

## **Caveman Meritocracy: Misrepresenting Women Managers Online**

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“Women are strong in those fields for which evolution has prepared them. It’s different in male fields. [...] Women are very emotional and short-term in their thinking. [...] Making sensible decisions is so-so, basically just lottery.” (Asterix [pseud.], comment on Ranta, 2012)<sup>i</sup>

The online comment above was posted in response to a feature article published in a web-based Finnish business newspaper, *Taloussanomati* (Ranta, 2012). The article itself drew attention to the reasons why women seldom make it to the upper echelons of companies in Finland. It built on a Chamber of Commerce report published some months earlier that examined women’s representation in top management and on corporate boards of directors (Turunen, 2012). The text, supportive of women in management and written in an upbeat and playful style, attracted a large number of online comments that were often belittling and abusive of women managers.

In this chapter, we provide a close reading of the comments on the *Taloussanomati* article to analyze gendered online media constructions and audience dynamics in the online business press context. In total, there were 236 online comments, which is a relatively high number for an article published in *Taloussanomati*. This suggests that the article not only attracted attention but also drove readers to take an active role in the media debate. The case reveals that (misogynist) misrepresentations of women are commonplace in Finland, despite its distinctly gender

egalitarian image, a tradition of policies that enhance gender equality, and a long history of women's full-time participation in the labor market. Along with the other Nordic countries, Finland regularly features among the countries with the smallest gender gap in the annual studies by the World Economic Forum (2014). Hence our example puts into sharp relief the ways in which online environments enable reproduction of gender stereotypes, myths, and outright vitriol that are constitutive of anti-women discourse and misogyny even in societies that are seemingly egalitarian.

We propose the term *caveman meritocracy*<sup>ii</sup> as shorthand to characterize the logic that dominates the commentary on the media article. It builds on what we call caveman talk, a register<sup>iii</sup> (Halliday & Hasan, 1976) of text in which gender differences are essentialized as deeply natural, primordial relations between men and women. These essential differences are presented in a dismissive tone that emphasizes their seemingly self-evident status in an aggressive manner. The mode of caveman talk is not one of engagement; it is declarative, as if stating undisputed and generally accepted facts. Caveman meritocracy thereby evokes a seemingly meritocratic system where men prevail for “natural” reasons. This language or talk not only frames management as a distinctly gendered (in this case, masculine) activity but also draws upon notions of nature and evolution to claim that women are unsuitable for positions of responsibility and leadership. However, online media also allow for other discourses or registers to surface, ones that challenge the masculinist worldview. In this chapter, we elucidate caveman talk and how it serves to (re)construct a particular gendered idea of meritocracy and consider its consequences for understanding gender, management, and online media.

### **Gender, Management, and Online Media**

It is well established that the media are active in forming frames of reference in relation to gender (Macdonald, 1995, 2003). The media both reflect and construct social reality. While media serve to circulate and reproduce established understandings and taken-for-granted assumptions concerning the roles and positions of men and women in society, gender discourses in the media are also open to contestation and change. This also applies to the question of gender and management. Extant research tells us that the media is a key site where gender is “done” in and for management (Deutsch, 2007; Kelan, 2010; Tienari, Holgersson, Meriläinen, & Höök, 2009; Tienari, Meriläinen, & Lang, 2004; cf. West & Zimmerman, 1987). It routinely portrays men and women differently as corporate managers (Krefting, 2002; Lämsä & Tiensuu, 2002) and as political leaders (Mavin, Bryans, & Cunningham, 2010). The male norm in management is perpetuated, and women are compared to an elusive masculine ideal.

At the same time, media discourses are also subject to contestation and change in the sense that media texts and the comments they engender are not crafted and consumed in a vacuum. Established understandings and taken-for-granted assumptions can be challenged, and practices of crafting and consuming media texts are subject to scrutiny (Coleman & Ross, 2010; Hellgren, Löwstedt, Puttonen, Tienari, Vaara, & Werr, 2002; Talbot, 2007). The media can bring alternative meanings based on different assumptions to the fore, challenge the status quo, and work to reduce hierarchical perceived gender differences. They can downplay, set aside, or ignore binary gender differences, or at least draw attention to gender imbalances in organizations (Tienari et al., 2009).

While extant research on gender and management in the media tends to focus on journalistic texts (Achtenhagen & Welter, 2011; Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Tienari et al., 2009), our primary focus in this chapter is on the *comments* that an article written by a journalist attracted.

Online comments are a relatively new form of media text, and they do not conform to journalistic conventions. They also differ from traditional letters to the editor in that they are not selected or edited by journalists or printed in the newspapers themselves. They only exist online and as seemingly unfiltered audience engagement with and reactions to the journalistic content rather than as a part of it. Online comments are, in many ways, interventions of social media discourses and practices into the journalistic sphere, interventions that journalists themselves find quite vexing and problematic due to their often aggressive tone and unconstructive nature (Marchionni, 2014). Such commentary on newspaper articles has only recently begun to attract scholarly attention, focusing on questions such as civility and incivility of language in online comments, the influence and consequences of anonymity online, and the role that online comments play in the public debate mediated by newspapers (Canter, 2012; Gervais, 2014; Hmielowski, Hutchens & Cicchirillo, 2014; Santana, 2014).

An emerging area of interest is the treatment and representation of women and women's issues on online forums and in social media more generally (Binns, 2012; Herring, Job-Sluder, Schedkler, & Barab, 2002; Jane, 2012, 2014, 2015; Mantilla, 2013; Megarry, 2014). These studies draw attention to the vitriolic, misogynist, sexualizing, and openly violent nature of comments that women daring to take space online receive. These kinds of analyses have not yet, however, made their way to management, organization, or leadership studies. This chapter is an attempt to begin the discussion of these issues in the contemporary interconnected global economy where "new media" play an increasingly influential role. We ask the question: what do online comments that media texts engender tell us about gender and management today?

The emergence of online commentary in web-based newspapers is a development that brings together traditional forms of media texts, journalistic content, and the practices of "new

media.” Newspapers see online comments as a key means with which to engage their audiences who, to an increasing extent, expect that they are able to make their voice heard in connection with news and feature articles. In the ever expanding mediascape (Appadurai, 1990) enabled and driven by new technologies, newspapers are seeking ways to remain relevant and to foster and even enhance public debate by making available new forms of engagement and debate between journalists and members of the public (Canter, 2012; Santana, 2014). While these aims are highly laudable, realities on the ground are often quite different. Despite the facility of online comments, media still tends to function in accordance with its traditional mono-directional model; online commentary tends to take place between members of the public as journalists are notably reluctant to engage with commentators (Canter, 2012).

Civility, or lack thereof, is an important question when it comes to public debate and the role of the media. Journalistic media texts are, by and large, civil. This is because civility is seen as a fundamental value of public debate that media see themselves as fostering (Wessler & Schultz, 2009). Civility, that is, treating others with courtesy or at least refraining from personal attacks, stereotyping, hate speech, vitriol and the like, is generally seen as a crucial aspect of constructive, persuasive public debate in the media. Without it, the debate quickly becomes an impoverished mud-slinging contest between the small number of those who are prone to engage in such activities while most potential participants withdraw their contributions (Gervais, 2014; Rowe, 2014; Santana, 2014). In online comments, however, incivility and abusive rhetoric is prevalent and at times even dominant (Gervais, 2014; Marchionni, 2014; Megarry, 2014).

In the comments on newspaper articles, then, broader trends in online culture are evident. Online language use is often less concerned with social graces and conventions of courtesy or politeness, let alone so-called political correctness. “Flaming” (making intentionally offensive

and contradictory comments) and “trolling” (intentionally misunderstanding or misrepresenting aspects of a debate to draw unaware discussion participants into useless and endless debates simply for the fun of it) make their appearance in newspaper comments (Buckels, Trapnell & Paulhus, 2014; Cole, 2015; Jane, 2012, 2014, 2015). Online discussions are sharper, more intolerant, and more inflammatory than discussions where discussants are in the presence of each other (Santana, 2014). These characteristics of online commenting are also likely to give rise to reinforced misrepresentations of women managers because the medium prompts more direct and abusive communication than would be socially acceptable in face-to-face interactions or in texts written by professional journalists. As such we argue that studying journalistic media texts and online comments offers a way for approaching the ways in which gender is done in everyday life (Gherardi, 1994). Our Finnish example illustrates this in a pointed way.

### **Representing Women Managers in a Business Newspaper**

A feature article titled “Village Idiots and Self-Promoters – Is This where the Glass Ceiling Is?” was published in *Taloussanomati* on January 7, 2012 (Ranta, 2012). The article was written by a woman journalist, and it framed the issue of the lack of women in top management positions in an upbeat, light-hearted manner, as the headline above evinces. The article was crafted from interviews with two top managers (a man and a woman) and an ex-manager (woman). Women managers were given a voice in the text through extensive quotations. Men’s domination in management roles, the scarcity and weakness of women’s networks, gendered family and child care issues, and structural impediments in business were briefly repeated as the main reasons for the small number of top women managers in Finland. The crux of the article, however, was in highlighting the differences between men and women in how they approach management challenges. Women’s skills as managers were flagged: “Women’s ability to analyze

things is excellent. Women are great as managers – as long as they do not burn themselves out,” a female manager in the article argued (Ranta, 2012).

The article, however, did not aim to dismantle or challenge the idea of the salience of gender as a factor in management. In fact, it relied on generalizing differences between the sexes and on forging essential(ist) links between gender-based differences and management behavior. Women managers stood out and in good stead, the article implied, by virtue of being female. Addressing the apparently obvious question of whether women are competitive first and foremost among each other, one of the women managers interviewed stressed that “I don’t think that women are nasty to each other.” In fact, she observed that “all my female bosses have been better than the men,” and concluded that “I guess the fact that you are in the minority brings about a sense of solidarity” (Ranta, 2012).

The language in the article deployed gendered generalizations and essentialism to drive home the point that women can be and are effective managers and leaders. The choice of words and expressions—beginning with the provocative title—suggests that the *Taloussanommat* article was written in a deliberately pointed way to trigger reactions and discussion. It was unapologetically albeit entertainingly on the side of women managers as it spoke for women’s special skills and encouraged women themselves to be more active in taking up challenges and in managing their careers. What is particularly interesting to us here is how the article gave rise to a frenzy of comments by readers and how in the comments the gender egalitarian society reveals a more vicious side and the civility of the media discourse begins to crumble.

### **Online Comments Run Amok**

Readers can comment on articles published in the online newspaper *Taloussanommat* (taloussanommat.fi) with a few clicks. The comments themselves can be “liked” (clicking on an

image to give a “thumbs up”) or “disliked” (given a “thumbs down”). Anonymous comments are allowed, but users are reminded of comment etiquette before they post. *Taloussanomat* underlines that commentators are legally responsible for their comments, and that it reserves the right to remove any comments from the website. Even heated discussion is acceptable, we are told, as long as the comments do not break the law or breach norms of common decency<sup>iv</sup>. According to the etiquette, comments that are abusive to specific individuals or groups are not tolerated.

The article *Village Idiots and Self-Promoters –Is This Where the Glass Ceiling Is?* attracted a total of 236 comments in four days between January 7-11, 2012. Most comments were made during the first 24 hours; some 30 comments were made thereafter and only two comments were made on January 11. No comments were made after that date, which underlines the temporary and opportunistic nature of online commentary. Online comments on articles do not readily result in prolonged, in-depth public debates. Most of the commenting, then, followed the publication of the article very closely.

The comments cannot easily be considered to form a discussion or a debate as many commentators were content to make statements that did not relate to other comments. Some comments, in turn, referenced other comments but did not relate to the theme of women managers in any way; they engaged with other commentators but not with the topic of the article. Overall, the discourse was fragmented, incomplete, and lacking coherence; a centrifugal antenarrative assemblage of texts heading in a number of directions (Boje, 2001, 2007).

We focused on the 170 comments that directly or indirectly refer to women managers or at least to gender in broader terms. It is worth noting that many of the comments did not follow the newspaper’s comment etiquette; they were, arguably, directly abusive and/or offensive (to



women as a group)<sup>v</sup>. Given the anonymity of the comments we do not have any definite data on the gender composition of the commentators or knowledge of who they were. We assume that the readership of *Taloussanomat* consists of people who have some kind of connection to business organizations or an interest in reading business news. What we do know is that 30 commentators used a male pseudonym and an additional 53 commentators indicated in their comments that they were men. There were 21 female pseudonyms and an additional 20 commentators indicated that they were women. The rest of the comments and their pseudonyms, if any, were more ambiguous. We strongly suspect that the great majority of the remaining commentators were men, given the tone, style and content of the comments.

What is notable is that in this instance the *Taloussanomat* article did not attract many internet trolls, commentators whose sole aim is to skew a discussion for personal amusement with outlandish, irrelevant, and often offensive interjections. Few comments matched the kinds of entries that literature identifies as trolling (Binns, 2012; Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014). Excessively violent or hateful comments—“e-bile” to use Jane’s (2012, 2014, 2015) terminology—were also rare. We identified six e-bile comments, and they all seemed to be from the same source. What we considered to be e-bile were comments such as “Well-educated whores want to be part of highly advanced technology Finland ... bitches belong where they are told with their menstrual pains and hormonal imbalances, to give birth. Period.”

We analyzed the comments in sequence, preserving their temporal order, and also retained the relationship of the comments with follow-up comments. We ranked the texts for relevance (that is, whether and how directly they referred to the article they were ostensibly commenting on) and categorized relevant comments in terms of their register, the tenor and mode in which they discussed the issue of women managers. It is notable that 66 comments were

not related in any discernable way to the topic of women managers and we excluded these texts from further analysis. Out of the remaining 170 comments we classified 50 as instances of discourse where gender differences were directly described as deriving from an ostensibly natural order of things, a primordial essence that determines the roles for the sexes. We refer to this as *caveman talk* because it assumes that women are inherently inferior to men in management and in life in general. In this talk type, we identified four recurring themes:

1. Women as excessively controlling micromanagers.
2. Women as unreliable backstabbers.
3. Women as emotionally distant and supercilious managers.
4. Women as womanist conspirators. These themes constitute a discourse—albeit a fragmented one—wherein women are represented in degrading ways and essential “primordial characteristics” are attached to women managers.

Another distinct category of texts (22 comments) rested explicitly on irrefutable meritocracy: those who deserve top positions reach them. The logic in this category of texts is self-explanatory and self-fulfilling: those at the top are the most competent and the most competent end up at the top. Finally, and in opposition to caveman talk in particular, 26 comments in our sample challenged the idea of essential gender differences, criticizing the views expressed by other commentators or even the uncomplicated understanding of gender of the original article (11 comments we classified as anti-caveman talk as they challenged the views expressed directly as sexist and incorrect, while 15 comments made acerbic remarks about caveman talk)<sup>vi</sup>. It is noteworthy that the challenging of caveman talk was mostly done by reversing the gender hierarchy of and using essentializing language to argue that women as a group make better managers. Although few, there were some comments that could be considered

to be feminist, pointing out the problems with both essentialized gender assumptions as well as the pitfalls of so-called meritocracies.

### **Caveman Meritocracy**

The dominant register of the online comments on women managers in response to the *Taloussanomat* article was caveman talk. These were comments where women's inferiority to men as managers and/or human beings was presented as self-evident, a result of essential differences between men and women. Women managers were called "bitches," "fuck-ups," "petty bosses," "nerdy girls," and mere "extras." In our materials, one of the first themes to recur in the comments was women's alleged essential tendency towards excessive control and micromanagement:

A woman wants to keep control of everything and does not trust her subordinates. Male subordinates get picked on by woman managers and they are under constant surveillance (7.1.2012 19:03)

Who wants to have a "bitch" as their boss who ... starts to micromanage minutiae and avoids making big decisions? (7.1.2012 8:02)

These kinds of comments claim that women lack a sense of the big picture and with it a fundamental leadership trait that is a sense of judgement and proportion. In these characterizations women emerge not as incompetent or hapless as managers but rather excessively controlling bureaucrats, incapable of making big decisions. Women are

administrators, not leaders. Moreover, under the micromanagement of women the working environment suffers:

The unfortunate truth about women as managers is that the work climate deteriorates and job autonomy is lost. Women want to keep all strings in their own hands; they don't trust their subordinates. (7.1.2012 19:03)

The truth is that as managers women are prone to neurotic behavior, cracking under pressure. They are not prudent, they pick fights. They don't take responsibility and they let others do the work. Rather than seeing all their negative traits as causing the problems, they blame men, the society, glass ceilings etc. They are free-riders. I'm just wondering whether we can ever see a generation of women who'd take a look in the mirror, develop themselves in order to become a genuine alternative to men managers, and offer a constructive perspective to management. (7.1.2012 11:48)

A second recurring theme in the comments depicted women as "back-stabbers":

My only female boss was bureaucratic, uptight, untrustworthy, and negative. Some of my male bosses have been fantastic, some have been jerks. But not one of them has stabbed me in the back. (7.1.2012 17:31)

Women managers, the comments assert, cannot be trusted. The claims often relied on the discursive practice of professing the evidence of experience (Scott, 1991). According to this

logic, the evidence was plainly visible and therefore as irrefutable as it was damning; it was based on direct contact with women managers, or at least *a* woman manager.

The third recurring theme in the comments was the reversal of gender socialization and familial responsibility discourses. Sarcastic comments drawing on this logic represented women managers as uncaring, unwilling to consider familial responsibilities, and lacking the ability to provide emotional support:

I've always had male bosses who have been affable and supportive, the kind of people you can go to and talk about your problems. My one female boss was really rigid and the work climate was awful. It's really nice to go and try and convince a childless career rocket why I forgot to punch myself out when I had to go and take my kid to the doctor's. (7.1.2012 17:36)

Based on my experience, I don't think women are better as managers. The only woman I ever had as a boss had absolutely no clue about technology, production, and business, and she had none of that famous emotional intelligence. (7.1.2012 23:55)

Men managers emerge here as enlightened leaders while women managers lack emotional intelligence and empathy. Women managers are caught in a double bind of not matching male criteria of success but not living up to the nurturing female stereotype either (Gherardi, 1994). A further twist in the reversal logic is representing other women as a woman managers' worst enemy:

I don't share Huber's [*sic*, Satu Huber is one of the woman managers interviewed in the article] view of women as good managers. When I worked in ... insurance, I only came across selfish, back-stabbing women managers who were full of themselves. I have never experienced the same from male bosses. A woman is a wolf to another woman, also in working life. (7.1.2012 7:38)

Through such comments men managers are represented as the true egalitarians or meritocrats, more able to treat everyone with respect and integrity. Women managers explicitly lack those qualities. Women are represented as hard-nosed, sharp-elbowed careerists to whom other people are either obstacles or means to further personal advancement. Hence the masculine symbolic order shapes and constrains women managers' social relations with other women (Mavin, Grandy, & Williams, 2014).

While some comments claim that women lack any ability to work together with other women, in other comments women's networks and support systems were treated as highly suspicious attempts to gain unfair advantage in an otherwise meritocratic system. The fourth recurring theme in the comments—and in sharp contrast to the above—was the conspiratorial, women-preferring woman manager:

Women's career development comes to an end due to the fact that women think themselves better than men because they are women. Women form cliques and networks only amongst themselves. (7.1.2012 10:48)

In these comments, women seeking solidarity and empowerment through connecting with other women are represented as exclusionary and conspiratorial. Gender quotas, whose purpose is to right historical wrongs and current day imbalances, are presented as evidence of women's natural superciliousness, sense of entitlement, and selfishness:

Women want all kinds of quotas for themselves because they think they are better by nature. This is where women succumb to their own selfishness. When women don't succeed by these means, they accuse men of discrimination. (ibid.)

What we call caveman talk, then, presents men as the inherently more capable gender and whatever women do, be it focusing on their own career or attempts to join forces with other women, it is represented not only as a weakness and a failing but also as anti-meritocratic. This sentiment leads some commentators to be directly dismissive of women as managers, as professionals, and as human beings. The woman journalist who wrote the *Taloussanommat* article became a case in point:

Women are clearly at a lower level. You can see that in the competence of the writer of the story. Not even the most basic principles of journalism were followed. (7.1.2012 12:20)

If the kind of caveman talk that we outline above relies on steep, primordial differences between the genders, another strong strand of this talk, in some 30 comments, specifically refuted the idea that the lack of women in top positions in organizations was an indication of any

discrimination. These comments pick up the idea of competition but frame it even more explicitly in terms of meritocracy: those who deserve the top positions reach them. True equality, these commentators hold, is achieved through non-interference in the prevailing conditions.

We're only in the second week of the new year, and what do we see: feminists whining again. It's all men's fault when women are not competent enough. No-one stops women from establishing their own publicly listed companies! Do that if you think you are as competent as men. Don't be martyrs and whine about quotas and equality! (7.1.2012 11:17)

Comments like these were typical contributions: expertise, not gender, is and should be the deciding factor in reaching top positions in organizations. In these comments, gender divisions are depicted as natural and a result of personal choices and initiative. The commentators do not discuss any kind of structural or historical disadvantages in women reaching top jobs. The reasoning is that they have not achieved top positions because of the lack of individual effort or required personal traits. Some commentators identifying themselves as women shared this view:

Many women think too much of themselves. This is my woman's opinion. I've succeeded by just being myself. I haven't taken notice of sexism. I haven't whined. I've concentrated on the job at hand. Also, I try to avoid female colleagues who are all the time concerned about what others think of them. How can someone like that focus on what's really important? (7.1.2012 21:45)



Success is presented as a personal and personality question. In this comment the self-identified woman manager emphasizes the importance of “being herself” at the same time as it is important to ignore sexism and focus on the task at hand. It is a personal failure if one loses focus on organizational goals or lets side issues, such as sexism, affect them. The very final comment in the thread, made on January 11, sums up the danger of being identified as a woman manager. It captures the attitude behind caveman talk:

A woman is an E X T R A. Forever and always. (11.1.2012 20:43)

### **Challenging Caveman Talk**

Alongside what we call caveman meritocracy—and caveman talk that brings it into being—attempts at representing women managers in other ways were also made in the online comments. Women’s special qualities were presented as an asset, echoing the sentiment of the *Taloussanomat* article. This discourse also involved derogatory remarks about men. These interventions were, however, relatively rare in comparison to occurrences of caveman talk. Only in a handful of comments were women depicted as professionals who have specific individual skills and competences—just like men. In contrast, many essentializing comments reiterated women’s special management qualities as they were presented in the *Taloussanomat* article:

Research has established that women are stronger in logical thinking. Research has also established that women can multitask. This is an important management trait (7.1.2012 16:25)

Women have a higher work ethic. So there is a bit of pressure and the poor boys are not fond of it. Challenging male authority on a wider scale is a blow to their self-esteem.

(7.1.2012 16:18)

I've noticed that men only see others' mistakes and not their own. They bolster their self-esteem with technical knowledge and they are unable to see the big picture. ... Women dare to question established ways of working and to report problems. ... Women make things run smoother and more openly. (7.1.2012 14:43)

All these comments confront caveman talk while relying on similarly essentialist logic. Apart from a few comments that pointed to the need to break out of traditional gender roles and chauvinism, much of the discourse of women's special management qualities reproduced established assumptions about women's qualities as managers, only in more positive ways. It elevated women on the basis of the same generalizations that were used to degrade them.

Finally, a small number of comments reflected on the tone and content of the comments themselves and drew parallels between them and the world of work at large:

What's behind all this are men who hate women. You only need to read these comments to understand that there are a great many men like that. They think that a woman's place is in the kitchen, between a fist and the cooker<sup>vii</sup> and their job is to serve men. These men do not want women in leadership positions because they think they'll lose out. It is still a man's world, and it is not going to change when attitudes are this old-fashioned and chauvinistic. (8.1.2012 5:05)

The references to meritocracy in the online commentary are presumably based on the assumption that gender equality has already been achieved, which pervades Finnish society (Korvajärvi, 2002). However, despite its egalitarian image Finnish society is deeply divided along gender lines, to which the comment above seems to refer. Firstly, the Finnish labor market is notably gender segregated (Kolehmainen, 2002). Vertical segregation makes it very difficult for women to reach top positions, for example in business organizations and higher education. Horizontal segregation, in turn, segments the job market into “women’s jobs” and “men’s jobs.” The former tend to be devalued both in socio-cultural and economic terms. Secondly, Finnish women tend to do a “double shift”—they work full-time outside the home while still doing most of the housework and reproductive labor (Nätti, Anttila, & Väisänen, 2005).

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

In this chapter, we provided a close reading of online comments that an article in the business press engendered and considered what they tell us about gender and management today. We took issue with misrepresentations of women managers. We argue that the dominant register in the comments is what we refer to as caveman talk. It is often dismissive of women as managers and as human beings, and represents women and men as fundamentally different creatures. The online comments make the masculine norm in management not only explicit but seek to legitimize it as an inalienable truth; a natural order of things.

We need to keep in mind that the comments do not exist in a vacuum or take some kind of natural and organic form. They are, literally, *comments* on a media article. The focal article, then, needs to be considered as a frame that gives the comments both the space the comments occupy and the direction they take (cf., Macdonald, 1995, 2003). The article framed the issue in

an intentionally provocative manner. The title itself created a rather unflattering image of male managers, representing gender differences as sharp and significant, even essential. While the media article was supportive of women managers in a somewhat essentialist manner while still retaining journalistic factuality, the online comments actively degraded women. The alleged characteristics of women managers were mocked, their female traits ridiculed, their behaviors, whether ostensibly feminine or masculine, derided, and their assumed weaknesses exaggerated.

Importantly, “women” appeared as a monolithic group, characterized and apparently limited by their essential and inferior qualities. They emerged from the depictions in the comments through *lack*. There is no logic or consistency to the caveman talk in terms of claims made—women are, for example, depicted both as being in cahoots with each other and unable to work with each other—but the consistent and essential representation of women managers through a lack that either has primordial origins or at least becomes evident through competition (and assumes the form of “battle of the sexes”) is what organizes caveman talk. In this logic, the current organizational realities and the lack of women managers are a natural outcome of meritocracy, competition, and the evolutionary traits of each sex.

The assumption that competence is something objectively measurable and observable (Tienari et al, 2004, 2009), at least post facto, allows for the logical extension that because there are not more women in top management, women are in one way or another unsuited for the positions. The notion of competence draws from and adheres to masculine ideals and expectations that are difficult if not impossible for women to fully meet (Kerfoot & Knights, 1998; Ross-Smith & Kornberger, 2004; Tienari et al., 2009). The commentary reflects the fact that women in management face what Gherardi (1994) called “dual presence” where they are

simultaneously expected to be like men (to adhere to masculine norms in management) and be different from them (to bring something extra to management by virtue of being women).

In summary, we argue that the notion of caveman meritocracy captures the content and form of the discourse that builds on male supremacy in management as an undisputable fact and does so in an aggressive way by means of exaggerations and generalizations that misrepresent women managers as professionals and as human beings. Caveman talk is, we argue, a mundane form of epistemic violence constitutive of anti-women sentiments and misogyny (still) prevalent in the seemingly egalitarian societal context of Finland. The sentiments that caveman talk expresses are something that would be mostly hidden from public view without the internet and the discursive practices of social media (cf., Gherardi, 1994). Our analysis adds to extant research a hitherto unexplored dimension, or perhaps an extension, of media analysis, the discourse on gender and management in the nowadays prevalent comment sections of online newspapers. This liminal textual space, where the discursive practices of social media uneasily meet those of journalism and where the exchange of views—of sorts—takes place adjacent to, although not within, the recognized confines of mediated public debate, is increasingly important and warrants further and closer research attention.

At the same time, caveman talk is a product of the specific conditions of possibility that social media and network culture create and enable. Its character is produced by these conditions. Online commenting often unfolds in gushes of emotional outrage before it dies down and the commentators move on to commenting on something else. As in “new media” more generally, time, space, and context become blurred as the commenting can be done in all kinds of circumstances without the other participants knowing about these conditions of content

production. A spur-of-the-moment thought becomes public and permanent when the commentator presses “enter”.

Finally, we are not suggesting that caveman talk represents a truer social discourse than do more civil forms of public debate. Rather, we propose that it forms a mode of operating and a register of text that has found a conducive environment on the Internet (Canter, 2012; Cole, 2015; Gervais, 2014; Hmielowki et al., 2014). It forms a character and part of the culture of that space and thereby makes that particular space accessible and available in specific ways, to specific kinds of actors and particular kinds of opinions and ideologies. In this way, the online space is no different from any other space, but it is governed by its own relations of power and it has its own forms of language and expression. This chapter is a modest attempt at making this visible for the purposes of studying gender, management, and the media.

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<sup>i</sup> Below we will identify the comment by their time stamp as it is the clearest way of identifying the comments, many of which were anonymous. The time stamp for Asterix's comment is 7.1.2012 16:51.

<sup>ii</sup> By deploying the notion of caveman meritocracy we do not mean to suggest that prehistoric cultures were necessarily patriarchal or male-dominated. The reference point is in the present, among the present day 'Neanderthals,' men and women who claim evolutionary justifications for their gender constructs, behaviors, and prejudices.

<sup>iii</sup> Halliday and Hasan (1976/2013, 23) define *register* as "the set of meanings, the configuration of semantic patterns, that are typically drawn upon under the specified conditions, along with the words and structures that are used in the realization of these meanings."

<sup>iv</sup> *Taloussanommat* seems to assume that a universal definition for common decency exists, whereas we see this to be a contested notion. Our analysis indicates that it is contextual and open for debate. Questioning and breaching norms of common decency is a notion that is at the heart of new media and their culture of immediate and seemingly unmediated engagement. The issue of incivility in online media is of increasing importance and attention.

<sup>v</sup> Offensive comments were not removed. More than three years later, as we wrote this in April 2015, the 236 comments were still available online.

<sup>vi</sup> The remaining 72 comments in our sample, while linked to the issue at hand, were repetitions (reposts of a comment already posted at least once) brief factual additions, clarifications, or comments on comments that added little in terms of substance. These texts were excluded from further analysis. The detailed textual analysis was carried out on a total of 98 comments.

<sup>vii</sup> The Finnish saying "a woman's place is between a fist and a cooker" is paraphrased here. The gist of the saying is that women are supposed to obey and serve their husbands and, by

extension, men in general. Although the saying may originally be misogynist, it nowadays is used more to flag outdated ideas of gender relations, as is the case here.