

Researcher examines lack of female opinion columnists in the US

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(Phys.org) —Despite decades of progress by women in the nation's newsrooms, female writers are still a rarity on the opinion-editorial pages that help drive important public discourse, a UT Arlington assistant communication professor has found.

Dustin Harp's newly published study found that while two-fifths of female-penned columns at the top U.S. newspapers were about "hard news" subjects such as politics and economics, these [women](#) writers are often relegated to writing about traditionally feminine topics, including parenting and health. A more concerning finding of the research, however, is the sheer lack of female columnists given space on opinion pages.

Harp, a gender and communication expert in the UT Arlington College of Liberal Arts, co-authored the paper "Where are the Women? The Presence of Female Columnists in U.S. Opinion Pages," which appears in the June issue of *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*.

"We hope our study will lead [news organizations](#) to reconsider the inclusion of female voices and to carefully examine their hiring and promotion policies," Harp said. "Females make up more than 50 percent of the U.S. population and when women are permitted to join the conversation, they provide a distinct and needed perspective."

Beth Wright, dean of the UT Arlington College of Liberal Arts, said Harp's work "contributes to the ongoing dialogue about women's roles in

society and the need for diversity in the workplace."

Along with the lack of women writers on the opinion pages, Harp and her colleagues found that women are less likely than men to be sources or appear in authoritative roles in news stories, are depicted less frequently than males and less prominently, such as appearing further down in the columns, with fewer quotes or only paraphrased, and in relation to topics deemed less substantive, such as parenting, education or gardening.

The authors noted previous studies that offered some explanations for the female underrepresentation, including a male-dominated culture of newsrooms where women have traditionally been offered fewer opportunities; women opting out of the positions because of parenting or family responsibilities; and women discounting themselves and their knowledge.

Harp undertook the new study with Ingrid Bachmann, assistant professor of communications at Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile, and Jaime Loke, assistant professor of journalism at the University of Oklahoma.

They examined 10 newspapers based on circulation size and nine regions of the country, including: the Boston Globe (New England), The *New York Times* (Mid-Atlantic), the *Chicago Tribune* (East North Central), the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* (West North Central), The *Washington Post* (South Atlantic), the *Louisville Courier-Journal* (East South Central), The *Dallas Morning News* (West South Central), the *Arizona Republic* (Mountain), and The *Los Angeles Times* (Pacific). To complete the sample, USA Today was included as a national newspaper.

The researchers acknowledged that an examination of online publications would be beneficial considering the state of the newspaper

industry and the move to online content.

Of the 10 newspapers examined, Harp and her colleagues argued that the news organizations have the financial and journalistic means to have a more gender-balanced pool of commentary writers and editorial board members. They found, however, that the leadership was overwhelmingly made up of white men.

The study examined the work of 22 columnists at the newspapers studied – six were female, while only one represented an ethnic or racial minority. The average editorial board included 11 members, four of whom were women. Whites comprised eight of the 11 members, on average.

"The lack of diversity, whether racial or gender, shows the inability of media to reflect different life experiences and perspectives, and thus presents an inaccurate picture of the world," Harp said.

David Boardman, president of the American Society of News Editors Board of Directors, acknowledged the new study and said the nation's news sources should make every effort to ensure that the demographics of their newsrooms reflect the makeup of their communities.

"Obviously, that means having women in key positions, including in leadership and as opinion writers," said Boardman, who is also dean of the School of Media and Communication at Temple University. "The finding that white men still dominate opinion pages is disconcerting and should serve as a call to action for America's editors."

The study adds to other research that has argued putting a column by a woman on the same page as columns written by men conveys a message that women's opinions matter and that women are worth taking seriously. Moreover, scholars have argued that gender equality cannot be achieved

in the U.S. if females do not have access to and equal representation in cultural symbols of power such as the op-ed pages.

"We believe our study lays the groundwork for further investigations that go beyond merely stating numbers by including considerations of how female columnists write as well," Harp said.

More information: Dustin Harp, Ingrid Bachmann, and Jaime Loke. Where Are the Women? "The Presence of Female Columnists in U.S. Opinion Pages." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, June 2014 91: 289-307, first published on March 24, 2014 [DOI: 10.1177/1077699014527457](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699014527457)

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