

Women in the media: a critical analysis of gender social representations.

Abstract

Our research work intends to study social gender representations in the news on Portuguese television. Women's exclusion has a strong historical and cultural background and is still present in some ways inside Portuguese society. The rise of democracy, in the 70's, didn't have the same meaning for both sexes since it has been living side by side with gender biases.

Recent studies show that women, approximately half the world's population, are almost invisible in television and that their presence is frequently related with gender stereotypes.

We believe that news is an important source of information, through which, citizens, in specific social contexts, acknowledge their social roles and responsibilities. We also assume that balanced gender representation in the news is an important criterion to consider when we intend to produce quality journalism and also that this analysis must be framed into the wider social context of the long exclusion process of women in the various areas of society.

Thus, based on the analysis of social gender representations on national television news bulletins, we aim to contribute to the development of a critical gender perspective over media structures and contents.

Key words: gender, social representations, television news, media

Introduction

If we take into account the democratic possibilities related with television news production, we may perceive the importance of research considering the public dimension of content opposed to individualized representations.

We believe that the analysis of television news has the necessary potential to act as a basis for a critical approach of journalistic practices and routines that reinforce gender stereotyping and, therefore, stand as obstacles for change.

According to Silveirinha (2001), media are a crucial space for social movements' political struggle, and specifically, for feminist movements. However, the study of gender inequalities in the media shouldn't be restricted to the analysis of media

messages. It should also include the political and social matters behind those inequalities in a public sphere perspective, taking into account both sides of the relation between consumer and media products and institutions.

In Silveirinha's opinion (2001), feminist research can be divided in two main sections: *feminist media studies* and *public sphere research*.

Feminist media studies include themes as employment, feminization of the journalist profession, media practices and narratives, audience analysis, property and control, among others, aiming to question gender relations and the social structures and value system on which they rely on.

Some research on this section include news sociology and media frames study – as speech organizing schemes that are part of the everyday media life and which are most commonly considered as common sense (Silveirinha, 2001).

Public sphere research constitute a considerable research body and have been interested in female identity social construction matters as well as Habermas' public spheres critic for being the responsible concept for women and minorities exclusion. According to this investigation line, Habermas' proposal of suggesting a public sphere as a homogeneous set of citizens marginalizes differences and standardize them under the dominating male model through the notions of «public man» and «private women» (Silveirinha, 2001:5). This traditional distinction has been analyzed by several feminists, as Lisa McLaughlin (1999), who considers that this division placing women in the intimate and private domestic space and men in the political and economical public sphere (and also empowered in the domestic sphere) has been structuring gender social relations with great disadvantages for women.

In the study here presented we took into account that gender inequalities in media practices and contents must always be framed in the wider context of the long discrimination and exclusion process “a discrimination not necessarily felt or lived in the experience of each person, individually, (...) a discrimination as a social phenomenon”¹ (Amâncio, 1998:3).

We also agree with Gallagher (1995) when she says that if the media are often accused of recalling women's power, they have also the potential to give them that same power. Actually, there has been a stable growth of feminist media associations and networks which have been playing an important role on the struggle for a more diverse

¹ Translation of the author.

and democratic media system. On Silveirinha's opinion (2001: 7), this struggle may consist of creating a counter-public, capable of a public use of reason.

In this context, it becomes crucial to think about the way media assume their responsibilities and compromises before citizens since citizenship exercise has, today, in the media an important space of development (Pinto, 2004). We believe that the inclusion of a gender perspective in the news must be a journalistic criterion taken into account in each item approached when deciding who will be interviewed and included in the news and how the subject will be portrayed.

As we intend to give a critical gender view on Portuguese television news we shall also be, in a wider sense, accepting Lisa McLaughlin's challenge (1993) to contribute to the development of a feminist media theory within a public sphere approach.

Media research from a gender perspective

Until today, there have been several studies approaching gender in the media. As it has been said previously, women's representations in the media have always been among feminists' concerns. In the 50's the women's image of the perfect housewife was often criticized as well as female's common representation as wives, family mothers or care givers. Some research of a more sociological or philosophical nature developed considerations on the effects of these representations on the economical, political and social life (Silveirinha, 2004).

In 1978, Tuchman's work introduces the concept of "symbolic annihilation" of women. Tuchman believes that the fact that women are frequently related to passivity, dependence, romanticism and the domestic sphere, trivializes women's role.

In the 80's, feminist media studies focused on the relation between audience and texts in order to understand the way in which gender discourses are born and developed in political and social contexts (Silveirinha, 2004).

Another type of approach studied the increasing presence of women in the journalist profession and their participation in the media. Despite the increasing number of women working on this area, investigation showed that "quantity" doesn't imply "quality" as women are still under-represented in decision making positions which suggests a kind of vertical discrimination in media companies and organizations. Besides, it was observed that although there are more women working in the media, there hasn't been a more balanced gender approach in media contents.

“Actually, when writing news in a certain way, journalists are anticipating the answers from their editors and peers, in a process that acts as “mental scissors” cutting out writing in that certain way. It is a widely unconscious process, common to men and women, though, in women’s case, it absorbs them into a culture that is essentially masculine.”²

(Silveirinha, 2004: 25)

In Portugal there has been some research on gender contents in the media. Recently, the work of Pinto Coelho and Mota Ribeiro (2005) approached the women access to speech in Portuguese press by analyzing women’s centrality in the news and the themes to which they were related. Their results showed that women in the newspapers play an active role, namely as information sources. However, in some themes they are referred to in generically way and identified through family relationships.

In another research, the same authors focused on women’s images in Portuguese newspapers and found that women seldom appear as protagonists and are frequently isolated in images that suggest passivity and inactivity. According to the authors, feminine photos in Portuguese newspapers are unrealistic and diminisher of Portuguese women (Mota Ribeiro e Pinto Coelho, 2005).

Lopes’ study (2005) about weekly information television broadcasts detected some gender inequalities reporting to the public man/private women issue. The author stresses the under-representation of women in decision making positions in television channels as a result of a social structure characterized by “glass ceilings”. Lopes also found that women seem to be related to social themes and the emotional speech, while men appear more within the political debate.

“Besides separating public space and private sphere, the interviews/debates and talk shows operate a gender division. Thus, men seemed qualified to discuss ideas and women to talk about emotions.”³

(Lopes, 2005: 432)

² Translation of the author.

³ Idem.

Considering these research works, we may conclude that gender biases in the media are beyond the mere issue of the achieved number of women journalists: we must consider their presence in the media agenda and contents and in roles played by each individual in the media context. More than looking at the numbers, one needs to focus on gender issues in information reproduction processes.

Methodological procedures

The way in which people are portrayed in the news, the *who* and the *why* that becomes news subjects is a very important matter in what concerns the access to speech and power relations.

The last report from the *Global Media Monitoring Project* (GMMP) concluded that women's visibility in the news is very scarce and that they tend to be portrayed according to some biased characteristics. Women's points of view are rarely presented in the dominating topics of the news agenda even in themes that affect women profoundly such as gender-based-violence (Media Watch, 2005).

The conclusions showed that most women appearing in the news are victims of something, frequently presented in terms of their family status (mothers, wives, daughters) and seldom as experts.

“When women do make the news it is primarily as ‘stars’ (celebrities, royalty) or as ordinary people. Women make the news not as figures of authority, but as celebrities (42%), royalty (33%) or as ‘ordinary people’. Female newsmakers outnumber males in only two occupational categories – homemaker (75%) and student (51%).”

(Media Watch, 2005: 17)

Women's images are frequently used to provoke a dramatic effect. For female journalists working on television youth and appearance seem to be more important than professional skills or experience for they are more likely to ‘disappear’ from the screen after the age of 34.

Also, women are rarely central in politics or economy news and “Even in topics where the percentage of female news subjects is relatively high – education, child-care, consumer issues, HIV-AIDS – women seldom feature centrally” (Media Watch, 2005:

19). A Portuguese team cooperated with the former monitoring project and results indicated that in Portugal women are news subjects in just 20% of the themes.

However, this report was based on a monitoring project conducted on just one day: the 16th February, 2005. Several groups in seventy six countries around the world analyzed and compared news stories monitored on television, radio and newspapers, which allowed them to achieve this interesting data.

Our proposal, departing from the GMMP methodology, aims to develop a more enduring analysis that may give us another kind of results, avoiding some circumstantial trends of the news agenda. In order to accomplish this, we have developed a frame of analysis categories aiming to observe gender biases in the news currently broadcasted by Portuguese television main channels (RTP1, SIC and TVI). This frame of analysis was previously applied to a sample of two national 08 p.m. TV news bulletins, one from the year of 2006, and another from 2007, in total of fifty nine news pieces. This pre-test was meant to check the instrument's effectiveness before its application to a wider sample of sixty six hours of 08 p.m. television news bulletins recorded throughout the year of 2008.

At this point, some of the GMMP television categories already tested through the three monitoring projects implemented by the World Association for Christian Communication (WACC) were included in our frame, although some changes were introduced in order to adapt it to the goals of this first stage of our investigation.

Parallely, we developed other and more specific analysis categories aiming to collect subtler data, capable of refining or study and of opening new research possibilities.

When elaborating our frame of analysis we tried to create categories that would allow us to make a critical assessment of gender representation in media contents and identify women's social representations and ways in which they are portrayed in terms of social roles and power relations. We also wanted to observe the presence of obvious and subtle gender stereotypes in television news. On a higher level we hope to comprehend the way in which journalistic options, practices and routines are related to specific patterns that may reproduce gender asymmetries.

On the first part of our frame of analysis categories we included the identification of the news bulletin and the number and sex of the existing anchors.

On the second part, each news piece is identified in terms of its valency, scope and thematic content. The scope of the piece allows us to analyse the gender distribution

in local, national and international news. The valency gives us the tone of the piece which, in some cases, may be determining for the interpretation of results.

In what concerns to theme codification, a detailed list of thematic categories was developed based, again, on the GMMP frame of analysis. These thematic categories were adapted in terms of their relevance and scope to Portuguese national reality and to the specific project's orientation. With this dimension we intend to catch an early scenario of gender distribution through the different themes of national news agenda.

The third part is related to the intervenient. Here information concerning sex, age, professional occupation, social status and role played in the news will be registered. GMMP previous study showed that women are frequently presented in the professional categories of domestic, student, health or education professional and that they are often introduced to the audience in a family context instead of a professional one. Professional occupation is a particularly interesting category since it is seen as one of the most common factors of social status assessment by others.

The role played by intervenients is a relevant matter to act as a base for a critical analysis of the protagonism given to men and women in the news. For instance, the fact that women outnumber men in education stories doesn't necessarily mean that they appear as experts or in central roles. It is possible that women are mostly invited to testify about a change in the national education system or about the students' performance on a certain national test but it is also important to see who gets to be the leading figures. Frequently, authorities and experts, even in matters that mostly affect women, are mostly men. Still within this part of our frame of categories we added a section with the purpose of collecting data about some image elements, namely, the angle used or the background of the piece. The idea is to verify if there is a connection between the sex of the intervenient and the image format or the environment to which he is associated.

Considering studies that showed that women are commonly related to emotivity and passivity, a category named "expressivity and emotions" was added to register, whenever relevant, the degree and nature of the emotions expressed by the intervenients.

The fourth part of the frame includes information related to the journalists with the purpose to indentify gender distribution patterns among media professionals on the television news bulletins. Here we codified data about the journalist's function in the news piece (anchor, reporter, commentator) and age, since one of the hypotheses

suggested by GMMP report was that women journalist working on television tended to disappear as they aged. In this part we also included another category concerning the theme of the news piece in which the journalist participates in order to observe the gender distribution of journalists through different thematic categories.

Simultaneously, an experimental category has been introduced to pick up other research hypothesis that may be complementary to this work. Thus, all news pieces approaching gender inequality issues or including pertinent vocabulary about women will be signalized.

Finally, we have created a category to mark if the piece is particularly interesting to be subjected to a deeper analysis, later on. Despite the quantitative nature of this instrument, we found useful to mark some pieces that may be representative of typical situations or particularly relevant because of their mediatization to be submitted to a qualitative analysis capable of providing less perceptible data about obvious or subtle gender stereotype construction and maintenance processes.

By developing this frame of analysis categories directed for television news bulletins we hope to pursuit some of our research goals, namely:

- To gather a representative volume of national news bulletins recordings of the three main channels to be analyzed according to a critical approach to gender representations in news contents;
- To structure collected information in order to identify women's social representations, the themes to which they are related to, their portrayals and the perspectives in which they are presented.
- To measure females' representativeness and identify and compare the presence of gender stereotypes in the news;
- To understand how journalistic practices and routines might reinforce gender stereotyping and suggest alternative practices that may provide a more representative news cover.

Based on these different gender dimensions and on the analysis of eventual gender biases on Portuguese television news bulletins, we aim to develop a critical perspective over the news and, simultaneously, to study the effects of this kind of data in the audiences and in the public sphere. To do so, we will use a methodological triangulation, confronting quantitative and qualitative data.

In this context, we have been organizing several focus groups to debate about news contents. Participants of both sexes will be shown some news recordings and invited to speak about a small set of semi-directed questions concerning gender in the news. The main goal of these focus groups will be to understand how gender information is interpreted by men and women.

Based on this methodology we will establish comparisons between the analyzed news materials and the interviewees' perceptions. We will also try to understand how audience negotiate and internalize gender representations provided by television news bulletins. Through these procedures we hope to analyze, on one hand, news production and, on the other hand, the reception process of news contents in order to obtain a wider comprehension of the process through which gender social representations are built, conveyed and, afterwards, processed by audiences.

In a wider sense, the comparative analysis of the full gathered material shall offer us a general perspective over the socio-cultural influence of television news bulletins in the maintenance and construction of gender stereotypes.

Finally, and based in the obtained results, we aim to develop alternative proposals of journalistic practices capable of promoting a critical, balanced and diversified gender perspective in the audiences.

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