparent due to type of coverage.					

When examining the relationship between the race of the reporters and the race of the people they approached as sources, as shown in Table 3, this study found that no matter what the race of the reporter, there was an across-the-board preference for white sources over non-whites.

TABLE 4			
	Gender of Source		
Gender of Reporter	Male	Female	Unknown*
Male	686	126	190
Female	303	76	96
Unknown*	6	2	5
*Not apparent due to type of coverage.			

An examination of the relationship between the gender of the reporters and the gender of the people they approached as sources revealed that the reporters' gender did not have an impact on the gender of the sources they cited. See Table 4. Once again, the scales were tilted heavily in favor of male sources.

DISCUSSION

The findings present a bleak picture of source bias during crisis news coverage, with a strong tendency among journalists to veer toward the traditional authority figure of the white male official. Three clear trends in the nature of sourcing during national crises emerged from this study. First, there is an overwhelming reliance on white sources compared to any other racial category. Second, the near absence of female sources in every category of source used except the non-authoritative source would suggest that 9/11 was a male story with little impact on women and little participation by them. The third trend indicated by this study is that the diversification in the newsroom by race, ethnicity, and gender seems to have done little to reduce gender and race biases and improve representation in news.

Reliance on White Sources

As America was hit by its worst act of terrorism ever, reporters rushed to white sources for comments, news, and viewpoints. As stated earlier, this might not be the easiest thing to do in a city with the highest levels of racial and ethnic diversity in the country. The poor (almost absent) representation of African Americans and Hispanics, in particular, is consistent for all three networks examined. Moreover, even though the quantity of female sources increased somewhat as non-authoritative sources, no such increase was seen for non-whites as non-authoritative sources, indicating that bias in sourcing by race may be harder to overcome than bias in sourcing by gender. This finding alone points to the need for ethnographic interviews, field studies, and in-depth interviews with news journalists. Such future studies should examine routines, thought processes, and newsroom procedures that propel journalists toward white sources despite the ample availability of non-white sources.

Absence of Female Sources

The absence of female sources in the coverage of 9/11 during the first twenty-four hours is particularly perplexing. This is indicative of a conscious or unconscious discrimination on the part of reporters, possibly intensified during reportage of an unprecedented crisis. The nature of the story does not appear to be responsible for this bias in favor of male sources. The 9/11 tragedy was not merely a political, business, and/or foreign policy story, for which it might be argued by some that most sources tend to be male. Authoritative sources in government, police, medicine, and aviation, or in analytical, talking head coverage, could all have been made up of female sources as well as male. The fact that this did not happen points to the need to study a possible perception among journalists that stories about terrorism, war, and militarism are male stories. In such stories, do female sources tend to be approached merely as victims?

As this study found, women were quoted largely in the human-interest format of story and as non-authoritative sources. A typical example of this was images of women screaming during live coverage of the World Trade Center attacks, women giving eyewitness accounts, or of female relatives of people who were reported dead. These formats of coverage during the 9/11 tragedy probably set a precedent and even intensified the dependence thereafter on the white male official during coverage of national crises. Future studies could examine how such a precedent has played out in the coverage of, say, the subsequent War on Terror.

No Impact of Newsroom Diversity on Diversity in the News

One explanation for the lack of impact of newsroom diversity may be that journalists are still influenced by the "objectivity" norm, which might inhibit female reporters or non-white reporters from approaching female or non-white sources. However, another journalistic bastion—fairness—urges equity in sourcing. Were non-white/female journalists being "objective" in their sourcing decisions even though they might have been unfair?

As suggested earlier, the 9/11 events provided an opportunity for breaking away from traditional news reporting norms, pack journalism, and sourcing ruts, and in fact threw open the doors for a rich diversity of sources. This was an unknown tragedy with an undefined face; therefore, there was even less need to rely on authority figures and even greater need to report, quite literally, from ground zero. The diversity of the victim cities (New York City and Washington, D.C.) meant there were many opportunities to approach diverse sources. Moreover, all races and both genders were equally affected by the devastation—in politics, and in their policing, professional, and personal lives. However, despite the natural diversity of the story, the coverage relied unduly on traditional sourcing procedures.

Once again, a study using qualitative in-depth interviews with journalists who covered the 9/11 tragedy from different vantage points (the White House, the World Trade Center, and the Pentagon) would help complete the picture by inquiring into their decision making processes and compulsions in news sourcing. In particular, this study calls for a renewed vigor for inquiry into the sociology of news production from the point of view of the impact of reporters' gender and race on their sourcing decisions and strategies.

As this study demonstrates, an incremental body of research, based not merely on news content but also on the circumstances and exigencies of news production, is necessary. Surveys of male, female, white, and non-white journalists might provide confidential indications of difficulties in news processes. Fieldwork in newsrooms and in the company of news reporters during their beats and assignments would likely reveal differences in sourcing styles and inhibiting circumstances. These and other types of studies could help explain the biases and inabilities that influence the gate-keeping role journalists seem to play with sources.

CONCLUSION

Given that representation in the mainstream public opinion formation process is impacted by representation in mainstream news media, an absence (or selective use) of entire populations, particularly in multicultural cities such as New York City and Washington, D.C., is indicative of well-entrenched biases engendered by the news production process itself. This evidence holds implications not merely for the equitable makeup of newsrooms and its result on news, but for the very nature of race and gender relations in America.

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[7] *See* Jo Ellen Fair, *War, Famine, and Poverty: Race in the Construction of Africa's Media Image*, 17 J. COMM. INQUIRY 5 (1993).

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[14] *See* CHRISTOPHER P. CAMPBELL, RACE, MYTH AND THE NEWS (1995).
[15] *See, e.g.,* S. HOLLY STOCKING & PAGET H. GROSS, HOW DO JOURNALISTS THINK? A PROPOSAL FOR THE STUDY OF COGNITIVE BIAS IN NEWSMAKING 4, 5 (1989); Renita Coleman, *Race and Ethical Reasoning: The Importance of Race to Journalistic Decision Making*, 80 JOURNALISM & MASS COMM. Q. 295, 297-99 (2003).
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[17] *Id.* at 336.
[18] *See* ENTMAN, THE BLACK IMAGE, *supra* note 5, at 230-31.
[19] Entman, *Modern Racism*, *supra* note 16, at 336.
[20] *Id.* at 342.
[21] Robert M. Entman, *Blacks in the News: Television, Modern Racism and Cultural Change*, 69 JOURNALISM Q. 341, 350-51 (1992).
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