

MEDIA'S GENDER GAP:

Investigating relationships between women's news production and consumption

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This report reflects research Zeisler conducted in a personal capacity and not as an official representative of the FT.



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SUMMARY

- Women are underrepresented in newsrooms and are less likely to read political and international news.
- Preliminary data shows that news organizations with a higher share of women writing the news and in leadership positions also have a higher share of women in their audience.
- A number of academic studies found that (1) women are more likely to cover the news with a positive framing and (2) women are more likely to read and respond to news with a positive framing.¹
- As such, it is possible that increasing the share of female journalists, editors, and newsroom leaders in a newsroom could reduce the gender gap in political and international news consumption.
- More women reading these news topics could create (1) revenue opportunities for media companies through audience growth and (2) a more informed and engaged public.
- This work is not definitive. Further research must be done to verify this relationship and assess overtime.

¹Framing can mean many different things including story valence (the automatic emotion elicited), topic choice, angle, and format (i.e. [solutions journalism](#)²).

The media gender gap is well established: women are **underrepresented in newsrooms and leadership roles are primarily held by and most frequently filled by men**.³ There exists another equally well established but less discussed gender gap: women tend to read **less political and international news**⁴ than men. This gender gap in news consumption has both commercial implications (vis-a-vis audience size and revenues) and editorial implications for news producers.

In 2012, economics professor Christine Benesch from the University of St. Gallen **concluded**⁵ that the gender gap in political and international news consumption cannot be “explained by differences in education, income, and other socio-demographics,” by job-related benefits of news consumption, or even by reading preferences. Even though Benesch did find that these differences were particularly large among working people with children, gender gaps in the consumption of political news were present in all of the subgroups she studied. The absence of a single explanatory variable suggests that something may be happening within media environments that affects news consumption.

Other research reveals gender gaps in the consumption of different genres of news. Research presented by the **Media Insights Project**⁶ found that a greater share of men say that they enjoy keeping up with the news “a lot” (60% vs. 51%), while women are more likely to say they enjoy following the news “some” (37% vs. 27%). Moreover, while men report slightly higher levels of enjoyment, both men and women reported similar responses in their consumption of in-depth news and breaking news. The greatest differences were in the news topics men and women reported they followed.

The Media Insights Project found statistically significant differences in reported news consumption by men and women: women are more likely than men to report following news on schools and education (69% vs. 50%), health and medicine (74% vs. 56%), lifestyle topics (58% vs. 30%), and entertainment and celebrities (44% vs. 28%). Men are more likely to report following foreign or international news (75% vs. 61%) and sports news (57% vs. 34%). Pew Research also found that **women and men reported comparable levels of interest in the top news stories of the day**.⁷ but that women read less of certain types of news despite similarities in stated interest. In 2008, for instance, Pew found a 5% point difference between the num-

ber of men and women who **“followed campaign news very closely.”**⁸ A **Reuters study**⁹ showed similar variances in the types of news men and women generally tend to consume.

The news industry has been under financial stress with significant job losses. Media companies require new audiences and revenues to survive. With 163 million women in the U.S., increasing readership by women could offer additional revenues through increasing subscriptions and advertising impressions. There are also significant implications at the societal level: more women reading political news would create a more informed voting population, which could in turn **shape government policies**.¹⁰

As awareness of the gender consumption gap and the possible benefits of increasing women’s news readership has become more prevalent, media companies have begun to innovate and experiment with different methods to engage women readers. Three primary solutions have emerged: create content specifically for women, develop marketing to target women, and push for gender parity for women in newsrooms.

While independent sites focusing on women’s voices and issues have existed for some time, there has been an uptick in publications creating content for millennial women. The Skimm (www.theskimm.com) launched in 2012 as a daily newsletter for women to cover the news of the day. In 2015, Vice created Broadly (broadly.vice.com), which aims to represent women’s experiences. Lenny Letter (www.lennyletter.com), a newsletter about “feminism, style, health, politics, friendship and everything else” was also founded in 2015. Mic launched The Slay (mic.com/slay) to cover the “most pressing issues impacting young women’s lives” in 2016. *The Washington Post* created The Lily, a “publication for women” in 2017 and most recently, the Wing, a women’s only social club and co-working space, launched the print magazine *No Man’s Land*.



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With the creation of these new outlets and brands, these companies are addressing women as a discrete audience. And while audience [segmentation is important](#)¹¹ to building bonds between media providers and their audiences, these formats fail to consider the consumption gap within the context of what and how news is created. These strategies risk marginalizing women as consumers or even magnifying gender stereotypes.

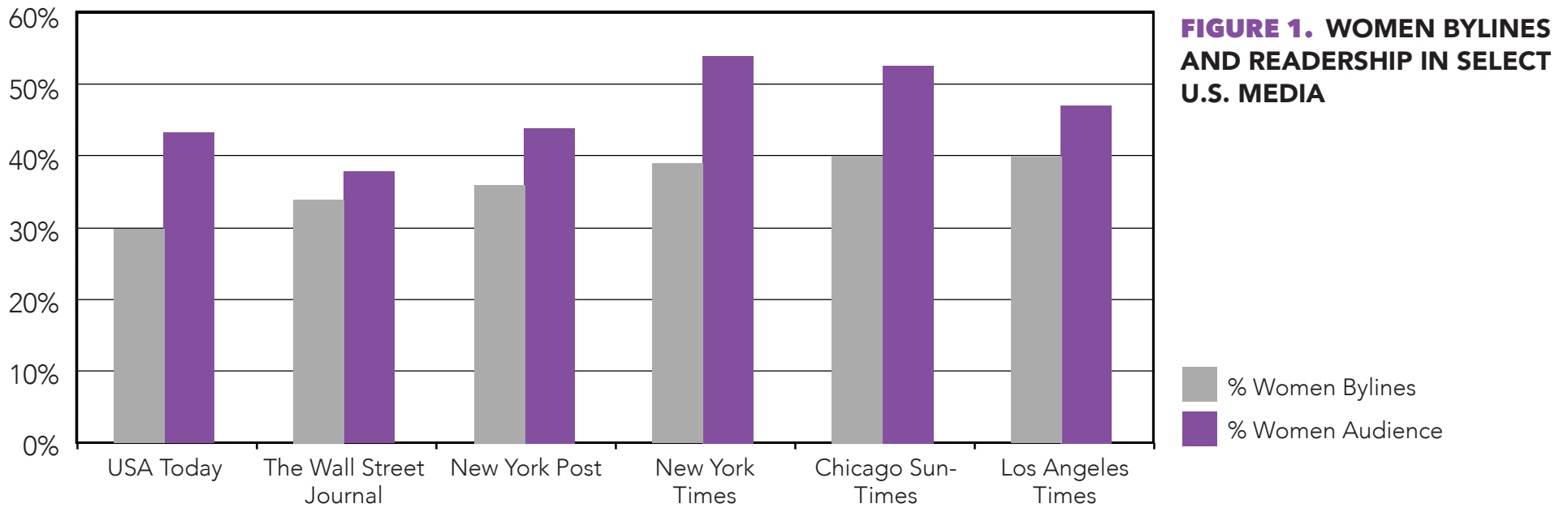
Furthermore, the resources required to create and maintain a targeted vertical are significant. The Lily launched with a [team of six](#).¹² As of November 2017, Broadly has 17 [staff members](#)¹³ listed on its website across commercial and editorial roles. This strategy may be prohibitively expensive for many companies.

Branding and marketing — trying to change perceptions and/or drive awareness of a company — is another way to increase readership by women. The Economist sponsored a [competition for students](#)¹⁴ to put forward marketing aimed at growing their numbers of women subscribers. *The Wall Street Journal* launched a [marketing campaign targeting young women](#)¹⁵ in October 2017.

Marketing strategies like those adopted by *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist* can be implemented rapidly, but may add costs and tend to have diminishing returns over time. Ad decay and ad wear out mean that consumers require several impressions and an ongoing stream of new marketing material for a company to maintain awareness and sales results. Therefore, marketing to women may work in the short term but is unlikely to solve for the consumption gap in the long run.

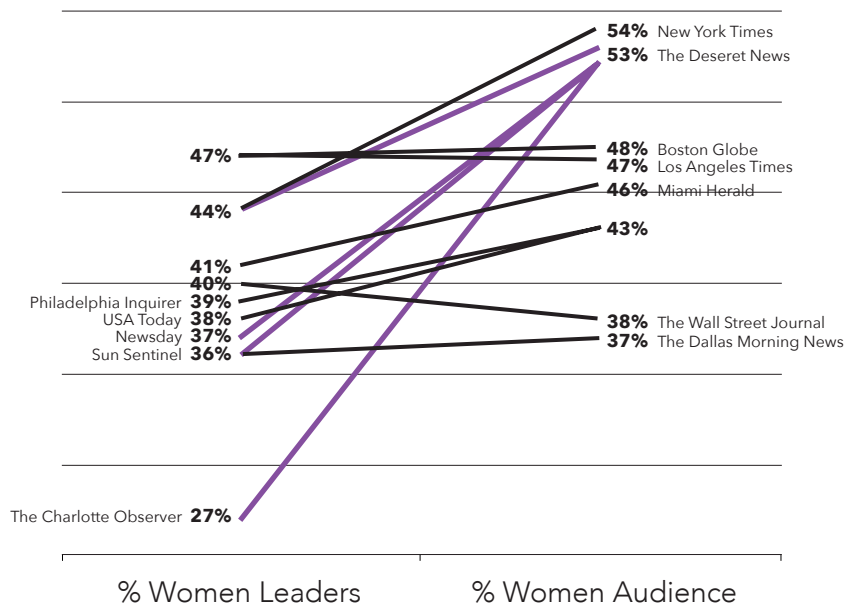
Although it is too soon to know about the success of new formats or marketing, a third approach is possible within existing newsroom resources. Liz Spayd, former public editor of the *New York Times*, proposed in a [2017 column](#)¹⁶ that the “overall scarcity of women” in the *New York Times* newsroom could be having an impact “not only on the journalism but also on the *Times*’s audience.” Spayd further noted that, “while the numbers are considered proprietary, internal research shows that more men than women read the *Times*.” The *New York Times* is not the only newsroom with fewer women writing the news and taking on newsroom leadership positions. According to the Women’s Media Centre, which has tracked women practitioners in the news industry since 2012, [“men still dominate media across all platforms — television, newspapers, online and wires — with change coming only incrementally.”](#)¹⁷

If a relationship between the gender makeup of a newsroom and the audience exists, then creating gender parity in newsrooms could provide a systematic method to increase women’s consumption of certain news topics. Addressing the consumption gap in this way would allow companies to use their existing infrastructure to better engage existing readers and to reach out to new ones, potentially increasing readership and revenues. A broader more informed public with the potential for greater civic participation are goals that are fundamental to the mission of news media.



Byline data is from the Women’s Media Center. For broadsheets (*Chicago Sun-Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*) “articles were collected from the first section of the paper.” For *New York Post*, “articles were selected based on content, generally excluding sports/lifestyle/entertainment.” The audience demographics were collected from each company’s media kits and would therefore cover a breadth of content, rather than just core news topics. You can read more about the data and methodology on page 10.

FIGURE 2.

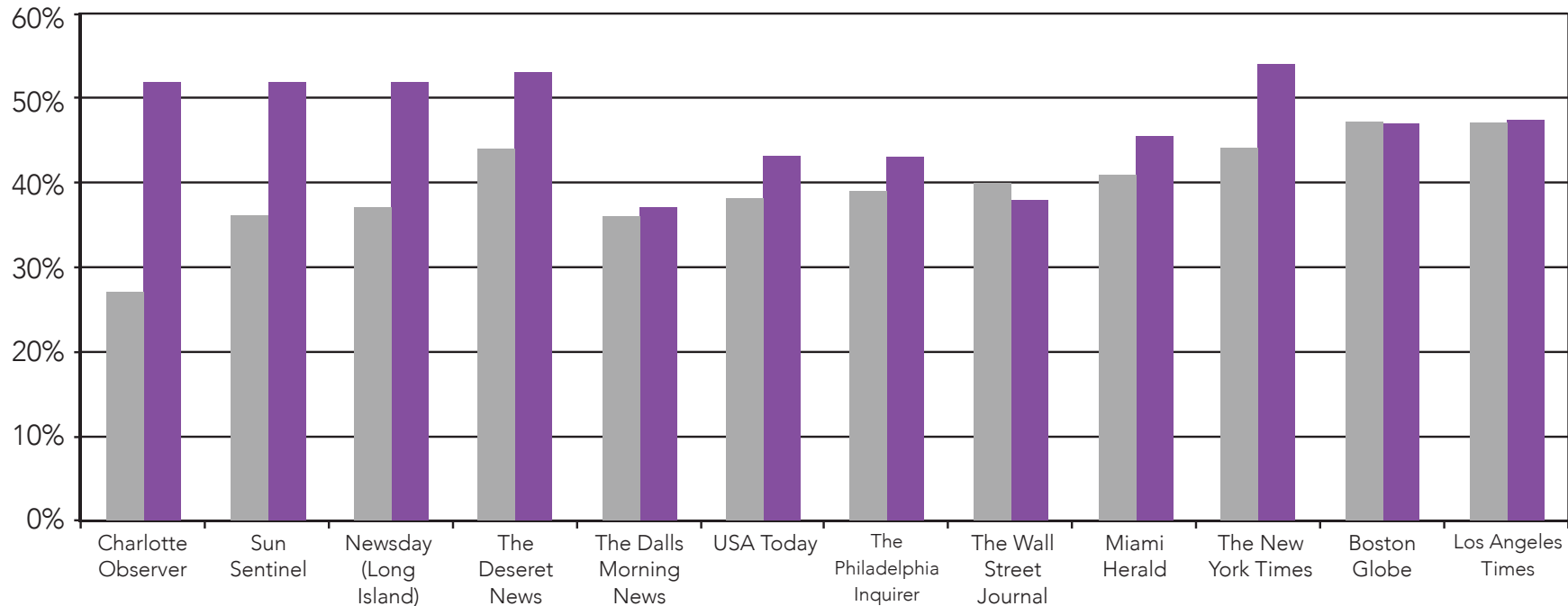


Preliminary analysis suggests a relationship between the percentage of women writing the news and the percentage of women reading the news. Figure 1 indicates that the percentage of women readers is higher in organizations with a higher percentage of bylines by women. The three companies with the lowest percentage of bylines by women (*USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The New York Post*) also have the lowest percentage of women readers.

The relationship between women in newsroom leadership and women in the audience is less direct. Of the 50 outlets considered in this analysis, only twelve companies reported both the percentage of women in their newsroom leadership (as part of the American Society of News Editors [ASNE] diversity study) and the gender split of their audience. As a result, the data references media sources that vary in size, focus of coverage, ownership, and circulation.

It is clear that outlets that place the most emphasis on topics that women traditionally over-index garner the highest percentages of women readers, regardless of the percentage of women with leadership positions. Women predominantly make up **“the audience for news about religion, health and entertainment, and... local or community news.”**¹⁸ *The Charlotte Observer*, *Sun Sentinel*, *Newsday* and *Deseret News* (in purple in the slope chart — Figure 2)

FIGURE 3. WOMEN IN NEWSROOM LEADERSHIP AND AUDIENCE IN SELECT U.S. MEDIA



The top 50 US News Websites, identified by Pew, were considered. Those outlets were winnowed down by those that participated in the ASNE diversity study and further again by those that reported their audience demographics. The audience demographics were collected from each company's media kits in 2017 and would therefore cover a breadth of content, rather than just core news topics. You can read more about the data and methodology on page 10.

emphasize these topics in their coverage. Conversely, *The Wall Street Journal* has a greater editorial emphasis on news topics women are less likely to follow (political, foreign, and business news) and, in comparison, a smaller share of women news readers. While there is evidence that suggests a positive correlation between women in leadership roles and women reading the news, there is no doubt that audience engagement is significantly mediated by news genres. An editorial emphasis on topics that women are more likely to read undoubtedly influences the overall percentage of women news readers.

■ % Women Leaders
 ■ % Women Audience

However, after removing these “outliers” from the data set, there is suggestive evidence that involving more women in newsroom leadership correlates with increases in readership of news by women. Focusing in on this data, then, raises a number of interesting questions as to the impact more women in a newsroom may exert on news content, tone, and readership, and most notably, as to why this relationship exists.

An explanation suggested by a number of academic studies lays in news framing. When men and women editors are asked to rate the newsworthiness of certain stories, both genders **define newsworthiness**¹⁹ similarly. However, differences do emerge surrounding the framing of articles: newsrooms **with a high percentage of women in managerial (editor) positions “tended to cover news in a more positive light.”**²⁰ The same study found that in newsrooms with women in senior positions, women reporters were more likely to cover the same

range of issues as male reporters, for instance, journalists of both genders covered politics. Conversely, “when a newspaper had a low percentage of women in managerial positions, male reporters covered politics” while women reporters were more likely to cover business and education.

According to the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), an ongoing longitudinal study on gender in the world’s media, **“women are 33% of sources in stories by online news female reporters, compared to 23% in stories by men.”**²¹ The GMMP has also found that articles by women are more likely to be about women (14% of articles by women were about women, compared to 9% of articles about women by men).

Simply put, bringing more women into the newsroom seems to impact what is written about, in what way, and by whom. This conclusion is supported by a content analysis of three U.S. daily newspapers and published in the *Journal of Communication*²²: “female reporters drew upon a greater diversity of sources... and wrote more positive stories than did male reporters.”

A number of studies also suggest that framing impacts the audience. A **multidimensional analysis conducted in 2016**²³ found that differences in story angle — which includes a “different event focus or other viewpoints” — can explain differences in news consumption by gender “whereas the topic and issue differences cannot.”

Additionally, research on gendered responses to the news has shown that **women benefit (that is, have improved comprehension and memory) when news has a positive framing**.²⁴ A study published in *Communications Research* in 2006, took a number of real world broadcast news stories and presented them to men and women with either a positive, negative, or neutral framing device. An example from the study:

In the story about deployed soldiers, the negative audio track emphasized the resistance of Afghani fighters and failure to de-arm them: “Since January, only 500 caches of weapons were confiscated and destroyed.” The positive version framed the mission as successful: “Since January, as many as 500 caches of weapons were confiscated and destroyed.”

The researchers found that women reported a stronger emotional response to positive messages, while men reacted more strongly to negative framing. The study also found that women were better able to remember news that had a positive frame rather than a negative one.

An analysis of *Financial Times* (FT) data supports the hypothesis that women news consumers have a preference for positively framed articles. As part of the **Google Digital News Initiative**²⁵, the FT’s articles were categorized by sentiment and compared against a number of different user attributes. Sentiment was determined using the **VADER**²⁶ methodology, a model that was developed at the Georgia Institute of Technology in 2014 that considers both the polarity and the intensity of sentiments. The analysis revealed that articles with a higher positive sentiment index also had a higher proportion of women subscribers.

This analysis suggests a possible relationship between news production and consumption by gender. Understanding differences in consumption — including both volume and content — and how it relates to newsroom attributes is a nascent and valuable area of study. Further research is needed to confirm the relationship between the gender gap in news production and the gender gap in news consumption, to determine causality and to assess over time. In particular, effort should be made to consider additional explanatory variables and to use an audited data set for audience demographics. Furthermore, an effort should be made to understand what positive framing of political and international news could mean to practitioners. Changing the mix of stories covered to include more positive news and solutions journalism is more consistent with existing editorial thinking than the idea of changing story valence, and is therefore more likely to be adopted.

For now, we know that women both produce and consume less political and international news than men. Current research is far from conclusive but suggests that these two gender gaps may be linked. Greater gender parity in the newsroom is a matter of equity but it also has the potential to engage more women as readers of political and international news, which could result in larger audiences, more revenues, and a more informed society.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

The overarching hypothesis of this research is that the gender makeup of a newsroom will impact that organization's audience. The methodology involved correlating female bylines and female leadership in newsrooms with the percentage of women in each company's respective audience. Analysis of this data was suggestive of a relationship that warrants further investigation. As more data becomes available, consideration of relationships between bylines, leadership, and audience demographics could also be used to investigate how racial, income, sexual orientation, and other imbalances in a newsroom might influence readership.

For those interested in this topic, here is a collection of sources:

- The American Society of News Editors (ASNE) conducts a yearly [newsroom diversity study](#)²⁷
- The Media Insights Project's study "[The Personal News Cycle](#)"²⁸ asked respondents about race in addition to their news consumption habits.
- Statista tracks the [frequency of news consumption among U.S. consumers by ethnicity](#)²⁹
- Academic papers:
 - [Interviewing the Interviewers: Journalistic Norms and Racial Diversity in the Newsroom](#)³⁰
 - [Diversity disorders: Ethnicity and newsroom cultures](#)³¹
 - [Racial Profiling in the Newsroom](#)³²
 - [Race in the Television Newsroom: Do On-Air Personalities Reflect the Communities They Serve?](#)³³
 - [Race and Ethnicity in local Television News: Framing, Story Assignments, and Source Selections](#)³⁴
 - [African American Women in the Newsroom: Encoding Resistance](#)³⁵
 - [Locating Whiteness in Journalism Pedagogy](#)³⁶

ABOUT THE DATA

FIGURE 1

- Byline info from Women’s Media Center is (2017) [here](#).³⁷ All bylines were taken from print products.
- Publishers were included based on what information was publicly available.
 - Provided percentage of women in print audience: *New York Post*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *USA Today*
 - Provided percentage of women in digital audience: *Chicago Sun-Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Post*, *New York Times*
 - Provided percentage of women in generic audience: *Los Angeles Times*
 - When an entity reported both print and digital breakdown, an average was taken.

FIGURES 2 and 3

- The top 50 news sites from Pew Research Center’s 2017 “State of the News Media” report were considered. [Their methodology is here](#).³⁸
- Leadership data was then taken from the ASNE 2017 report on newsroom diversity, [available here](#).³⁹
- Publishers were then included based on what information was publicly available in their media kits.
 - Provided percentage of women in digital audience: *New York Times*, *Sun Sentinel*, *Boston Globe*, *Miami Herald*, *The Wall Street Journal*
 - Provided percentage of women in print audience: *Newsday*, *Sun Sentinel*, *Charlotte Observer*, *Boston Globe*, *Miami Herald*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *USA Today*
 - Provided percentage of women in generic audience: *Deseret News*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Dallas Morning News*
 - When an entity reported both print and digital, an average was taken.

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Screenshots of mediakits for the outlets [can be found here](http://www.mediaimpactproject.org/uploads/5/1/2/7/5127770/mediagendergap_mediakits.pdf) (http://www.mediaimpactproject.org/uploads/5/1/2/7/5127770/mediagendergap_mediakits.pdf).

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