

Who's Covering What in the Year of the Woman?

TOP NEWS IN 1992—government and political news. Least prominent: agriculture and transportation.

In a presidential election year, that's not too surprising. But who wrote what? Examination of a sample of front pages of 10 newspapers circulating to almost 8 million Americans every day from January through December offers some insights into news content and story assignments in the Year of the Woman.

We analyzed front-page stories in 10 top U.S. dailies from Boston to Los Angeles to Miami for byline gender, story content and other items. The sample included final editions of the papers appearing on 14 randomly selected dates spanning all of 1992. The result: Men wrote 70.7 percent and women 29.3 percent of the bylined Page One stories, out of line with their 61–39 percent proportion in the newsroom. Men wrote on war, leisure activities, politics, technology and the economy. Women wrote on education, health and medicine, social issues and spot news.

In 1992, women made up 52 percent of the U.S. population. Inspired or outraged by the spectacle of Oklahoma law Professor Anita Hill's public confrontation with Clarence Thomas and the Senate Judiciary Committee in October 1991, many women worked to define 1992 as their year, when they would do more than take back the night. In politics, business, the media and elsewhere in society, women felt themselves empowered to "be Anita." Women political candidates won seats in national and state races around the country. The "boys on the bus" covering the 1992 political campaigns were women—NBC's Andrea

Mitchell, ABC's (and NPR's) Cokie Roberts, the *New York Times'* Maureen Dowd, the *Boston Globe's* Chris Black and scores of others. In 1992, perhaps more than in any other presidential election year, the concerns and perspectives of women were in the political forefront.

BUT THE FACE of the U.S. newspaper press in the Year of the Woman has other features. Although some 39 percent of newspaper reporters and editors are women, they still don't get the kind of assignments and play for their stories that their male colleagues do.

The *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Des Moines Register*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Miami Herald*, *New York Times*, *Portland Oregonian*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, *USA Today* and *Washington Post* are among this country's leading newspapers. Together, they help form public attitudes and opinions, help politicians gauge citizen sentiment, help citizens define what's important and understand how to view the world, the culture and the society in which they live. Their coverage helps a society learn about itself. On any given day, these 10 newspapers circulate a total of almost 8 million copies.

Using them to create a watermark content measure, we examined these papers' front-page "faces" to see who reported what news in the Year of the Woman.

On Page 1 in those 10 papers in 1992:

- Men's bylines: 70.7 percent.
- Women's bylines: 29.3 percent.
- Average story length:—Men, 918 words; Women, 831 words.
- Women covered more than their share of local news; men more than their share of state stories; national and international stories split more or less along the portions of women's and men's overall percentage of bylines.
- Women were not more likely to write "soft" news than men; 68 percent of stories by both men and women were "hard" news (event oriented and time bound).
- The press does report "good news." Most of the Page One stories (57 percent by men, 51.5 percent by women) were "positive" news.

LOCAL CONDITIONS will always dictate news coverage and assignments; a newspaper's Page One content will reflect not only the people regularly covered (a woman mayor or senator, for example), but also the paper's own newsroom demographics. As *New York Times* Editor Max Frankel once pointed out, if either Raisa Gorbachev or Nancy Reagan had been leading their respective nations, news coverage would have reflected that. There are other environmental or situational factors that govern who gets on the front page—being there when Mount Saint Helens erupts or when John Hinckley takes off after President Reagan is a factor in journalistic fortune (but less so when George Bush hits Saudi Arabia during Desert Storm or when Bill Clinton next picks up his sax, when assigning editors play a part).

Who gets Page One play depends in part on staffing and events. The 10 newspapers in our sample have different staffing needs, community characteristics and coverage demands. Nationally, 39 percent of newspaper journalists are women (including 8.5 percent of publishers, 12 percent of editors and executive editors, 24 percent of news editors), but they got just 29 percent of the bylines. Only one of the papers in the sample, *USA Today*, ran more Page One bylined articles by women than the percentage of women journalists in the business, although the *Miami Herald* came close. Women wrote 45.3 percent of *USA Today's* lead articles and 37.5 percent of the *Herald's*, exceeding the sample average by 16 percent and 8.2 percent, respectively. The worst performance in this regard was at the *Chicago Tribune*, where men wrote 81 percent of Page One stories.

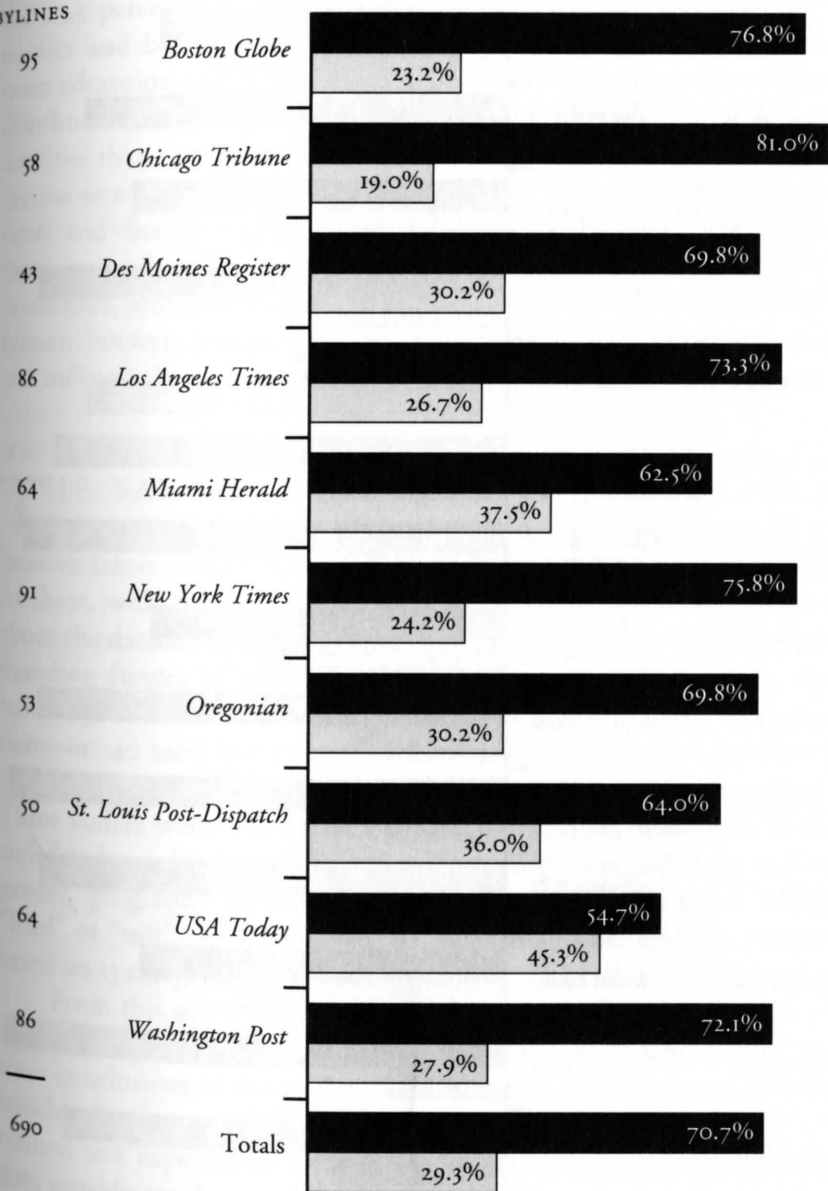
PAGE ONE CONTENT

NEARLY ONE-THIRD of all the bylined front-page content in this sample—210 stories—concerned government and politics. The next largest category was economics and business, which comprised 11.2 percent of content, followed by foreign relations at 9 percent; crime and courts, and human interest at 8.8 percent; and social issues at 8.6 percent.

Men wrote 70.7 percent of all stories in the sample and women 29.3 percent; those are the baselines against which to measure the

Percentage of Page One Bylines by Gender in 10 Newspapers

TOTAL
BYLINES

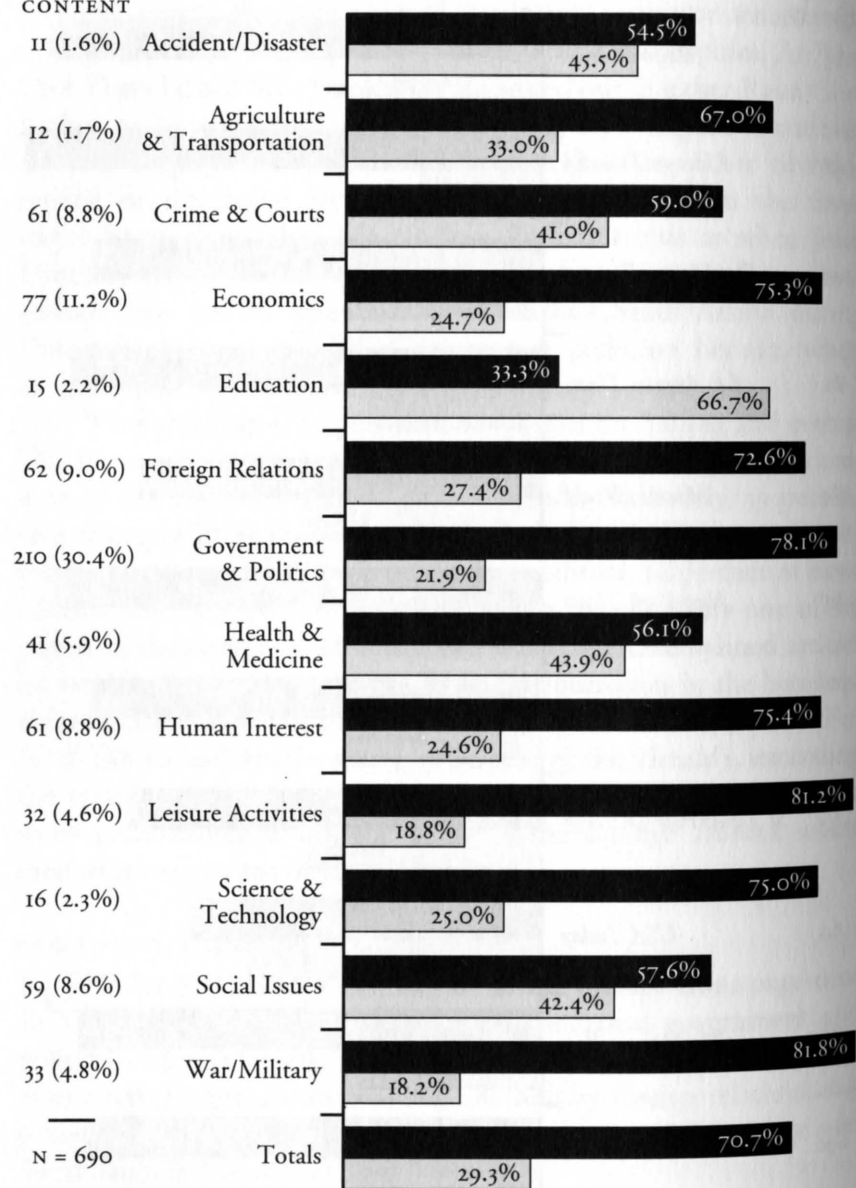


■ Male □ Female

(Sample: 14 randomly selected dates from January to December 1992)

Percentage of Page One Content Categories by Byline Gender

% OF TOTAL
CONTENT



N = 690

■ Male □ Female

byline data in the content categories. For example, women wrote 66.7 percent of all education stories, which is 37.4 percent more than the 29.3 percent "norm"; conversely, women's 24.7 percent of economics and business stories is less than the norm. Women wrote more education stories and fewer economics stories than the average distribution; men wrote more stories about war and about leisure activities than their average. Thus, women journalists at our 10 major metros were more likely than men to write about spot news (accidents and disasters; crime, cops and courts), education, health and medicine, and social issues. Men were more likely to have written on economics, foreign relations and diplomacy, government and politics, human interest, leisure activities, science and technology, and war and military affairs.

METHOD

THE SAMPLE of 10 newspapers was purposively selected from among the largest dailies in the nation, with geographical location taken into account. The stories were drawn from the Dialog database, with copies of the papers obtained in cases of questions about the database's completeness. In order to eliminate possible confounding factors of particular news events on content coding, the sample period consisted of 14 issues of each newspaper's final edition—or 140 total front pages—taken from a two-week constructed sample period whose dates ranged from January to December 1992. Three coders were trained to evaluate the sample, with each story coded independently at least twice. Each story was coded for byline gender, geography (local/state/national/international), word count, "hard" or "soft" news, "positive" or "negative" tone, and for content based on 13 categories of news adapted from Deutschmann-Stempel.

From this admittedly small-scale snapshot of some elements of who's writing what on the front pages of U.S. daily newspapers, we leave conclusions to the reader. Structural and organizational factors, which take time to shift, obviously influence which journalists are trained and experienced enough for which story assignment. These data provide another mark in the process of gauging how such influences are evolving.