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An Analysis of the Role of Gender in Political News Media Coverage

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SIT International Relations and Multilateral Diplomacy

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Abstract

Although there has been a decrease in specific exclusionary rules in governments around the world, most nations are very far from a governing body which represents the diversity that exists within their borders. There are many issues which may dissuade previously marginalized populations from political participation. One of these problems when it comes to female participation, is differential political news coverage. This study looked at how media sources set the political agenda and frame news stories in terms of the gender of a politician, and how this can create an additional challenge for women in government. The investigation found that women are not only often excluded from conversations about topics like economics and military, but they are disproportionately asked about issues related to things like women's rights, creating the narrative that this must be a policy priority. The study also found that politicians, such as Angela Merkel, face more scrutiny than male counterparts to make equality legislation a policy priority, disregarding all other aspects of her belief or policies. This highlights the need to separate arbitrary traits from the identities of politicians, in order to hold all government officials accountable to contribute to equal representation.

Keywords: Media Studies, Politics, Gender, Angela Merkel

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Introduction

The Problem

As nations across the world strive towards democratic development, the need to include marginalized groups, as well as diverse perspectives in every nations' political system is of ever-increasing importance. However, despite the widespread increase in areas like voting rights, and the breakdown in direct barriers to running for office, a governing body which is representative of the population is far from coming to fruition in most societies. Studies have shown that in many developed countries, the discrepancy between male and female political participation is not necessarily more or less, but rather differences in *modes* of participation (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). The study indicated that while women are just as active as men in politics, they prefer private activism as opposed to traditional mechanisms, such as running for public office (330). While these methods of participation still influence the governing process of a society, it calls into question why women tend to shy away from directly running for office and turn to more unconventional participation. Historically, it has been culture and gender equality in broader society which helps to foster more inclusivity in government; nations where female leadership is more commonplace in things like family life, or in the workforce, tend to be more accepting of female politicians (Union, 2020). However, the developed nations involved in this study were, according to the UN Human Development Report, some of the highest-ranking countries when it comes to their Gender Development Index scores, indicating there are additional issues contributing to governmental participation (UN, 2021). Bringing awareness to the more nuanced and institutionalized matters contributing to the marginalization of women from the lawmaking process, is essential in order to create democracies which promote representation more demonstrative of the population as a whole.

Even the most respected and powerful female politicians face an array of challenges distinct from their male counterparts- which could account for their chosen mode of indirect political participation. One of these challenges is how gender is addressed in political news coverage. Media is an incredibly effective tool for influencing public opinion; The portrayal of a politician inevitably impacts public perception, and the criteria people use to judge them. Studies have shown that female politicians around the world are forced to engage with stories about gender specific, stereotypical, topics regardless of their other characteristics or political views (Pas & Aaldering, 2020). Some of these stereotypes include receiving more attention to their appearance and personal life, plus more negative viability coverage, and trait coverage (2020). Many of these gender specific topics which are covered can make women more vulnerable to criticisms that their male counterparts would never encounter, especially when it comes to questions about women's rights, which female politicians are disproportionately asked about (Winfrey & Schnoebelen, 2019). Furtherly exasperating this, female politicians are judged more harshly than males for the same transgressions, and news coverage of the same event between genders can vary extensively (Smith, Powers, & Suarez, 2005). These stereotypes, and coverage of specific stories based on gender, can potentially lead to women being represented in way that makes them less attractive to voters, and overall creates an additional challenge in their political career.

The issue of gender in news coverage is multifaceted. One aspect concerns how often they are consulted in the news in general. Concerning strictly consultation, women are the subjects of news coverage (either quoted or whom the story is about) only 27% of the time, clearly showing a widespread discrepancy (Center, 2018). When considering the substance of these articles they are included in, the findings are even more concerning. Women are most

likely to be featured in ‘soft news’ stories, such as celebrity and arts, while they are much less frequently included in ‘hard news’ such as politics, economics and government (White, 2009). This clearly would have a huge impact on female politicians, if their opinions are only considered for certain news topics.

The ability to point out instances of discrepancies in media coverage, especially when it comes to politicians, is the most necessary tool for creating a more equitable, and overall accurate, media environment. Studies conducted in order to correct this have found that, when it came to gender of the journalists themselves, it was shown that broadcasting networks with more longstanding gender diversity policies actually scored worse when it came to equal news coverage among males and females (Swert & Hooghe, 2010). This suggests that this is a much more systemic problem, and is not as simple as just employing more female journalists. As women’s rights movements advance, it is important to realize what is actually perpetuating issues such as unequal representation in government- before taking steps to implement policies like gender quotas in government. This research seeks to investigate the tie between a politician and their gender in traditional political news media in hopes of creating a more equal playing field for participation in government.

Focus of the Study

The focus of this study is to investigate recent news coverage of Angela Merkel using feminist media theory, to recognize stories which feature her gender, or include a stereotype that is associated with women in politics. It will compare this to public perception of her leadership and policies, to determine if this coverage was at all representative of her, or was exclusively a reaction to her gender. The question to be answered, more broadly, is: to what extent, and in what ways does the media focus on certain traits such as gender, and can we remove this to

create equality in news? After being named the world's most powerful women by Forbes magazine for over 10 years, and consistently maintaining one of the highest approval ratings of any head of state, Angela Merkel's 16-year chancellorship has clearly made strides in normalizing women in positions of power (Forbes, 2021). Her long career was characterized by the handling of countless European crises and she has been dubbed an inspiration to millions around the world. However, Merkel remains unique from many other female politicians, as she tends to shy away from issues such as women's rights and feminism, but yet is so often asked about topics such as whether she is a feminist (Mushaben, *The Reluctant Feminist: Angela Merkel and the Modernization of Gender Politics in Germany*, 2018). This study will consider previous research regarding her public perception and also include the opinions of, and interviews with experts in related fields, to try and learn more about how a politician of her beliefs and background has been confronted with gender in the media. Finally, the goal of this study is to suggest a systematic way to not only distinguish inequalities in news coverage, but to attempt to correct them or increase awareness among media consumers and producers of these issues.

Literature Review

How to decrease the role gender narratives play in political news coverage is an area of evolving research, and studies into these topics go as deep as recognizing the importance of detaching the historical link of political power to the patriarchal identity (Eggers, Vivyan, & Wagner, 2018). This unconscious link often causes journalists to default to either a story which includes a gender stereotype or simply even arbitrarily incorporates the fact that the politician is a woman, which is only considered noteworthy because politics has historically been associated with men. On this same institutionalized level, "linguistic studies have analyzed how language

typically uses gender as a defining feature of a person, and the default is a masculine perspective” which helps to explain some of the psychology behind the media fixation with gender (Carver, 2013). Male politicians have the luxury of being the ‘default’ gender and do not have to address certain issues which are constantly posed to women. These problems perpetuate extreme challenges faced by many female politicians in media coverage, such as in the case of Hillary Clinton, who one study pointed that “digital media was used to produce a political reality in which Clinton's bid for the White House could be rendered improper and unnatural” (Richie, 2013). This is just one example of a narrative where women must prove themselves to even be considered on the same political threshold as a male.

Stereotypical portrayals of gender have also been shown to be hinder the number of women who seek office by causing sentiments of ‘defeatism’ and ‘political apathy’ discouraging political participation, even if there are no physical barriers to joining (Galligan & Clavero, 2008). This ties back into the study showing that women prefer less institutionalized forms of politics, potentially to stay out of the political media spotlight avoid these encounters with the press (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010). Another challenge of female politicians is how they respond to the specific topics forced upon them, which one source explained by saying “female leaders find themselves wedged between rock and proverbial hard place” (Mushaben, Kan-di(e)-dat? Unpacking Gender Images across Angela Merkel’s Four Campaigns for the Chancellorship, 2018). This referred to the concept that if women go against stereotypes, that they face criticism such as ‘neglecting their god given role as a nurturing caregiver’ and conversely, if they act feminine they are judged incapable of a leadership role. This has specific effects on women in higher offices and in the executive branch of government, as these are more demanding, time consuming careers, which creates even more opportunities to paint a woman as ill-equipped due

to these antiquated gender roles (Reyes-Housholder, 2020). Moreover, women may also seem less equipped for these positions because the media does not offer them the chance to discuss policy topics in traditionally male dominated fields, which are clearly important to voters. For example, on topics such as economics, men's share of voices was up to 31 times higher than women's (Byrnes & Kassova, 2020). This research shows some of the specific ways gender stereotypes have been used in the past and the negative impacts that it can have on politicians.

This is especially interesting when it comes to Angela Merkel, whose political agenda has a much greater focus on topics not traditionally associated with her gender, and who has expressed a specific aversion to conversing about things such as feminism; one article has commented on her attempt to 'de-gender politics' (Ferree, 2006). Her controversial reluctance to embrace what is thought of as a 'traditional western feminist' has drawn criticism from many saying that she should use her role to help advance the rights of all women (Mushaben, *The Reluctant Feminist: Angela Merkel and the Modernization of Gender Politics in Germany*, 2018). This identity is distinct from most powerful female politicians and has contributed to a changing perspective about the decreased significance of gender playing a defining role in a political identity (Ferree, 2006). This study hopes to delve further into the intricacies of how her identity and beliefs are approached in the media and what concerns this raises.

Research Methodology

Quantitative Analysis: Media Review

To analyze the most recent news coverage of Angela Merkel, five different German news websites were considered. These were chosen using two different sources, which named the most popular German news media outlets, all with different affiliations, owners, and funding (Deutschland.de, 2019) (News Media and Political Attitudes in Germany, 2018). The study used

the digital archives of the websites and analyzed each news story which mentioned the name “Angela Merkel” from the October to November of 2021. After identifying how many articles mentioned her somewhere in the text, it was furtherly narrowed down to only stories directly concerning *her*, excluding those which simply included a brief mention. Following this process, feminist media theory was applied to distinguish the stories which were directly about Merkel, *and* written about her gender, or topics that are associated with common female trait, or belief stereotypes. Due to the scope of this study, it will be focused mostly just on the topics covered, and not all of the direct language or judgements issued within the content of the stories themselves. Some of these stereotypical topics include discussions of her appearance, motherhood, work life balance, military/economic competency and emotional expressiveness (Pas & Aaldering, 2020). This analysis will be compared to examples of Angela Merkel’s past statement and policies, to determine whether the topics covered are reflective of her beliefs and policies. Overall, it will try to determine how much gender was featured throughout her news coverage and whether it was a defining factor of what topics were chosen to discuss.

Qualitative Analysis: Interviews

In order to gain more insight into this topic, several experts on subject areas such as, gender equality, news media, communications and politics were consulted in the form of interviews. Their unique perspectives have been used to supplement the existing literature, and to gain some more recent qualitative data, which is important due to the always changing and rapidly advancing fields of politics and media. Some interviews were formally conducted with specific questions prepared, however, some offered expertise in more of an informal setting, which allowed for a unique look into their field. Not only were these interviews helpful in solidifying

the methods and theoretical framework of the study, but also offered further information on general public perception of Angela Merkel and gender inequality in news media.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are especially important when discussing sensitive topics with interviewees such as gender and politics. When conducting interviews, it is necessary to be aware of this, and ensure proper consent from each participant. This project only includes interviews from adults who are able to give informed consent. Furthermore, when formulating questions for the interview it is important to exclude any possible bias, taking a subjective view in order to not skew the results, and ensuring that answers to the questions are properly conveyed in the research. Additionally, respecting the requested anonymity of subjects is of the utmost importance to maintain trust and ensure the best quality information to be included within the research.

Theoretical Framework

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis will be used to interpret the overall messages of each news article, in order to expose a bias or stereotype that the producers of media may have unintentionally used when creating it. Media analysis employs a method of encoding and decoding, which identifies the message ‘encoded’ by the creator of the media versus what is ‘decoded’ by the consumer (Hall, 1973). This framework applies semiotics to analyze how media encodes symbols, and aims to deconstruct the underlying message that a media text may convey (Hodkinson, 2017). The producers encode the media with meaning, in hopes that it will be interpreted using the dominant ideology surrounding the symbols, as opposed to an oppositional or negotiated reading, which points out unintended messages. These dominant ideologies often adhere to common standards of the time, which in this case, are related to the historical patriarchy in most societies’

politics (Zoonen, 1994). Feminist theory points out stereotypes, which are sometimes unknowingly encoded, and seeks to point out often times overlooked instances of inequality. An oppositional reading helps to expose the unintentional focus on gender in the sphere of political news media, and help formulate a way to ensure content that is representative of the politician themselves, and not on arbitrary traits like gender.

Analysis

Traditional Political News Media

Perceptions of Angela Merkel

After developing a framework to analyze the how frequently news coverage was focused on topics specifically related to gender, and looking into some background information about the political identity of Angela Merkel, consultations with experts was the next step. The goal of this step of the research was to gain more qualitative details on the different aspects of the chancellor's policies, beliefs, and background. One professor at a local university, who is also an international human rights activist, was intrigued by the idea of investigating how often gender was brought up in news coverage of Merkel, in light of her personal views of the chancellors' policies and personality. The professor pointed out the interesting marginality of most traditional feminine traits, such as a very prominent home/marital life or a focus on clothing, which are usually of utmost importance especially during the campaign of a female politician. "When I think of her, I think of a rational scientist who fought through many crises over the years, the last word I would think of is 'woman' to describe her, it is obviously a part of her, but not a defining one" (M. O'Neil, personal communication, November, 9th 2021). An assistant professor of gender studies at another university, had many of the same thoughts. "The most feminine thing about her is her nickname- Mutti" (Anonymous, personal communication, November 11th 2021).

She went on to detail how the German population widely uses this phrase meaning mother, which was developed as a patronizing slur by the opposing parties, to refer to the leader who does not have children (Evans, 2013). When asked about the role which ‘Mutti’ has played in women’s rights in Germany and abroad she was clear in her feeling that beyond being a symbol of the possibility for a woman to ascend to this level, she did little for substantive policy change in Germany in respect to gender. Both of these sources agreed that beyond this symbolism, the goals of Merkel’s chancellorship were not defined by her gender and viewed her more in terms of her political affiliations with the conservative party. The professor of gender studies also commented that this could be due to a lack of political feasibility for these type of policy goals within the conservative party. However, while more liberal policies may have been a difficult sell among her party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Merkel did successfully challenge some other existing conservative narratives. She helped to pass laws such as marriage equality and increase immigration quotas; but never personally addressed gender equality legislation, making it clear it was not on top of her agenda.

When interviewing a professor of politics, he brought up another aspect of Merkel’s personality in addition to her conservative affiliation, which was her upbringing in communist East-Germany. “One must consider that she was raised in a society that viewed people as workers, regardless of gender. From a young age she was surrounded by an atmosphere of equality” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 24th 2021). He pointed out an interesting positive element of this authoritarian regime, which was creating a sense of equality among all people. This argument was repeated in an article which discussed how her ‘neutrality’ on gender issues could stem from this deeply ingrained belief of sameness among all people, which is a difference in the East and West German identities (Woggon, 2019). During this

interview, we went on to discuss how she, very traditionally, rose through the ranks of the CDU, and her tendency to follow what the previous conservative chancellor, Helmut Kohl, had done, never using gender as a platform. One article about Merkel's rise to power, and role in women's rights movement stated that she had 'no choice' but to run as a woman, however, her role in the movement was separating the feminine identity to be viewed as an individual (Ferree, 2006). The article went on to say that unlike male politicians, her standpoint on advancing the rights of women would *always* be a topic that would come up, whether she directly spoke on it herself or not (96).

During Merkel's time in office, although she personally shied away from addressing women's rights as a policy priority, a sweeping bill advancing gender equality was passed in Germany, mandating legally binding quotas for women in government and private companies (Gesley, 2021). A study was done to determine the main actors and reasons behind the latest gender equality legislation, which was passed in 2020, and it found that Angela Merkel, who although was the most powerful female politician in the world, did not play a significant role (Petra Ahrens, 2021). While this is clearly understandable given her beliefs, many people were still angered by this and alleged that as a woman she should do more in legislating 'for women'. In previous years, although over one-third of her cabinet was comprised of women, she was very much opposed to implementing any type of quota system (Eddy, 2013). She was criticized for supposedly putting party consensus above German women, and for 'neutralizing' her gender to the public. Given this overview of how Merkel approached gender in her politics and her beliefs on the subject, her news coverage will be examined to see how often it is still brought up.

Figure 1:

Analysis of Topics in German News Coverage of Angela Merkel From October-November 2021

Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF): total **98** digital articles that mention Angela Merkel from 10/17-11/17

- Public-service television broadcaster since 1963 and is an independent nonprofit institution. Many different programs and channels offered.

The number of articles that are directly concerning her policies, life, leadership etc....	23
How many articles mention gender or discuss a topic related to a stereotype? (including appearance, personal life, motherhood, work life balance, emotional expressiveness, or any specific women's rights issues)	Total: 6 10/26/2021- Discusses her winning 'affection' compared to a male counterpart. 11/12/2021- About her portraits over the years and her appearance in them.
Percentage of Articles Concerning Gender: 26%	11/12/2021- Discusses her being the first female chancellor. 11/03/2021- Calls her the mother of Germany. 10/22/2021- Calls her the 'girlfriend' of Barack Obama. 10/23/2021- Written about including more women in political parties.

Ziet: total **131** digital articles that mention Angela Merkel from 10/17-11/17

- Privately owned newspaper in existence since 1946. Known for long, extensive news stories that are generally more left-leaning.

The number of articles that are directly concerning her policies, life, leadership etc....	26
How many articles mention gender or discuss a topic related to a stereotype? (including appearance, personal life, motherhood, work life balance, emotional expressiveness, or any specific women's rights issues)	Total: 5 10/28/2021- Titled 'where are the women'. 11/02/2021- Article on a 28-year-old woman in Bundestag is compared to Merkel (no other relation between the two).
Percentage of Articles Concerning Gender: 19%	11/08/2021- Discusses rape and assault of female migrants. 11/11/2021- Discusses her image in portraits. 11/11/2021- Points out Merkel's emotions compared to male politicians.

Bild-Zeitung : total **156** digital articles that mention Angela Merkel from 10/17-11/17

- Published by the Axel-Springer Publishing Company is Germany's largest and most popular tabloid. A mixture of news, gossip, and sensationalism. Notorious for having a large influence on politicians.

The number of articles that are directly concerning her policies, life, leadership etc....	25
How many articles mention gender or discuss a topic related to a stereotype? (including appearance, personal life, motherhood, work life balance, emotional expressiveness, or any specific women's rights issues)	Total: 14 11/17/2021- Critiquing her keeping staff and not returning to civilian life (x2). 11/16/2021- Calls Merkel expensive for maintaining staff after leaving office and not returning to life.
Percentage of Articles Concerning Gender: 56%	11/10/2021- About first female candidate for chancellor. 11/10/2021- Calls her dealings with Putin 'dramatic'. 11/08/2021- Titled 'the CDU's women problem'. 11/06/2021- Titled 'women are just a commodity'. 11/03/2021- Refers to her as mother of Germany. 11/03/2021- Titled 'there are very good women in the CDU' and says that women are afraid of being compared to Merkel. 11/01/2021- Whole section about how women dominate nominations for a certain bundestag position. 10/25/2021- A woman is slated for VP. 10/24/2021- Revealing that she gives away her discarded blazers. 10/23/2021- Asking what she does with her discarded blazers and wardrobe. 10/18/2021- Pointing out the lack of women in CDU party.

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Deutsche Welle (DW): total **72** digital articles that mention Angela Merkel from 10/17-11/17

- Is a relatively new news organization specializing in international coverage and in several different languages. State-owned and funded by German federal taxes, intended to provide independent coverage to connect people.

The number of articles that are directly concerning her policies, life, leadership etc....	16
How many articles mention gender or discuss a topic related to a stereotype? (including appearance, personal life, motherhood, work life balance, emotional expressiveness, or any specific women's rights issues)	Total: 3 11/12/2021- Her appearance in portraits and general looks. 10/23/2021- Calls on women to be more active in politics.
Percentage of Articles with Stereotype: 19%	10/20/2021- New candidate is discussing gender inequality in Bundestag.

Stern: total **140** digital articles that mention Angela Merkel from 10/17-11/17

- Most popular news magazine in Germany since the end of WW2. It is privately owned and generally more liberal and left leaning.

The number of articles that are directly concerning her policies, life, leadership etc....	63
How many articles mention gender or discuss a topic related to a stereotype? (including appearance, personal life, motherhood, work life balance, emotional expressiveness, or any specific women's rights issues)	Total: 8 11/17/2021- Discusses the CDU as a 'gentlemen's club' and points out an unknown woman with no relation to Merkel to compare them. 11/15/2021- Her appearance in portraits.
Percentage of Articles Concerning Gender: 13%	11/14/2021- Discusses not having children impacting career. 11/12/2021- The Danish monarch comments on her character and competence is then asked whether she thinks there is enough women in politics. 11/07/2021- Asks whether there is enough women in the CDU party. 11/04/2021- Discusses her and her husband's relationship.

	<p>10/23/2021- About her blazers and clothing choices.</p> <p>10/23/2021- Titled ‘Merkel encourages women in politics’.</p>
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Note. News sources were chosen, and descriptions were obtained, according to a Pew Research Study (News Media and Political Attitudes in Germany, 2018) and also an article on an independent German website (Deutschland.de, 2019).

Findings of Quantitative Analysis

General Findings

First, the percentage of articles which concerned a topic which had something to do with Chancellor Merkel being a woman (or a stereotype about this identity) in each news source was calculated. The next step was taking the mean of the values, to determine the average number of these types of articles in all of the sources. While the individual percentages of gender specific articles ranged from 13% to 56%, which could be potentially attributed to several differences in each media company, the overall average was 26%. This means that out of all news articles directly about Angela Merkel on these German news sites, more than a quarter of them were about a topic that had something to do with her gender. While this general statistic is concerning, it can be broken down into several specific issues within the coverage.

Agenda Setting & Stereotypes

Agenda setting is the ability of the media to choose certain topics which the public will focus on to form judgements about an event or individual, especially during elections and in politics more generally (Dearing, Rogers, & Rogers, 1996). In this context, the study established that the press has often used stereotypes related to gender to ‘set the agenda’ of what people will consider when they think of Angela Merkel. If the press focuses on Merkel in stories concerning how there is not enough women in government, the public will judge her based on how she has played a role in the women’s movement- and not on a topic like her economic policy. This was

discussed during an interview with an EU Business School Researcher, who is currently looking into how gender discrepancies in many industries are being addressed. He noted that *especially* in public office or positions with a responsibility to stakeholders, such as CEO, gender should be completely negligible when it comes to expectations and policies. “When you start assigning certain obligations to female officials which are different from males, or focusing unnecessarily on their gender, this exacerbates the problem of inequality within these offices, because why should it [gender] even be discussed at that point?” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 26th 2021). Overall agenda setting creates unconscious associations in the minds of media consumers who will use the most salient stories to form judgements, which are often chosen because of gender, instead of focusing on issues which are much more relevant to her political platform.

Framing

Another problem realized in this investigation is what is referred to as ‘framing’. Framing is when media presents an event or story in a specific way which influences the way that people interpret it (Scheufele, 2000). Not only does the agenda set by the press matter, but the way the event is framed makes an even bigger impact. In this news coverage, many of the stories about Angela Merkel were framed around her identity as a woman. During the same interview with the business researcher, he stated: “the minute that you include even the context of ‘female chancellor’ instead of just saying chancellor, you are framing the issue in terms of her gender, which in almost all cases in a political discussion is irrelevant” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 26th 2021). In this study specifically, many of the articles which were considered were a review of her leadership over the past 16 years and despite all of her other accomplishments, the first thing mentioned was often her gender. The interviewee went on to say

that adding this caveat to her title can not only distract from her accomplishments, but even seems to diminish them in a way (Anonymous, personal communication, November 26th 2021).

Perspectives on News Coverage

After making this calculation, and delineating the specific issues which are involved in news concerning Angela Merkel, an official from a political news organization was interviewed to learn more about this topic from a journalistic standpoint. One of the first things he called attention to was the mindset reporters and journalists often have when creating a story, or ‘setting the agenda’. He detailed that even state-run media still is inherently focused on ‘giving the people what they want’ and that when it comes down to the individual journalist, no one wants to publish a boring or unpopular story. This problem is exasperated in profit-based organizations, where generating popularity and giving equal coverage almost never aligns. Furthermore, we discussed how more attention needs to be brought to the way that biases are manifest in news coverage. “When you ask a woman about her outfit or whether she is a feminist, it is often just an implicit association, combined with the fact that we think it is what readers want to know about her, it is often the content that is created, equal or not” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 11th 2021). Furtherly, considering the lack of attention to female opinions on topics such as economics and military, he agreed that the media environment is often polluted with topics that are really only brought up because of gender, with little thought to substantive policies or beliefs (Anonymous, personal communication, November 11th 2021). The inherent goals of journalists themselves clearly contributes to the agenda which is set in the news, which generally perpetuates previously held beliefs of consumers. This essentially creates

echo chambers¹ in the traditional media environment, where detrimental gender bias is disseminated.

We went on to examine possible remedies for this issue, and if there was a potential regulatory method, or information campaign which could be put in place to try and make the journalistic community aware of these tendencies. “I think we are moving away from many instances of really harmful news bias, however, with so many considerations to make when writing a news article there are also many opportunities to insert a bias- which everyone has one way or another” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 11th 2021). He went on to detail how he was recently writing an article about economics and when choosing a photo, he could have gone with an image of a few men sitting in a bar. “Clearly this follows the stereotype that economics is a ‘boys club’, and I think it is important to at least try and catch ourselves, even when it comes to seemingly small things like what photo we are using” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 11th 2021). Furthermore, even when more ‘neutral’ events are covered, they are still framed in terms of the feminine identity. This is due to the role the psychological concept of Attribution Theory plays in framing, causing people to attribute certain behaviors to things like the gender of a person, discounting other variables (Scheufele, 2000). One example of this, which was commented on in an article regarding Merkel’s image was:

If Angela Merkel is convinced of the inevitability of a process, she moves on unsentimentally. But that is remarked on differently for her than it would be for a man. And should she seek a compromise, which would be called political talent in a man, the newspapers call her hesitant. If she gets her own way, she's called the

¹ An echo chamber is defined as an environment in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered. It is a common phenomenon in social media, which algorithmically shows people what they want.

iron lady whose path is littered with the corpses of her male opponents (Roll, 2009).

On a broader scope, we concluded that more attention needs to be brought to considering stereotypical beliefs especially when it comes to things like choosing what questions to ask female politicians or the topic of a specific story, no matter the potential popularity of the article.

Comparison with Race-Based Agenda Setting

In order to engage with the issue of the trait-based media agenda setting, during one interview with a professor, we discussed how besides only gender, other marginalized populations, have experienced similar instances of forced media narrative. He brought up the first black president of the United States, Barack Obama, and how no matter what his stance on any racial matter was, he would constantly be forced to talk about his race in the media (Anonymous, personal communication, November 24th 2021). While a white politician may be questioned about this topic sometimes, or when a current event makes the topic salient, President Obama would always be subject to consistent stories concerning this. Similar to how Merkel was criticized for ‘neutralizing’ her gender, Obama’s strategy of ‘color-blindness’, in an attempt to normalize race relations, brought major backlash (Smithers, 2009). Although both politicians are viewed as an inspiration and to have made great strides in their respective nations, the media unfairly set the agenda expecting them to focus on race/gender related issue, which resulted in them being framed as not addressing these concerns enough. One article quoted a letter written to the New York times regarding president Obama which stated: “why can’t we see Barack Obama as a great person for president first, and a black man second?” (Smithers, 2009). Altogether, media producers need to be cognizant of the fact that these traits are not defining features of their identity and definitely should not be the main consideration when choosing a topic for a story.

Conclusions

Findings

The findings of this comprehensive review are that in terms of media coverage, gender is still inherently used to set the agenda for political news, and also within the framing of these stories. In addition to having to overcome different, and often more significant barriers compared to male politicians to take public office, media coverage then revolves around how they are contributing to issues dependent on these marginal traits. Women are judged based on stories related to their gender, often perpetuating stereotypes about how they act in leadership roles. This also leads to individual women being forced to take on the role of advocate for an entire segment of the population. While equal representation of the population is clearly a very important political topic, these subjects are posed to women far more often than male politician would be questioned about them. During this study, it was shown how Angela Merkel has gone to extensive lengths to neutralize the importance that gender has played in her politics, yet the media still constantly frames her leadership in terms of her gender; she has never had the chance to just be a politician, with the ability to set her own agenda. During an interview with an operations and hiring manager at a large engineer company (a highly male dominated occupation), the backwardness of these expectations was highlighted. “Sometimes I think when women have the opportunity to take on a typically male dominated role, the automatic assumption is that they should lead the charge to help others do the same- but why should *they* specifically have that obligation?” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 25th 2021). He went on to detail that if anything, it should be the leaders of the organization undertaking this role. If everyone has an equal opportunity to pursue office, this means that the people with the most merit will be our leaders, which is the main goal of equal representation. This also means

that once they are in these offices, there should not be a discrepancy between the expectations of any gender or race. Applying this directly to the situation of chancellor Merkel, if she is facing pressure to directly oppose her party by implementing certain laws, why are the male politicians in her party not being confronted with even more scrutiny? The example given by the hiring manager was: “if I hire a woman as a project manager, I don’t ask her how many women she is having work on the project; why would it be her responsibility to address this, the entire management should be the driving force behind more equality in the industry not one woman, simply because she is a woman” (Anonymous, personal communication, November 25th 2021).

Angela Merkel led Germany through some of the most difficult crises of this generation. As a physicist and expert in economics, her thoughtful, fact-based approach to politics has been a lesson to leaders around the world. This should not be downplayed by the fact that she has not been the driving force of the women’s rights movement in Germany; simply because she was born as a woman should not mean she has to be the champion of women’s rights. Instead of forcing her into a role based on one identity trait, we should focus on the entire German government to endorse policies to increase equality. This also comes down to what gender means at all in the modern world. During another interview with a researcher at the European Union Business School, he discussed his agreement with Merkel’s standpoint against quotas for women in business and government. He stated that gender has nothing to do with merit for political or business office, and although underrepresentation is a huge issue, the systemic issues causing many women to refrain from political participation or be unequipped for the role, cannot be fixed with this ‘top-down’, quota approach. He said these quotas do nothing to fix the problems women face much earlier in their political journey, and we should promote initiatives which tackle the heart of the issues, like equality in news coverage, or access to education- which

influence girls from a young age. Furthermore, the business researcher went on to say that sometimes, it is men who can create more changes for women when they are in office, and that it is counterproductive to assume that it is only women that should have to take this on. The problem of underrepresentation should be addressed from a platform of creating neutrality, and avoid framing politicians in terms of gender, as this just causes more inequities to arise.

Future Areas of Research

Due to the extensive amount of news media and the scope of this paper, this media analysis was clearly not sufficient to completely analyze how media has engaged with Angela Merkel. Further research into how women are addressed in the news, with specific focus on agenda setting and framing, along with a comparison across genders and countries would be a very valuable asset to this field of study. Furthermore, in terms of actually addressing these problems, an area of research would be how to systematically point out instances of unnecessary gender references or simply unequal news coverage. One study had previously mentioned the possibility of more mandatory training during journalism training programs, which would include how to be less biased. There are some guides which already exist, which lay out principles of gender equality attempting to correct this, but changing the deeply ingrained bias of journalists and citizens is a complicated question (White, 2009). However, the rules and suggestions laid out in this guide include very progressive and helpful ideas, such as more carefully portraying individuals and not pre-defining characteristics based on gender, also ensuring gender balance in all stories. With frameworks like these already in existence it is now a question of an impactful manner of implementation. One very recent area of research is developing Artificial Intelligence (AI) that can recognize instances of differential coverage, such as how often women are referenced in relation to certain topics, and even as simple as how often

the word ‘woman’ or ‘female’ is used to define an individual. This may seem far from actual implementation, but AI is already being used in several areas of the journalistic process.

‘Augmented reported’ uses tools to for gathering, verifying, sorting, and disseminating information, especially in regions of the world where newsrooms may be understaffed, and more dangerous for human workers (Anand J Kulkarni, 2021). While at the moment, most of the software actually in use is equipped to just save time and money of news organizations by turning raw data and facts into news as fast as possible, there is a possibility of using it to ensure more equitable news, and account for biases.

In the beginning months of 2021, a Swiss company has begun the process of making this a reality in the journalistic world. The Swiss company Ringier has developed a technology called “EqualVoice” which measures how often men and women are included in media coverage of all topics (Gupta, 2021). Their goal is to decrease instances of women only being included in specific types of news stories. Inclusion in all news stories will hopefully remove the emphasis that has been placed so heavily on gender within news and contribute to more equality in terms of agenda setting. However, this may not go far enough in terms of how women are addressed, or framed, within these stories, which could still be according to stereotypes. Overall, creating equal representation in government should be a priority of every citizen, official, and private organization. In order to accomplish this, we must bring attention to the way in which gender impacts the way in which politicians are presented in news coverage and recognizing the inequities this propagates.

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