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Published online: 02 Jun 2014.

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It's a Man's World: A Qualitative Study of the (Non) Mediation of Women and Politics on *Prime Time* During the 2011 General Election

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The manner in which women appear, or disappear, within the Irish politics–media intersection is a question central to understanding the nature of contemporary politics for Irish women. This article explores the manner in which the 2011 General Election coverage broadcast on RTÉ's flagship current affairs series Prime Time *was gendered. The representation of Irish women's engagement in politics was constituted through four dominant frames. Firstly, women are marginalised by being 'framed out' of the political picture, secondly, they are framed through a visual gendering of politicians which presents women in a limited manner, thirdly, the source-frame is not applied equally to men and women on* Prime Time *and finally, women are framed as participants only in a limited set of topics for discussion.*

Introduction

While systematic analyses of media impacts on politics have become commonplace in Western democracies, there is still a relative dearth of such analyses in Ireland. Brandenburg (2005) proposes that the reasons for this are the perception that Irish elections are localised affairs and that Irish media coverage of elections is perceived to be unproblematic. However on the latter count, this article argues that the mediation of women's relationship to politics during the 2011 General Election is far from unproblematic. The mediated space for women and politics in Ireland is not neutral but rather structured on highly gendered terms. The extent to which television coverage of women's engagement with politics is gendered becomes very clear in this qualitative analysis of the general election 2011 coverage, on the national broadcaster RTÉ's current affairs series, *Prime Time*. In the 11 episodes that addressed the general election, women's engagement with politics was gendered in

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a number of ways. Firstly, women were numerically underrepresented on the pro-
gramme. While constituting at least 50 per cent of the population, women were
only present in a 1:3 ratio to men and their voices were heard on a highly imbalanced
1:9 ratio to men. Secondly, women were visually gendered, they were not represented
as half of the voting public, they were invisible in predominantly masculine public
spaces and female politicians were always visually framed as the followers of male
political leaders. Thirdly, the use of sources in the programme contained a gender
bias, with women invariably underrepresented in studio debates, location reports
and panel discussions. Finally, women were dominant in discussions of 'soft' or
caring issues, such as health, unemployment and education and less frequently
present for discussions of 'hard' or technical topics such as economics or politics.
Moreover, women were approached to contribute personal opinions or experiences
rather than being used as sources based on their professional, authoritative or
expert status. The consequence of these four patterns for women and politics in
Ireland is that women's political lives and views and participation are relegated,
depicted as of lesser importance than men's involvement in the world of power.
This representation of women's engagement with politics as marginal or minor,
serves only to further exclude them from an institution that is already numerically
hostile to their presence and perpetuates a situation where the presumption is that
politics is primarily or exclusively a 'man's world'.

Media and Politics

In the last decade, there has been a seismic shift from unidirectional mass media trans-
missions to more complex, networked and interactive mediated exchanges. Sudu-
lich's work points out that the Internet in Ireland has a mobilising potential for
political engagement but also notes that males are more likely to gather political
news online (2011). The theoretical, if not the gendered, complexity of the contem-
porary media–society relationship has been succinctly captured by Silverstone, 'The
media are both context and themselves contextualised. They both construct a world,
and are constructed within and by that world. And of course the world is plural not
singular' (2007: 6). The result of the changing media ecology is that the ontology of
politics is affected, as politics itself has to adapt to the needs of the media, and so what
counts as political action has changed, as the media require that political policy be
explicable within the constraints of media formats (Meyer, 2003 in Couldry,
2008). In this space, the political and the mediated world become indivisible
because there is no influence or power or democracy without visibility, without
appearance in the media and without the control of mediated space (Silverstone,
2007). The media's selection of events comes to define what appears to be the
only reality for most citizens and for the political elite (Mazzoleni & Schulz,
1999). As Silverstone notes:

> It is through communications conducted through the mediapolis that we are
> constructed as human (or not), and it is through the mediapolis that public

and political life increasingly comes to emerge at all levels of the body politic (or not). (2007: 31)

While the mediapolis does not negate the world of experience or the world of everyday life, crucially, media create the 'frameworld' within which political discourse and action occur, which in turn enables or disables power. In short, 'Politics, like experience, can no longer even be thought outside a media frame' (Silverstone, 2007: 190–191).

If politics has become dependent on interactions with mass media, then there is an urgent need for communication research to understand how the media mediate not, as Livingstone notes, simply because it tells us about 'the media' as such, but rather because, more importantly, media research reveals the changing relations among social structures and political agents (2009: 5). That relationship is one of amalgamation of the political world and the mediated world. Such a perspective 'on life lived *in*, rather than *with*, media can and perhaps should be the ontological benchmark for a 21st century media studies' (Deuze, 2011: 137) as well as for understandings of contemporary political communication. If the media do in fact constitute the world's 'publicness', it behoves us to interrogate what kind of 'publicness' this is, and what its consequences might be. The media's agenda-setting and gatekeeper roles in public debate become key issues for politics. Because it is in the media space or the 'space of appearance' that women and men are presented and defined publicly then if women are not part of that political space of appearance, if they do not appear within discourses on politics, and if they do not appear on an equal footing, the political world becomes a place where women are not 'meant' to be, they are defined out of the political.

Women, Politics and Media Frameworlds

With regard to women and politics in the media, research has focused on the questions of invisibility and modes of representation that generate stereotypes and gender frames. Women are usually numerically underrepresented across all media platforms, in comparison to men (Tuchman *et al.*, 1978; Norris, 1997; Ross & Carter, 2011). 'Women's voices, experiences and expertise continue to be regarded by news industries as less important than those of men' (Ross & Carter, 2011: 1148). In addition, women politicians are connected to domestic issues (Heldman *et al.*, 2005) and the private rather than public sphere (Lee, 2004). Women are typecast around the sort of topics that they discuss in media. Huddy and Terkildsen (1992) found that women are assumed to be sensitive and warm and so more competent in dealing with education, health and poverty rather than the economy or defence. Visually, women professionals working within the area of politics are gendered and typecast in complex ways (Lundell & Ekström, 2008: 891) and sometimes even as part of party campaigns (Devere & Graham Davies, 2006). Scharrer (2002) found that in newspaper reports, the more Hilary Clinton was framed as politically active and more certain to run for office, the more the tone of the story was negative. Men

are more likely to be presented as expert sources (Armstrong, 2004; Ross, 2007) and so their views are presented as more important and legitimate (Kim & Weaver, 2003). As Ross puts it 'If what we see and read and hear are men's voices, men's perspectives, men's news (then) women continue to be framed as passive observers rather than active citizens' (2011: 19). Moreover, if women are constantly presented as inactive spectators of politics then their capacity to actively engage as participants in politics is compromised by gendered media framing. This article corroborates many of the findings from the literature and in addition argues that the media frameworlds for women and men in Irish politics are not 'neutral' but are in fact highly gendered.

Women's appearance in the political realm generates specific frameworlds that both define and constrain their autonomy. 'Frameworlds' are constructed through the institutionalisation of particular 'frames' of representing women. In this context, frames are understood as the interpretative structure that set events in a broader structure (Entman, 1993). Frames represent 'persistent patterns of selection, emphasis and exclusion that furnish a coherent interpretation and evaluation of events' (Norris *et al.*, 2003: 2). Production practices in broadcasting, they way that journalists observe phenomena, how people have been depicted in the past and the types of sources used, all combine to create 'conventional' or dominant media frames. Conventional frames are important because they generate 'predictable, simple and powerful narratives that are embedded in the social construction of reality' and they cluster 'key concepts, stock phrases and iconic images to reinforce certain common ways of interpreting developments' (Norris *et al.*, 2003: 2–6). Framing effectively selects and prioritises some facts, images or issues over others, and thus promotes a particular vision or interpretation of phenomena. On the one hand, frames can be pragmatic solutions for political actors and journalists who must structure vast amounts of information, such as presenting policy positions in 'sound bites', but on the other hand frames are also activated as interpretation devices for the public who 'process' complex events into regularised patterns and interpretations.

However, the key point is that frames are not value free, they are 'ritualized ways to understand the world, of presenting a reality that excludes/includes, and that emphasizes/plays down certain facts' they constitute 'highly orchestrated ways of understanding social (including gendered) relations' (Byerly & Ross, 2004: 40). Frames present one meaning out of multiple possible meanings, while simplifying, organising and structuring gendered narratives, which, when repeated over time, become the conventional way to define women in the media. Once established in media routines frames are institutionalised through training, production practices and 'news cultures which strengthen a common interpretation of events' (Norris, 1997: 8). This institutionalised framing of women eventually creates a 'frameworld' for women in politics, outside of which they have no public profile or no access to the public. So the frameworlds, or the mediated 'space of appearance' within which Irish women or politics are presented and defined publicly, ultimately comes to determine women's entire 'politicalness'. This process of constructing frameworlds around women and politics is examined in detail below, through a case study of the Irish national broadcaster's series *Prime Time* which institutionalises a particular frameworld of Irish women's engagement with politics.

Methodology

This case study analysis documents some of the elements that generate the frame-worlds used to present women and politics in the Irish broadcast media and serves to connect some of the overarching assertions, made by feminist media analysts, to the particular or specific cases of the gendered nature of women's encoding in mass media. The research examines the proportion and qualitative nature of the framing of women and politics on the Irish national broadcaster's flagship current affairs series *Prime Time*. The analysis looks at women and politics in Ireland generally, rather than examining women politicians as a specific category. The analysis avoids that narrow avenue because the conclusions can only apply to a small number of political 'elites' who are part of the political establishment. Instead the study explores the wider issue of how women and politics intersect more generally in a broadcast series, so as to get at a more generalisable sense of how women and politics are mediated and understood within Irish society. The research takes this latter, broader approach because it is the discourses that surround women and politics generally that contribute to the ongoing marginalisation of women's participation in politics, not simply in a formal or professional sense of their participation in parliament, but even as informal participants, as citizens and voters who are affected by the outcomes of political decisions (Murtagh, 2008).

The sample of programmes for examination was selected from the Irish national broadcaster RTÉ's flagship current affairs series *Prime Time* because this is the most-viewed current affairs series in the country. The Leaders Debate episode drew a viewership of 807,000, online platforms had 23 million hits during the last 3 days of the election coverage (RTÉ, 2011). All of the episodes from the series' coverage of the Irish general election in February 2011 were selected for analysis. Under Irish legislation, broadcasters are obliged in election periods to give balanced coverage to all political parties, which would have influenced the time allocated to participants (Broadcating Authority of Ireland, 2011). This sample of programmes was selected because the election gave a unified theme and clear time delineation of 11 episodes for analysis. Moreover, the general election coverage presented a useful opportunity to examine women's status in political discourse at the height of key national electoral participation. The analysis examined all relevant content from *Prime Time*, which included opening sequences, programme signature graphics, feature and studio panel segments, commentary among presenters and scripted pieces to camera. All broadcasts were procured through publicly available online archives. A case study methodology was used to examine the data generated from the broadcasts in order to determine the nature of the frames that constitute women and politics in Irish broadcasting.

Findings

The purpose of this article is to explore the precise nature of the gendered 'frame-worlds' that depict women's engagement with Irish politics. The key findings are

that women are marginalised in political coverage by being framed out of the political discourse within *Prime Time*; women are visually gendered in the series' framing of politics; sources are framed in a gendered and an unequal manner and finally, the political topics that women engage with are also gendered, with women discussing soft issues and offering opinion or personal experience, rather than expertise, on a majority of topics discussed in the series. The article proposes that Irish women are systematically excluded from the depiction and discussion of politics that occurs in *Prime Time*, and argues that this amounts to an expulsion of women not just from media but as active participants in the political world itself. This issue is important to understand because the media do not simply add a 'framing' or stereotyping 'layer' to the complex question of women's interactions with politics, rather they fundamentally create and constitute that engagement, through the institutionalisation of particular gendered norms for women within political media and the political institution. The manner in which women appear, or disappear, within the Irish politics–media intersection is a question central to understanding the nature of contemporary politics for Irish women. The representation of Irish women's engagement in politics is constituted through four dominant frames. Firstly, women are marginalised by literally being 'framed out' of the political picture (Ross & Carter, 2011), secondly, they are framed through a visual gendering of politicians which presents women in a limited manner (Lundell & Ekström, 2008), thirdly the source-frame is not applied equally to men and women on *Prime Time* (Ross, 2007) and finally, women are framed as participants only in a limited set of topics for discussion (Heldman *et al.*, 2005).

Marginalisation – Framed Out

Norris's comment that 'The major problem we found with coverage of women in Congress could be better characterised as one of omission rather than one of commission . . . ' (1997: 145), certainly holds true for Irish broadcast coverage of women and politics on *Prime Time*. The series adopted a thematic rather than a candidate-based approach to its coverage of the general election in 2011. A typical episode of *Prime Time* generally had two distinct segments to each programme. A studio-based panel discussion segment featured a political elite of parliamentarians in a group discussion while pre-recorded reports featured groups of elite commentators as well as members of the public. In quantitative terms, across all of the general election coverage, *Prime Time* had an overall ratio of male to female participation of 3:1 but the proportion of airtime given to female guests in total was only 10 per cent. This means that although women constituted 25 per cent of the participants on the series, female guests spoke for only 10 per cent of the airtime. In short, men had a massively disproportionate share of airtime, even relative to their numeric presence on the programme (Table 1).

The first episode of *Prime Time*'s election coverage had no female participation whatsoever, but had six male contributors, a male reporter and a male presenter. The highest disproportion of representation was in Episode 7 which had 13 male participants and only 2 female, when the programme staff of presenters and reporters are

Table 1. Gender breakdown of by number of participants on *Prime Time*

Episode	Report		Studio		Staff		Total	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
1	0	3	0	3	0	2	0	8
2	1	6	1	3	2	0	4	9
3	0	4	0	3	0	2	0	9
4	7	11	1	2	1	2	9	15
5	2	7	1	6	2	1	5	14
6	1	7	1	2	0	3	2	12
7	2	5	0	8	1	3	3	16
8	10	12	3	4	1	2	14	20
9	1	5	1	4	1	2	3	11
10	0	0	0	3	1	0	1	3
11	6	10	0	5	0	2	6	17

included in the calculation this proportion rises to 16 male and 3 female participants in the episode. The episode that came closest to parity of gendered participation was Episode 10 which had 3 men and 1 woman participate in the programme; however, this programme was somewhat atypical in that it exclusively featured an election debate among the party leaders and the one female participant was the programme presenter. Excluding the leader's debate, during the entire election coverage, the lowest number of male guests in any episode of *Prime Time* was 6 men in Episode 1, while the highest number of female guests was 13 women in Episode 8, although 8 of these women made relatively short vox-pop contributions. When vox pops are discounted, the highest number of female participants is eight in Episode 4 while the lowest number of male participants is six in Episode 1. Among the *Prime Time* staff, men dominated in terms of on-screen presence. Five of the 11 episodes on the general election were exclusively presented by the male presenter, 2 were presented exclusively by the female presenter and 4 episodes were co-presented. Only 3 pre-recorded reports were delivered by female reporters, whereas 10 reports were delivered by men.

Kahn's observation that female politicians receive less coverage than male counterparts (1994) holds true in the case of *Prime Time*'s studio-based panel discussions. With regard to the political elite, 36 men and 5 women professional politicians participated in the main studio debates. Female politicians on *Prime Time* constituted only 13 per cent of political elite participants, while men were 87 per cent of studio guests. This is not an entirely unexpected outcome, as the proportion of representation in Irish parliament in 2010 was 86.15 per cent male to 13.85 per cent female, with only 15.2 per cent female candidates for the 2011 election so the programme accurately matches the very low number of female members of the Irish political elite (National Women's Council of Ireland, 2011). Of a total of 11 episodes,

5 studio debates had no female politician-panellist, and a further 5 episodes had only 1 female panellist. For the most part, women panellists received comparable amounts of airtime, although never more airtime, than their male colleagues. For instance, in Episode 4, the female Labour spokesperson received 4 minutes of airtime, comparable with the outgoing male government spokesperson, who received 3.5 minutes, less than the 6.5 minutes given to the then main opposition party male Fine Gale spokesperson. Similarly, another female labour spokesperson on Health received 3.5 minutes of time as opposed to the 5 minutes given to the main male opposition party spokesman, but Labour was the smaller of the two opposition parties. While women politicians in studio receive much the same treatment as their male colleagues, they are present on screen in slightly less than the proportion of their presence in parliament.

Visual Gendering

The most striking visual representation of the gender disparity within *Prime Time*'s studio segment occurred in Episode 7, where the studio discussion was an outside broadcast and featured the series' female presenter interviewing a panel of six men, with no female participants present. This stark dominance of men was repeated in the final election episode of *Prime Time*, which saw the male presenter interview five male politicians in studio, with no female contributions in 27 minutes of studio debate, in a programme lasting 39 minutes in total. Ironically, this episode ended with the male presenter commenting 'we've run out of time. I had wanted to bring up gender equality but looking at the five of you, I think that answers the question'. In response, one of the panel quips 'six' and the presenter smiles, perhaps acknowledging that the production is as guilty of gender bias as the political institution.

The visual images used in the pre-recorded reports were also highly gendered. Across each of the episodes of *Prime Time*, pre-recorded reports arguably constituted the most powerful part of the programme, because of their visual impact. However, there were some striking anomalies in the selection and presentation of contributors within the reports. For example, Episode 3 chose a male primary school teacher as a spokesman despite the fact that the occupation in Ireland is dominated by 88 per cent female teachers to only 12 per cent male (FAS, 2011). Episode 4's report had a woman question local politicians about an incomplete housing estate, but she was accompanied by a second woman, who was silent and who went unnamed and unexplained within the report. However, one instance of *Prime Time* working outside of stereotypical presentations of gender was their inclusion of a female manager of a timber yard in Episode 4; however, this woman speaks for only 17 seconds of the programme.

Prime Time's election coverage included a series of pre-recorded reports called 'Vote Boat'. A male reporter travelled by boat on inland waterways, docking at various locations to discuss the general election with members of the public. Episode 4 examined the voting intentions of the public. The gender balance should have reflected the 50:50 gender breakdown among the voting public in Ireland

(McGing, 2012). However, the visual sequences in that 'Vote Boat' report did not reflect women as half the voting public, instead the visual sequences predominantly featured men, shot on location in a cattle mart, a Gaelic Athletics Association (GAA) training ground, a housing estate, a rowing club and a traditional music session in a public house. Three of the locations were populated exclusively by men; the mart, the GAA grounds and the pub. The housing estate featured two female members of the voting public, alongside male politicians, while the rowing club featured four women.

While each of the locations was public in the sense that they were either outdoors or generally accessible to members of the pubic, three of the locations were exclusively masculine spaces, they featured large groups of men only, both in the mart and the GAA training grounds. The pub featured only the three men interviewed. Women featured in two locations, a housing estate and the rowing club, but in both cases, the only women seen are those interviewed. What this means is that throughout the report, women are invisible in busy public spaces and only appear in secluded public spaces. Moreover, in the report, the visual presentation of the typical 'voter' is disproportionately and predominantly male. Excluding any shots that only show the male reporter, the mart sequence uses 36 shots of men, the GAA sequence shows 28 shots of men, the housing estate shows 10 shots of women, the rowing sequence shows 19 shots of women and the pub shows 22 shots of men. This means that in a report lasting 10 minutes, there are a total of 86 shots of men and 29 shots of women. Visually, men outnumber women 75:25 rather than reflecting the 50:50 voter split. So, although the report innovatively defies stereotypes of women by featuring them outdoors in 'public' spaces, rather than in a domestic setting; nonetheless, the overall visual impression given is that men dominate in public life and women's position is marginal, which may hold true for establishment politics, but which should not be the case with public engagement with voting.

Kahn (1994) notes that coverage of female politicians is more likely to be negative and to emphasise the unlikelihood of their election as well as the problems that they confront as politicians, instead of their accomplishments. In the context of *Prime Time*, the coverage women receive emphasises mainly their marginality within the political institution. With regard to how establishment politicians were presented visually in *Prime Time* reports, a very definite pattern emerges whereby women politicians tended to feature mainly in the background, as passive participants and usually only as part of group shots. Male candidates are usually presented as active, and invariably shots of speakers at podiums addressing crowds feature male candidates. In the first episode of election coverage the programme uses shots of the then Taoiseach Brian Cowen with the then, female, President Mary McAleese, dissolving the Dáil. Thereafter all visuals of female politicians frame the women as secondary to the male leader and women only ever appear in the context of their party grouping. In Episode 1, for each of the then governing parties, Fianna Fáil and the Green Party, two prominent female Teachta Dalaighs (TDs) figure in group-shots, standing beside the party leader. Similarly, for opposition parties, Labour and Sinn Féin, female politicians are shown only in group-shots and, again, usually in the company of the party-leader.

This pattern reoccurs in Episodes 2 and 4, which feature politicians canvassing. Episode 2 opens on a sequence of the election campaign with the political leaders featured. One sequence is of a photo-call, the first shot shows the Labour party leader, seated in front of a window overlooking a Dublin cityscape with three female candidates standing behind him, leaning forward. Two of the women have a hand on either of his shoulders. The visual shows a male photographer taking a shot of the four. This sequence leaves the impression that the Labour party is heavily dominated by women, a misrepresentation of the actual situation. In the previous general election held in 2007, the Labour party returned seven female TDs to the Dáil. In another sequence of visuals, which are used to cover a scripted piece about the launch of political parties' manifestos, a range of shots of the political parties at press conferences, leaders canvassing on the street, leaders hanging election posters and a number of independent candidates at a podium outside the parliament are used. In this sequence of six shots, only two feature women politicians at all, none of the women are 'active' in the shots, but rather feature in the background to the main politician profiled, who is invariably a man and normally the leader. In each case, women are invariably in group-shots and usually accompanied by the party leader. Only twice, as an element of pre-recorded reports, does a female politician speak, despite the fact that elsewhere in the pre-recorded, as opposed to studio-based, electoral coverage, 12 male politicians voice their views.

The cumulative effect of these visual sequences is that what is missing from the report's coverage of the election is any sense that women are important players in politics, or indeed in the topics that *Prime Time* featured in its election coverage. Women are literally not seen to matter in decision-making on the economy, in the health system, in the banking crisis or in public sector reform. In fact, there is very little sense in the report's visuals that women are even affected by these issues, because they are, for the most part, either passive, or a visual absence in the *Prime Time* reports on these important subjects.

Source-framing

Within the *Prime Time* election coverage, gender disparity is also very evident in the presentation of women as sources. In the international news media, men are still more likely to be quoted as sources than women (Ross, 2007). A study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism (2005) in the USA examined 16,800 news stories, across 45 outlets, during 20 randomly selected days, over 9 months, and found that more than three quarters of all stories contained male sources, while only a third of stories contained a single female source. This is not exclusively an American phenomenon, the 2010 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2010) in 130 countries found that only 24 per cent of the people interviewed in mainstream news were female (World Association for Christian Communication, 2010). Ross & Carter note that despite some improvement on the 1995 GMMP, the 2010 project showed in that in Ireland 'women's voices, experiences and expertise continue to be regarded by news industries as less important than those of men' (2011: 1148). 'Women

Table 2. Gender break down by number of participants (and percentage) in pre-recorded reports

Participant category	Female	Male
Total participants	28 (29%)	69 (71%)
Expert	8 (19%)	36 (81%)
Non-expert	19 (36%)	33 (64%)

journalists are vulnerable to the 1:3 female/male ratio which characterises the proportion of women to men as subjects of news' (Ross & Carter, 2011: 1155). Ross further notes that women in Irish media were more likely to be framed

> as victim of various crimes and events . . . (and) women were three times more likely than men to be described in terms of the family status (e.g. mother, wife, daughter), either as part of their personal biographical detail as primary or secondary subject, or else they were invited to speak precisely because of their relationship to the main (male) news subject. (2011: 1155)

In short, the Irish section of the GMMP shows that 'women still struggle to break through the 1-in-3 barrier, their status and their function in stories is often very different from men' (2011: 1160) (Table 2).

Within the pre-recorded report section of *Prime Time*, there were 28 female participants and 69 male participants in total, or a breakdown of 29 per cent female and 71 per cent male overall. In the elite or expert category, gender balance was weaker with 36 men and 8 women or 81 per cent male and 19 per cent female participation. In the non-expert category of public commentators, there were 33 men and 19 women; this was the category in which the participation of men and women was closest to parity at 64 per cent male and 36 per cent female. However, most contributions from women in this category were short, vox-pop style inputs, which explains the fact that while women are 25 per cent of participants in the programme overall, they receive only 20 per cent of the spoken airtime and when female staff voices were deducted from the total, it falls to 10 per cent, that means that while women appear in a 1:3 ratio, women are heard in a 1:9 ratio to men on *Prime Time*. Added to the visual bias contained in the shot sequences used in *Prime Time* reports, the frameworld of women's engagement with politics is one that absents and restricts them as experts and as political news sources and agents.

The Topics Dimension

'In addition to conferring status upon actors by giving them attention, the media also assign political relevance and importance to social problems by selecting and emphasizing certain issues and neglecting others' (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999: 251). Just as

most women journalists are located in the 'soft' side of news (de Bruin, 2004) in *Prime Time*, many women were included in the discussion of 'caring' topics, such as health, unemployment and education where the discussion revolves around the impact of policy in this area on the well-being of people or groups in society. Women are less frequently present for discussion of 'hard' or 'technical' topics such as economics or politics, where the focus is on specialised knowledge of how the rules of economics apply in the Irish case and in the context of an extensive crisis, where the impact is at a macro–societal-level. A dichotomy of 'hard' and 'caring' issues can be used to capture the gendered characteristics of issue coverage on *Prime Time*'s studio panel format. In this contest 'hard' news refers to the concentration on macro, political or societal-level consequences of an event or issue whereas the 'caring' topics are those that address the impact of issues on the meso- and micro-level well-being of individuals or groups within society. Women only rarely got to speak at the former 'hard' level but were more frequently represented at the latter 'caring' level.

For instance, in the studio panel segments of *Prime Time*, five panels had no female participants whatsoever while discussing 'hard' political topics that impact at a societal-level, including, the impact of the election itself on Irish society, the proposed need for public sector reform, the issue of dysfunction in Irish politics and the party leader's debate on a range of election issues. A further hard economic issue that had a total dearth of female participation, despite the presence of six male panellists, was a discussion of the treatment of small- and medium-sized enterprises in the economic crisis and the future of the Irish economy if this sector were weakened. These five hard issues all addressed topics that contained societal-level consequences but all five were presented as an exclusively male preserve with a complete omission of female input or analysis. The dearth of women presented the unavoidable conclusion that somehow women were unaffected by the outcomes of 'hard' issues or immune to the architectures of power surrounding these institutional-level discussions which systematically excluded them.

On other panel discussions of the 'hard' topic of economics, there were three panels that did include a female voice, which respectively discussed finance, the banking crisis and candidates for the role of Minister of Finance. However, it was the same female politician who participated in all three economics panels, Labour TD and spokesperson on finance, Joan Burton. Only one other male politician, Richard Bruton of Fine Gale appeared on an equal number of occasions. However, the latter was one of 38 appearances by male politicians in panel discussions, whereas Joan Burton appeared three times in studio panels alongside only two other female politicians during the entire series. This meant that there was a sense of a repeated presentation of a single candidate, appearing three times in the series. This repetition acts to present one woman as the 'everyman' perspective of Irish women on economics. There is an inevitable take-away logic that one woman's voice can speak to and for all of the diverse viewpoints of women within the state, with no requirement for or acknowledgement of the potential of a continuum of opposing or even outright contradictory views on economic questions. The repetition

of appearances did not act to ballast women's overall representation on hard societal-level technical issues, such as macroeconomics or national economic policy. Instead the repeat appearances acted to reduce the multiplicity and complexity of women's economic views to a single and repeated voice.

Studio-based discussion of 'caring' issues that address the impact of politics on the meso- and micro-level well-being of organisations or the individual were conducted in studio panel discussions on health, education and unemployment. These topics saw a greater and more diverse number of women, albeit not necessarily female politicians represented in the studio debates. The issue of unemployment included a female panellist in her capacity as head of policy and media with the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed. Health coverage in studio debate included the Labour spokesperson on Health Jan O' Sullivan. The election coverage's discussion of Education had two panels discuss the topic. The first panel had the female former Minister of Education debate with three men and the second studio panel, which was the only one in the entire series that had more than one female panellist participate, two women, the public relations officer of the national parents council and the general secretary of the Irish National Teacher's Organisation, participated. Education was acknowledged firstly as a 'topic that barely featured in the election campaign' and secondly it was addressed in terms of caring issues, with parents and teachers discussing the physical well-being of students regarding the build environment accommodation in light of reduced education budgets and the question of the religious education of children was covered in detail. What is clearly a political election issue of investment in social infrastructure became interpreted in a peculiar way as being about physical infrastructure, the future of the Irish language and religious education.

The presentation of women as engaging with politics around caring issues constitutes something of a double-edged sword for the women in question. As Ross notes the media often appear to be operating double standards when considering women politicians, almost 'as if they expect "better" standards of behaviour, higher moral values, more honesty, integrity, loyalty' (2002: 82). How this 'double standard' was operationalised in *Prime Time* was that in effect women in particular were expected to meet the nation's needs around social care and educational infrastructure, but within a political system where that is increasingly an impossible task, due to the austerity regime adopted by the State. So women in their 'carer' political capacity were set care standards that were literally impossible to meet, while simultaneously being excluded from the 'hard' debates about the political structures that had brought the country to a point of being unable to meet the demand for care and social production.

Secondly, on a majority of topics discussed in the series reports, women tended to be included in offering opinion or personal experience of a topic, rather than because of their status as experts. 'Men were more likely to feature as news subjects spokespeople and expert commentators than women, whereas women were more likely to feature as eye-witnesses, to bring their personal experience, or to provide public opinion' (Ross & Carter, 2011: 1160). In a five episodes, women participated in

the elite studio panel discussion, a further seven women appeared as experts within the report section of the programme but a total of nineteen women appeared in programme reports in a personal capacity. For instance on the question of Education, one female school principal was interviewed in a professional capacity about the inadequate facilities in her school. However, her contribution was 'matched' by four men who were also interviewed in various professional capacities associated with the education sector, such as Gaeltacht and policy experts and an education editor for a national newspaper. In that Episode 7, women spoke about their personal experience as parents, pupils and as carers of students but these contributions were outnumbered by male contributions in a personal capacity of which there were twelve. So while women are more frequently invited to speak in a personal capacity on soft or caring issues, this does not mean that this type of contribution to the debate 'compensates' for their exclusion from other types of input. While women are very much more likely to contribute to political discussions in a personal capacity, these inputs were still outweighed by equivalent or more numerous personal inputs from men on the same topics. The final effect of this pattern is twofold, firstly it further consolidates 'traditional gendered binaries of male/public/professional vs. female/private/personal which undermine women's value in and to society' (Ross & Carter, 2011: 1160) and secondly it reinforces the disproportion of male voices heard over the volume of women's voices.

Conclusions

With regard to marginalisation, the relative presence of women to men in *Prime Time* is firmly anchored in a 1:3 ratio, with women's voices limited to 10 per cent of airtime. These statistics suggest that men's lives and views and voices are regarded as at least three times, if nine times more important than women's. Similarly, the visual sequences used in pre-recorded reports on *Prime Time* are very gendered with the programme's reports predominantly featuring images of men. Women politicians are included visually, for the most part, only in group-shots, accompanied by the male party leader. Even where ample opportunity exists to feature women, such as in reports about the public and voting, the pattern is one of privileging male presence and women are noticeable only by their absence. This pattern reflects a tendency in electoral canvassing for parties to deploy female politicians mainly as visual 'fodder' for the media (Lundell & Ekström, 2008). The entire frameworld of women's engagement with politics is one that absents and restricts them as experts and as political news sources and agents. This gendered pattern is repeated both in the selection of topics for discussion by women on *Prime Time*, and in the roles or status allocated to women when they speak about particular topics. In short, then *Prime Time* presents a scenario where women still lag behind in terms of their access to participation in media output. There is a structural and systematic blockage when it comes to women's participation in media, and in political programming in particular. The causes and consequences of this dearth of representation for women, has serious political, social and cultural consequences and demands to be explored further and understood more broadly.

As Philips (1998) notes, there are four groups of arguments for raising the proportion of women elected. The first appeals to principles of justice, women are being denied rights and opportunities that are available to men and there is a case for action to ensure more participation as well as eliminating the structural barriers that lead to their unequal participation (Philips, 1998: 229). A second argument notes that equality of participation is one criteria by which democracy is judged and 'under-participation of particular social groups is normally regarded as a political problem' (Philips, 1998: 231). Another reason for gender parity is that without women's full participation, their multiple and heterogeneous interests are discounted. Philips also notes the role model successful women politicians offer. However, at the core of her analysis is the central ideal that changing the composition of elected assemblies is only one strand of a larger project of enhancing democracy. The argument for more women in parliament, in media and in politics at all levels, is in the end an argument for a broader dispersal of power throughout society and an argument for democracy and representation more broadly.

As this article has argued the media often create structural blocks on women's participation in politics and so on the quality of democracy. The media does this by presenting women in a stereotypical fashion, associating them with traditionally 'feminine', 'soft' or lifestyle topics rather than the 'hard' political, economic and defence topics that are dominated by men (Craft & Wanta, 2004). The media often offer less airtime to women's voices (Lefever, 2004). Even when women are numerically present, they get less time to speak than men. This discrimination against women serves to reinforce and reproduce their marginalisation and to constitute a form of symbolic violence against women 'the violence of representation based on sub-ordination of the "Other" in an en-gendered, en-classed, en-raced society of male, white, West, Christian domination' (Wolf, 2011: 44). To address this issue, programme makers, broadcasters, industry organisations and regulators all have multiple roles to play. There is a need to monitor the quantity and quality of women's participation and representation on air. The media need to proactively seek-out, enable and train women to participate in programmes. Databases of female experts need to be publicly available and productions need to avoid ghettoising women on 'soft' or lifestyle topics, giving them proportionate airtime. Feminist media analysts also have a role to play in enabling women's full and fair participation in media, society and politics by continuing to examine new information technologies, political communication and policy issues, questioning how the 'technologies' of gender operate, or what part the media play in the construction of gender discourse at the levels of media production, acknowledging that media texts are replete with 'tensions and contradictions resulting from conflicting organizational and professional discourse' (Van Zoonen, 1994: 41) but nonetheless seeking out limited conceptualisations of women. In that vein, this article interrogates what kind of 'publicness' the media offers Irish women, and questions what might be changed (Silverstone, 2007: 29). The 'simple' answer is that the qualitative and quantitative nature of women's representation on Irish primetime news and current affairs programming needs to change. If Irish women continue to be systematically excluded from the

depiction and discussion of politics that occurs in *Prime Time*, and current affairs broadcasting in Ireland more generally, then this amounts to an expulsion of women, not just from media, but also as active participants in the political world itself.

Acknowledgements

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