



LEARNING MODULE

Level:	Grades 10 to 12
About the Author:	Matthew Johnson, Media Education Specialist, MediaSmarts
Duration:	2 hours (without extension activities)

Suffragettes and Iron Ladies

Overview

This lesson considers how the media portrays women in politics. Students explore capsule biographies of female political leaders, from ancient times to current events – crafted from snippets of media coverage such as newspapers, magazines, TV news and encyclopedias – to understand bias in how female politicians are portrayed. Based on this, the class prepares a “portrait of a female politician” – a catalogue of the negative attributes frequently ascribed to women in politics by the media. Looking at this portrait, students are asked to consider which of these would be considered positive or neutral attributes if they were found in a male politician, and discuss how coverage of women in politics could be made less biased. Finally, students are asked to write a biography and position paper for themselves which casts them in a positive and politically active light.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Understand and identify bias
- Analyze gender stereotypes
- Use connotation in writing
- Think of themselves as political agents

Preparation and Materials

Photocopy the following handouts:

- Forms of Bias
- Profile: Hatshepsut
- Profile: Margaret Thatcher
- Profile: Hillary Clinton
- Profile: Kim Campbell
- Profile: Naomi Klein
- Profile: Nellie McClung
- Uncovering the Coverage: Gender Biases in Canadian Political Reporting (*note: this is only needed if you are conducting Extension Activity #2. If not, treat this as a backgrounder for teachers and read it before conducting the lesson.*)



Procedure

Bias

Write the word *Bias* on the board and ask students if they know what it means. Develop a definition that is similar to this one: a view or way of presenting something that is consistently unfair.

Distribute the handout *Forms of Bias* and review it with the class.

Composite Biographies

Explain that one common form of bias is *gender bias*, based on whether the subject is a man or a woman. Distribute the handout *Profile: Hatshepsut* to the class. Explain that it is made up of quoted excerpts from actual print and online articles about the Egyptian pharaoh Hatshepsut. Read through the profile and ask students to watch for examples of gender bias, and then go through it again with the class:

Paragraph one: Hatshepsut's reign is described as "long and prosperous" only in comparison to other female pharaohs – she is not allowed to "compete" with male pharaohs. She is favourably compared only to the "notorious" Cleopatra – damning with faint praise.

Paragraph two: Hatshepsut is "allowed" to reign – as though she had no influence on it. Her success is attributed to being the daughter of someone important (not who she is, but who her father is – although most male pharaohs got the job the same way), and to stereotypical female qualities like beauty and charisma. She "misled her subjects and the uneducated public" by appealing to religion, although all pharaohs claimed to be gods in human form. Are other, male pharaohs accused of misleading their subjects? Her co-regency is described as "invented" and "fabricated," although there are many examples of co-regencies throughout history.

Paragraph three: Hatshepsut's success is attributed to "propaganda," a term with negative connotations. It is suggested that she was only able to reign because she pretended to be a man. Her success is attributed on her advisors, all men – implying she needed the help of men to succeed. (How often are the advisors of male leaders mentioned in similar profiles?) She is said to have been a good pharaoh "although there were no wars during her reign" – implying that only the conduct of warfare, a traditionally male activity, can be the proof of a good leader; Hatshepsut had to settle for the lesser, feminine goal of "proving her sovereignty" (note the weak language) through trade. Finally, it's suggested that her reign was "inappropriate," presumably because she was a woman. (No other reason for her removal from the king lists – such as her successor's hatred of her for delaying his rise to the throne – is mentioned.)

Distribute the remaining *Profiles* so that one-fifth of the class gets each one. Have students go through their profiles and look for evidence of bias; remind students again that these are made up of actual quotes from print, TV and online sources. Once students have finished, have each profile read aloud and have students share and explain the examples of bias they found. Summarize the examples on the board.



Portrait of a Female Politician

Have students (either alone, in pairs or in small groups) develop a composite “portrait of a female politician,” collecting all of the qualities ascribed to the women in the profiles. (For instance, Hatshepsut could be described as passive, charismatic, attractive, unprincipled, manipulative, illegitimate, dishonest, needing guidance and weak based on the examples above). Go through the composite portrait and ask which qualities might be considered positive in a male politician (a female politician described as “charismatic” is seen as trading on her looks; a male politician described the same way could be seen as succeeding by force of personality).

Ask students if they think it is unavoidable for media coverage of female politicians to be biased in this way. Are different sources (TV news, newspapers, blogs, etc.) more or less likely to be biased? Are women more evenhanded when writing about female politicians than men are? Would coverage of female politicians be more fair if more journalists (and editors, producers and media owners) were women? Why or why not? Discuss ways in which media coverage could be made less biased.

Position Paper

Tell students to think about how they would present themselves if they were running for office or trying to organize a political cause. Ask them to consider what aspects of their own histories, personalities or opinions could be presented in a positive way to make them seem like a good leader or politician.

Have students write a brief (1-2 pages) biography and/or position paper (a summary of their political views) in which they present themselves as political agents.

Extension Activity #1: Who Makes the News?

Have students read pages 4 to 7 of the *Global Media Monitoring Project 2005* report on women in the news in the United States (http://www.whomakesthenews.org/images/stories/website/gmmp_reports/2005/gmmp-report-en-2005.pdf) and answer the following questions:

- 1) How many news reporters were male and how many were female?
- 2) How many subjects of news stories were male and how many were female?
- 3) Why do you think the ratio of male to female reporters is so different from the ratio of male to female subjects of stories?
- 4) What were the most common topics of stories that female reporters covered?
- 5) Do you think the data would be any different for male reporters? Why or why not?
- 6) What were the most common topics of stories with female subjects?
- 7) Do you think the data would be any different for male subjects? Why or why not?



Have students select a news program to watch at home, or else assign programs for students to watch, to get a “snapshot” of gender in the news today. Each student should watch for and record:

- the number of male and female presenters
- the topics of the stories presented by the male presenters
- the topics of the stories presented by the female presenters
- the number of male and female subjects of news stories (mention that stories may have more than one subject, and some stories will not have a human subject)
- the topics of the stories with male subjects
- the topics of the stories with female subjects
- the number of stories that show women or men in a stereotyped way according to their gender (you may wish to review the concept of gender stereotypes)
- the number of stories that show women or men in a way that challenges gender stereotypes
- the number of subjects portrayed as victims and whether they were male or female

Have students write their findings on a piece of chart paper and post it on the board. How similar is the class’s “snapshot” to the *Global Media Monitoring Project* report?

Have students answer questions 1-7 above about their “snapshot.”

Extension Activity #2: Uncovering the Coverage

Have students read the article “Uncovering the Coverage: Gender Biases in Canadian Political Reporting” by Joanna Everitt, PhD, and answer the following questions:

- 1) What is the difference between conscious and unconscious bias?
- 2) Why does Everitt see unconscious bias as more of a problem in press coverage of female politicians?
- 3) According to Everitt, how do news outlets (newspapers, TV news, etc.) appeal to their audiences? How does this affect their coverage of female politicians?
- 4) Politics is frequently described in the news using *metaphors*. What metaphors for politics does Everitt’s article discuss, and how do they affect coverage of female politicians?
- 5) According to Everitt, how does the news media communicate the message that women “just do not belong in the political world”?
- 6) Scan the political news in several Canadian newspapers, paying particular attention to headlines and the first paragraph of each article. Do you find that Everitt’s conclusions hold true?
- 7) Everitt concludes that female politicians are “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” by the news media. Can you imagine any changes that might be made to news coverage of politics or to the Canadian political system that would improve conditions for women in politics?



Extension Activity #3: Women Writing About Women

Note: This activity is only possible with Internet-connected computers. Media Awareness Network does not have and cannot grant permission to reprint the articles linked to below.

Have students read the following articles (students may be assigned a single article to read, with half of the class reading one and the other half of the class reading the other, or students may be asked to read both articles):

- Rich, Frank. "Is Hillary Clinton the New Old Al Gore?" *The New York Times*, September 30, 2007. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/opinion/30rich.html>>
- Dowd, Maureen. "Gift of Gall." *The New York Times*, November 4, 2007. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/04/opinion/04dowd.html>>

Have students identify any examples of bias they find in either article.

Have students compare their findings. Was either article more or less biased than the other? Were different forms of bias used in one article than in the other?



Forms of Bias

Bias is when someone or something is viewed or shown in a consistently inaccurate way. (Bias is usually negative, though one can have a positive bias as well.)

Bias by selection changes how the subject is shown by giving only part of the picture. (Imagine if all we ever saw of you was the time you spend in front of the mirror; we'd assume you were very vain, because we never see you doing anything else.)

Bias by omission changes how the subject is shown by leaving out important things. (Imagine if we never saw you working; we'd assume you were lazy.)

Bias by placement changes how the subject is shown by deciding what to show first. We assume that the first thing we're shown is the most important. (Imagine that the first thing we heard about you was that you once slipped and fell in the cafeteria; we'd assume you were clumsy, even if that only happened once.)

Bias by image changes how the subject is shown by choosing a particular picture or image. (Imagine that a story about you was accompanied by a picture of you dressed as a clown; we probably wouldn't take you seriously.)

Bias by naming changes how the subject is shown by choosing a name or a title. (Imagine how we'd see you differently if you were called *Tim* or *Timmy*; imagine how we'd see you differently if you were called *Dr. Smith* or *Mrs. Smith*; imagine how we'd see you differently if you were described as a *mechanic* or as an *engineer*.)

Bias by word choice changes how the subject is shown by using words with a positive or negative *connotation*. (Imagine someone's hair described as being *chestnut*, *brown* or *mousy*. They all mean the same thing, but which sounds better and which sounds worse?)



Profile: Hatshepsut



Hatshepsut (Hat-shep-soot), the first important female ruler known to history, lived a thousand years after the pyramids were built and seventeen centuries after the Egyptians had begun writing their language in hieroglyphs. [1] In comparison with other female pharaohs, Hatshepsut's reign was long and prosperous. [2] Although less familiar to modern audiences than her much later successor, the notorious Cleopatra (51–30 B.C.), Hatshepsut's achievements were far more significant. [3]

Tuthmose III was in line for the throne, but due to his age Hatshepsut was allowed to reign as queen dowager. [4] Hatshepsut was not one to sit back and wait for her nephew to age enough to take her place. As a favorite daughter of a popular pharaoh, and as a charismatic and beautiful lady in her own right, she was able to command enough of a following to actually take control as pharaoh. [5] Hatshepsut misled her subjects and the uneducated public by indicating that Amon-Ra had visited her pregnant mother at the temple in Deir el-Bahri in the Valley of the Kings. [6] In order to make Hatshepsut's proclamation to king more official and more accepting to the Egyptian citizens, she invented a co-regency with her father Tuthmosis I. She even went as far as incorporating this fabricated co-regency into texts and representations. [7]

Using propaganda and keen political skills, she deftly jumped each hurdle she faced. [8]

Monuments of Hatshepsut frequently portray her in kingly costume and the famous royal "false beard", often referring to her as though she were male. [9] It may be that if she had ruled strictly with a more feminine-looking disposition she may not have been so readily accepted by the masses. [10] Hatshepsut surrounded herself with strong and loyal advisors, many of whom are still known today: Hapuseneb, the High Priest of Amun, and her closest advisor, the royal steward Senemut. [11] Although there were no wars during her reign, she proved her sovereignty by ordering expeditions to the land of Punt, in present-day Somalia, in search of the ivory, animals, spices, gold and aromatic trees that Egyptians coveted. [12] Hatshepsut's name was also omitted from subsequent king lists, indicating that her reign was perhaps considered by some to have been inappropriate and contrary to tradition. [13]

1 "Hatshepsut: From Queen to Pharaoh." *Special Exhibitions*, Metropolitan Museum of Art. <http://www.metmuseum.org/special/hatshepsut/pharaoh_more.asp> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

2 "Hatshepsut." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hatshepsut>> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

3 "Hatshepsut: From Queen to Pharaoh."

4 Bediz, David. "The Story of Hatshepsut." *The Queen Who Would Be King: Hatshepsut*, 2000. <<http://www.bediz.com/hatshep/story.html>>

5 Ibid.

6 "Hatshepsut." *King TutOne.com* <<http://www.kingtutone.com/queens/hatshepsut/>> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

7 Ibid.

8 "The Story of Hatshepsut."

9 "Hatshepsut – The Female Pharaoh." *Egyptology Online*. <<http://www.egyptologyonline.com/hatshepsut.htm>> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

10 "Hatshepsut." *King TutOne.com*.

11 "Hatshepsut – The Female Pharaoh."

12 "The Story of Hatshepsut."

13 "Hatshepsut: The Female Pharaoh".



Profile: Margaret Thatcher



The Iron Lady of British politics, Margaret Thatcher was the longest continuously serving prime British prime minister since 1827. [1]

On 13th December, 1951 she married Denis Thatcher, a successful businessman. [2] Her marriage enabled her to finish her studies for the bar [to become a lawyer] and devote herself to politics. [3]

Newspaper headline:
TORY LEADERSHIP IS
WON DECISIVELY BY
MRS. THATCHER; 4 Male
Opponents Beaten [5]

In October 1970 she created great controversy by bringing an end to free school milk for children over seven and increasing school meal charges. [4]

On February 4, 1975 Thatcher defeated Edward Heath by 130 votes to 119 and became the first woman leader of a major political party. Heath took the defeat badly and refused to serve in Thatcher's shadow cabinet. [6]

Some of Mrs. Thatcher's support undoubtedly came from disgruntled

backbench M.P.s who felt that their talent had gone unrecognized and untapped by Heath. As the notoriously hardheaded Mrs. Thatcher put it, "I'll always be fond of dear Ted, but there's no sympathy in politics." [7]

She was sarcastically called the "Iron Lady" by the Soviet press, but she chose to adopt the title, believing it illustrated her resolve and strength in the face of adversaries, as well as adversity. [8]

[Her] twin children, Carol and Mark, were born in 1953. Denis was an oil company executive; he died in 2003... Mark Thatcher was arrested at his South African home in 2004 on a charge of financing an attempted coup in oil-rich Equatorial Guinea. [9]

1 Lewis, Jone Johnson. "Margaret Thatcher." *About.com: Women's History*, 2008. <http://womenshistory.about.com/library/bio/blbio_margaret_thatcher.htm> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

2 Simkin, John. "Margaret Thatcher." *Spartacus Educational* <<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/COLDthatcher.htm>> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

3 "Margaret Thatcher: British Prime Minister." *Cold War Knowledge Bank: Profiles*, CNN.com. <http://web.archive.org/web/20080214200239/http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/cold_war/kbank/profiles/thatcher/> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

4 Simkin, "Margaret Thatcher."

5 Eder, Richard. "Tory Leadership is Won Decisively by Mrs. Thatcher." *The New York Times*, February 12, 1975. <<http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F30F13F83C5A157B93C0A81789D85F418785F9>>

6 "No Time for Post-Mortems." *Time*, February 17, 1975. <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,912866,00.html>>

7 Ibid.

8 "Margaret Thatcher: British Prime Minister."

9 "Margaret Thatcher." *Answers.com*. <<http://www.answers.com/topic/margaret-thatcher>> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

Profile: Hillary Clinton



Why does Hillary like Pantsuits so much, you may ask? The answer is probably for the same reason men wear suits. First, it looks professional and is non-offensive. It is preferable to Hillary wearing a tank top that shows the "I love Bill" tattoo that she sports on her back. The second reason for Hillary's insatiable appetite for Pantsuits is, again, the same as for men. They hide body fat. Every man or woman who dons a suit or pantsuit will be able to hide the bulges that result from all of those business and campaign lunches. I don't think I am the only one who has noticed that Hillary has gained weight during the campaign. Hillary's pantsuits help to disguise it. [1]

"She has a bad figure. She's bottom heavy and her legs are short," reported CNN's style editor, Elsa Klensch. Performance coach Anthony Robbins added, "When she gets angry, she comes across as hard and bitchy and intense." [2]

[Hillary has] the calm, cool presence of a Grace Kelly... She has been charming but cold and absolutely flawless. [3]

Her feisty talk seems to play well with people in her audiences, many of them women who are quick to hail her fighting bona fides. [4] Fifty five percent of married men in the country say they'll never vote for her under any circumstances. [5] Clinton's "nagging voice" is the reason she lost male vote. [6]

- 1 Waltz, Zane. "Pantsuits and Hillary Clinton." *Associated Content*, May 19, 2008. <http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/775049/pantsuits_and_hillary_clinton.html?cat=7> (Accessed February 10, 2009.)
- 2 *Larry King Live*, CNN, June 1, 2008. Quoted in "From the Women's Desk -- Why Does Larry King Think Hillary Clinton's Hair, Legs, Smile and Figure Are "News"?" *FAIR: Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting*, June 14, 1999. <<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1781>>
- 3 *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, MSNBC, October 30, 2007. Transcript. <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21562091>>
- 4 Leibovitch, Mark, and Kate Zernicke. "Seeing Grit and Ruthlessness in Clinton's Love of the Fight." *The New York Times*, May 5, 2008. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/05/us/politics/05clinton.html>>
- 5 *Hardball with Chris Matthews*, MSNBC, November 8, 2007. Transcript. <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/21707994/>>
- 6 *Your World With Neil Cavuto*, Fox News, January 4, 2008. Transcript. *Media Matters for America* <<http://mediamatters.org/research/200801050004>>



Profile: Kim Campbell



There's something quite regal about Kim Campbell. Perhaps it's the tilt of her head, the beatific smile she bestows upon both nobles and commoners as she campaigns. Impetuous as she is intelligent, Campbell has never been content to patiently wait her turn. She has long relied on her instincts - which by all accounts run counter to those of most politicians. [1]

Kim Campbell was born Avril Phaedra Douglas Campbell. As a teenager, Avril permanently nicknamed herself Kim, perhaps for actress Kim Novak. She spent several years studying the Russian language, and was close to being fluent. [2]

Kim Campbell was Prime Minister of Canada for only four months, but she can take credit for a number of Canadian political firsts. Kim Campbell was the first woman Prime Minister

of Canada, the first woman Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada, the first woman Minister of National Defence, and she was the first woman elected leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada. [3]

If Campbell had miraculously defied the odds and led the Tories to victory, or even to a respectable defeat, Canadians might still be applauding her gee-whiz enthusiasm as a welcome breath of fresh air, as they did in those fleeting summer weeks of 1993 when her approval rating was the highest of any prime minister in decades. [But] she was exhausted after her leadership race, but was forced into an endless round of barbecues and speech-making. She had no time to exercise, relax, get a chipped tooth fixed, have her nails done or pay household bills. [4]

1 Williams, Marla. "Outspoken Kim Campbell May Be Canada's Next Leader – The Candid Candidate." *The Seattle Times*, June 6, 1993. <<http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19930606&slug=1704997>>

2 "Kim Campbell." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 2002. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kim_Campbell> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

3 Munroe, Susan. "Prime Minister Kim Campbell." *About.com: Canada Online*. <<http://canadaonline.about.com/cs/primeminister/pmkimcampbell.htm>> (Accessed on February 10, 2009.)

4 Phillips, Andrew. "Campbell, Kim (Profile)." *Maclean's*, April 29, 1996. <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=M1ARTM0010657>>



Profile: Naomi Klein



The author and activist Naomi Klein has just endured a gentle mauling on the *Today* programme. [1]

She was wearing dark jeans tucked into tall brown boots, a crisp white shirt, and a long black blazer. She was dressed for a fox hunt. She looked terrific.

She had spent the day curled up on the blue sofa in her living room, watching CNN while she waited restlessly to hear what would happen in Washington. She fortified

herself with cups of coffee and a smoothie. [2]

Naomi Klein is the pre-eminent figure (she would deplore the term "leader") in a worldwide protest movement against companies, free trade and global integration. [3]

Ironically, for a woman who has been hailed as the author of a "*Das Kapital* of the growing anti-corporate movement", there's nothing grungy about Klein. With her sleek hair-cut, immaculate teeth and friendly but down-to-business attitude, she could easily be mistaken for a telecoms exec winding up a power breakfast in the lobby of a boutique hotel. [4]

Naomi spent her adolescence in her room writing poetry or experimenting in the bathroom with makeup. [Her mother] Bonnie was

appalled. She worried that Naomi was turning into a brat, thinking about clothes, spending time in front of the mirror. "I think we were overly concerned about the kind of typical teen-age stuff she was into," Bonnie says. "She read *Judy Blume!* I was beside myself. I was a feminist—I wanted my daughter to be good at math." [5]

Naomi Klein, like most campus leftists of the 1980s, directed her ideological energies toward the denouncing of various *-isms* within academia. (She later recalled, with admirable remorse, that she was known as "Miss P.C.") By the 1990s, Klein had come to realize, like some other campus activists, that off-campus there could be found worse depredations than the canonization of Shakespeare and other dead white males. [6]

1 Wheelwright, Julie. "Brainwashed by the market: What drives Naomi Klein?" *The Independent*, September 14, 2007. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/brainwashed-by-the-market-what-drives-naomi-klein-464231.html>>

2 MacFarquhar, Larissa. "Outside Agitator: Naomi Klein and the new new left." *The New Yorker*, December 8, 2008. <http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/12/08/081208fa_fact_macfarquhar>

3 "Naomi Klein and her flawed brand of anti-brandism." *The Economist*, November 7, 2002. http://www.economist.com/printedition/displayStory.cfm?Story_ID=1429429

4 "Brainwashed by the market: What drives Naomi Klein?"

5 "Outside Agitator: Naomi Klein and the new new left."

6 Chait, Jonathan. "Dead Left." *The New Republic*, July 30, 2008. <http://www.tnr.com/story_print.html?id=69067f1c-d089-474b-a8a0-945d1deb420b>



Profile: Nellie McClung



On a January day in 1914, a prairie housewife walked through the doors of the Manitoba Legislature in Winnipeg to convince the government that women should be allowed to vote. Her name was Nellie McClung. By early 1916, with the help of McClung, the women of Manitoba would become the first in Canada to win the right to vote. [1]

Nellie, a lively, talkative little girl, began teaching school in rural Manitoba when she was just 16 years old. [2]

At an early age, she received a series of Dickens novels from her brother; inspired by his social cri-

tiques, she was determined to become a writer. [3]

In 1890, at a Young Ladies Bible Class she met Annie McClung, a woman she would later say was "the only woman I have ever seen whom I would like to have as a mother-in-law" [from her autobiography *Clearing in the West*]. McClung set out to meet Annie's pharmacist son Robert Wesley McClung; they married in 1896. Nellie and Wesley McClung had five children and had, from all accounts, a strong and happy marriage. [4]

On January 27, 1914, a delegation of women headed by McClung petitioned Manitoba's parliament asking for the right to vote and, not unexpectedly, their request was declined by an arrogant speech by [Premier Sir Rodmond] Roblin. McClung had been a brilliant mimic since childhood when she amused her father with imitations of her mother's family and McClung paid careful attention to Roblin's speech and man-

nerisms and used her mimic skills to her advantage. [5]

McClung's understanding of human nature affected her views on temperance issues and feminism. Thus, when the First World War ended and the Great Depression deepened, McClung's concern for people and her inability to keep quiet propelled her into political activism. [6]

McClung and her fellow temperance advocates knew they could never win their battle against the liquor trade without being able to vote. So, McClung and a delegation of peaceful, polite, Canadian feminists set out to win this fundamental right for women. [7]

In 1921, when the United Farmers of Alberta (UFA) comprised the majority government, McClung was elected as a Liberal. She served five years and joined hands with United Farmers' cabinet minister Irene Parlby on many pieces of social legislation. [8]

1 "Nellie McClung: The Sculpting of Angels." *Life and Times*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Accessed June 15, 2009. <<http://www.cbc.ca/lifeandtimes/mcclung.html>>

2 "Nellie McClung." *About Canada Multimedia Study Guide Resources*, Mount Allison University Centre for Canadian Studies and Canadian Heritage, 2001. <http://www.mta.ca/about_canada/study_guide/famous_women/nellie_mcclung.html>

3 "Nellie McClung, Woman Suffrage and the Persons Case." *The Canadian Studies Webcentre*. Accessed June 15, 2009. <<http://www.canadianstudies.ca/NewJapan/mcclungunit.html>>

4 Ibid.

5 "Nellie McClung, Woman Suffrage and the Persons Case."

6 "The Famous 5: Heroes for Today." *Alberta Online Encyclopedia*, 2004. <http://www.abheritage.ca/famous5/achievements/nellie_mcclung.html>

7 "Nellie McClung: The Sculpting of Angels."

8 "The Famous 5: Heroes for Today."



Uncovering the Coverage: Gender Biases in Canadian Political Reporting

Joanna Everitt, PhD
Associate Professor of Political Science
University of New Brunswick (Saint John)
(Reprinted with permission)

This presentation is based on work that I have conducted with Dr. Elisabeth Gidengil of McGill University.

Let me begin by saying that when I speak of gender bias in the media, I am not accusing reporters, editors or even political cartoonists of being consciously sexist in the coverage that they give to women in the political world. I don't think that anyone begins their story thinking "how can I treat Belinda Stronach, Sheila Copps, Alexa McDonough or Kim Campbell as unfairly as possible". No, I do not think that journalists are any more consciously biased than anyone else. But it is not the conscious bias that I am concerned about. It is the more insidious unconscious bias that is the problem.

We all have unconscious stereotypes that we use to frame our understanding of how women and men should behave – and of how politicians should behave. Unfortunately, those stereotypes that we so often hold of "women" do not map well over the stereotypes that we hold of "politicians". As a result, women who seek elected office frequently face expectations that are very different from the expectations facing male politicians. These differences are built into our evaluations of male and female politicians and they are reflected in the media coverage that they receive. And, there is lots of evidence that the coverage that women receive is very different from the coverage that men receive.

Now before I get into some of the results of our studies, let me first say that there are several factors that affect how political stories are covered. The first is that the news media are trying to capture and maintain audience attention in an increasingly competitive media market. If you are not a political scientist, a politician, a member of the media, or someone closely connected to the workings of government, what makes you want to watch the news? Well part of it is that there is something about the stories that get covered that grips you, some sort of conflict, something unexpected or some sort of novelty that captures your interest and pulls you into the story. It is for this reason that these news values, conflict, novelty or unexpectedness are often played up in the actual news reports.

The second thing to keep in mind is that politics has traditionally been a male dominated field ... and political journalism has also been pretty male dominated. The result, we argue is that political reporting typically employs a masculine narrative that reinforces conceptions of politics as a male preserve and treats the male as normative. This basically means that the language that is used to report on politicians and their activities tends to reinforce the image that politics is something that men do. It does this through the images that it evokes, most explicitly through the use of metaphors. These metaphors describe elections as campaigns or battles and parties as armies prepared to go to war with one another. These images fit well with the news value of "conflict". However, they do little to change the image of politics as being a male activity. Despite efforts to attract women, the military is still a male dominated profession, so metaphors that evoke images of war, evoke images of men, not women. Political events such as debates are often described in the same terms as boxing matches with leaders going into the ring and trying to land the knock out punch, or as back street brawls, free-for-alls, with punches landing everywhere - again not images that immediately bring women to mind.



A beautiful example is the case of Alexa McDonough in Craig Oliver's post debate coverage for CTV in the 2000 election. Oliver's commentary on the debate referred to it as a game of verbal hockey – a game that despite the Canadian women's team's success in the past Olympics is not one we immediately think of women as playing.

Oliver described the leaders as if they were NHL hockey players taking shots on net, skating off the ice bent and battered and unable to make break-aways on an open net. Not once in his post-debate report did he make mention of McDonough's performance in the debate. It was as if she wasn't there, or if she was, she was on the sidelines, on the sidelines of a game that women haven't traditionally played. Just like politics. So one of the real problems with the use of such a masculine narrative in describing election campaigns is that women are often left out or ignored, especially when they do not conform to traditional expectations of "political behaviour" - tough, assertive and combative behaviour.

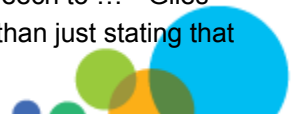
On the other hand, if women do assert themselves, get in there and play rough, they are also punished by the media. Women, who adopt traditional masculine behaviours and behave combatively, often find that those behaviours are over-emphasized in the coverage that they receive. Combative behaviour is newsworthy, but combative behaviour on the part of a woman is doubly newsworthy because it runs counter to deeply held expectations about how women should behave. It is "unexpected behaviour" and therefore it gets played up in the news stories.

Take for example, our studies that compare male and female party leaders' debate behaviours with post-debate news commentary. We coded the debates to determine as objectively as possible who displayed aggressive behaviour: interrupting, shaking fists or pointing fingers. What we found was that the female leaders were no more aggressive than the male party leaders. In fact, both [Audrey] McLaughlin and McDonough were less aggressive than their male counterparts in the debates that they participated in, Campbell was equally aggressive.

However, when we analysed the post-debate coverage in these three elections we found that the media regularly used a disproportionate number of attack metaphors to describe the women's conduct during the debates – even McLaughlin's and McDonough's behaviour. This was not true for the male leaders. Their "aggressiveness" tended to be under emphasized. We also found that the sound bites and news clips that were used in the post debate coverage showed the female party leaders interrupting and using other assertive behaviours such as shaking their fist or pointing their finger far more often than their behaviour in the debates warranted. The men, who for the most part were more aggressive than the women, were not shown behaving in this manner. The result is that someone who had not watched the debates would have come away from watching the post-debate coverage thinking that these women were perhaps a little bit too much on the attack.

In another study of all of the CBC election news in 1993 and 1997 we found that the media represented women's statements with more combative, expressive and unconventional verbs than they did men's. For example, while journalist reported the male leaders as "saying" or "talking" about something, the female leaders were reported as accusing, warning, insisting, boasting, challenging, daring and denying. Thus, while in these instances the women were reported on in language that fit with the combative, masculine image of politics, they were presented as behaving more aggressively than they actually had and described in a way that was dramatically at odds with traditional social expectations of appropriate female behaviour.

Journalists were also more likely to account for why the female leaders were doing what they were doing, in other words they interpreted the women's behaviour more than they did the men's. The statements and the actions of male party leaders tended to just be described - "Jean Chretien was in Halifax today to give a speech to ..." "Giles Duceppe announced his party's policy on ...". This wasn't so much the case for women. Rather than just stating that



“Kim Campbell did such and such today” they felt obliged to provide some explanation for why she was doing what she was doing. For example, they would say “Kim Campbell did such and such today because ... she needed to shore up support in the west, she wanted to appeal to this group or that ...”. They were also more likely to judge the statements or behaviours of female leaders, evaluating whether they had been successful or not. Often they judged not. This simply presents another avenue for mediation.

So why is all of this important? Why does it matter that we found these subtle differences in the coverage that male and female politicians receive, differences that most journalists would probably deny until they see the results of our content analyses?

First, by framing politics in a masculine manner the media highlight the “unnatural” position of women, the “unusualness” of women in these election campaigns. The masculine language used in political reporting implicitly presents women as abnormal participants in politics. Drawing attention to this uniqueness may raise questions in voters’ minds about the appropriateness of a woman in that position or her abilities to perform effectively in a male-dominated environment.

However, I would not argue that acting tough, acting like a “traditional politician”, acting like we might expect a man to act, is the answer for women. It is not the answer because of these news values that I have just outlined, news values of conflict, unexpectedness and novelty that govern political news coverage. As we have shown in our research these news values lead the media to focus disproportionate attention on those behaviours that we do not traditionally associate with women. In other words, women’s aggressive behaviours get far more attention than their actions in the actual debates or election campaigns warranted.

While some might say this coverage could help women, show that they are as tough as the guys, we are a little more cautious. It is possible that this coverage may reduce the likelihood that voters will stereotype female politicians in traditional manners; however it does not necessarily imply that women will benefit from this coverage. Actions which run counter to stereotypes are often viewed as more pronounced or more extreme, making a women’s assertive behaviour appear downright aggressive. This is a real problem as individuals who break these traditional expectations are often viewed more critically than others.

The under-reporting or negative coverage given to political women and their presentation in stereotypical or powerless roles that I talked about at the beginning of my presentation provide clear messages to voters that women just do not belong in this political world. Unfortunately, even when journalists cover female politicians using the same masculine narrative that they use to cover male politicians, the news values of conflict, novelty and unexpectedness that governing political reporting can still undermine women’s opportunities. Female party leaders, female cabinet ministers or even your average female politician who try to fit in by adopting combative debating styles or taking strong stances will find that their aggressive behaviours are over-emphasized. As a result they are likely to appear “too aggressive” and evoke criticisms of their non-stereotypical behaviour.

Paradoxically, those women who do not conform to the traditional masculine approach to politics will continue to be sidelined, receiving far less coverage than a similar low-keyed performance by a male leader. In my mind this is a clear case of being “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t”. Given that these prevailing news values and the masculine narrative guiding political news are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, I can only believe that the media will continue to present a serious stumbling block to women seeking elite elected office.



Questions

- 1) What is the difference between conscious and unconscious bias?
- 2) Why does Everitt see unconscious bias as more of a problem in press coverage of female politicians?
- 3) According to Everitt, how do news outlets (newspapers, TV news, etc.) appeal to their audiences? How does this affect their coverage of female politicians?
- 4) Politics is frequently described in the news using *metaphors*. What metaphors for politics does Everitt's article discuss, and how do they affect coverage of female politicians?
- 5) According to Everitt, how does the news media communicate the message that women "just do not belong in the political world"?
- 6) Scan the political news in several Canadian newspapers, paying particular attention to headlines and the first paragraph of each article. Do you find that Everitt's conclusions hold true?
- 7) Everitt concludes that female politicians are "damned if you do, damned if you don't" by the news media. Can you imagine any changes that might be made to news coverage of politics or to the Canadian political system that would improve conditions for women in politics?

