

## “Sticking to their knitting?” A content analysis of gender in Canadian newspaper op-eds\*

Philip Savage<sup>\*a</sup>, Sarah Marinelli<sup>a,b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>McMaster University, Hamilton (Canada), <sup>b</sup>Humber College, Etobicoke (Canada)

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### ABSTRACT

The largest content analysis of Canadian op-ed newspaper content, 80 published articles in the 2009 print editions of Canada's two largest circulation newspapers (the *Toronto Star* and the *Globe and Mail*), reveals a significant imbalance in male (80%) v. female (20%) authorship. Analysis found women authors were even more unrepresented in op-ed article that dealt with “hard news” issues such as politics, international affairs and economics (10%). In addition, analysis showed a pattern of male hard news authors freely venturing into op-ed authorship of “social” issues but the reverse pattern was not apparent among female op-ed authors finding space to write on political and economic issues. The results are contradictory to historically stated rationales for establishing op-ed space in newspapers and other media, namely to provide alternative perspectives on the traditional mass media coverage of current events.

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**L**ittle empirical research has been undertaken on the role of the “op-ed” in public discourse and media agenda setting either in Canada or throughout the world. To paraphrase Harold Laswell’s organizing communication question, we do not know: “Who gets to write what op-eds to what audiences in which media and with what effects?” (Severin & Tankard, 1997, p. 47). This article is an attempt to provide content analysis results of recent Canadian op-ed articles to baseline the range of op-ed authorship and content, and determine the possibility for a greater diversity of opinions in the Canadian media setting.

## Literature Review

Op-ed articles are essays that traditionally appear “opposite the editorial page” in newspapers. Op-eds are usually authored by non-journalists, i.e. individuals outside of the media payroll; purportedly allowing new expert opinion to be aired on a given subject or issue (Sommer & Maycroft, 2008, p. 590). Op-eds can impact public policy by presenting an expert opinion on current events and issues that are being discussed in the news but offer alternate views that are well researched, pointed, and thought-provoking. Op-eds are targeted to and acknowledged by lawmakers at most levels of government, and are regularly referenced by policy-makers; they can be very powerful as agenda setters, and even empower the authors in providing access to officials in power (Sommer & Maycroft, 2008, pp. 586-589). However, when a forum of public discussion, like the op-ed pages (in a newspaper, or indeed on various media websites) is compromised by narrow representations and the repression of marginal voices, the purpose is reversed. Some even question whether the journalistic intention of the op-ed page to increase content diversity and perspectives has been clouded by the need to feature public figures and established names (Day & Golan, 2005, p. 62).

The op-ed page was first introduced by the *New York Times* in 1970 as a way to increase diversity within journalistic practices by including the work of non-journalist experts and to create a completely open forum (Ciofalo & Traverso, 1994, p. 53). However, this attempt to empower thoughtful non-journalist writers resulted in the domination of op-ed pages by affluent and elite professionals and the so-called open forum became little more than an illusion, at least in the United States main-line media, where Ciofalo and Traverso (1994, p. 54) assert “public discourse [...] rapidly deteriorate[s] from a pluralism of viewpoints into a monologue.” They found op-ed pages to be dominated by other professional journalists, public relations practitioners and institutional advertisers, with a lack of representation of citizen writers (Ciofalo and Traverso, 1994, p. 54). In terms of the specific demographic characteristics of published op-ed authors, Ciofalo and Traverso found that 80% of op-ed pieces in major American news publications were authored by men (1994). Sommer and Maycroft (2008, p. 605), in their analysis of op-eds featured in the *New York Times*, found a similar result; 82% were written by men.

Before some of the American studies were conducted, uneven gender authorship was suspected by many female academics and journalists. In recent years, American women organized around the tenet of diversity in op-ed authors and developed tools to ensure their access to key media publications. In 2005, Susan Estrich, a professor of law and political science at the University of Southern California, initiated a very public campaign to get the *Los Angeles Times* to publish more opinion journalism by women (Chert-Zand, 2010). The

movement was strengthened significantly in January 2008 when New York City-based journalist and author, Catherine Orenstein, founded “The OpEd Project”:

Rather than just lament that women’s opinions and voices are grossly underrepresented on the Op-ed pages and in other aspects of the media, Orenstein [...] founded an organization to correct the imbalance (Ghert-Zand, 2010).

Orenstein and her group train female academics and expert women from a variety of business, labour and civil sectors, to become more present on the op-ed pages and to get under-reported issues and perspectives on to the public agenda.

## Methodology

Given the paucity of Canadian research on the basic data about the authorship of op-eds, we conducted a content analysis of Canada’s two most prominent newspapers to establish a baseline of op-ed authorship in English Canada. In total, 80 published op-ed articles were analyzed from the 2009 print editions of: 1) the *Toronto Star*; and 2) the *Globe and Mail*.<sup>1</sup> Publication dates were chosen to ensure sampling of the broad range of weekdays and weekend issues across the 12 months. The *Globe and Mail* publishes more op-ed articles, on average four per day, than the *Toronto Star*, averaging just fewer than three per day. The final sample of 80 articles consisted of 48 op-ed articles from the *Globe and Mail* and 32 from the *Toronto Star*.<sup>2</sup>

Coding was conducted by co-author Sarah Marinelli in February 2010 according to the coding schedule and manual attached in the appendix. This schedule was developed to identify characteristics of the author’s identity as

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\* The authors of this paper organized the first Canadian nationally organized “Op-Ed Project” workshop, led by Catherine Orenstein in Montreal in May 2010, as part of the Canadian Communication Association (CCA) meetings at the 2010 Canadian Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences. The meeting was sponsored in part by the Canadian Communication Association, Media@McGill, and the Humanities Department of McMaster University. Preliminary results of the content analysis discussed in this paper were first presented to the fifteen participants in that workshop and their feedback is gratefully accepted. McMaster University student Paul Bullock also helped with the organization of the workshop, and proofread this paper

<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Newspaper Association (CNA) audited 2009 weekly circulation figures show the top two Canadian newspapers to be the *Toronto Star* at 2,199,214 in paid subscribers and the *Globe and Mail* at 1,891,629 (Canadian Daily Newspaper Association, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> The dates of the sample were: January 29, February 6, March 28, April 16, May 2, June 25, July 17, August 4, September 10, October 23, November 18, December 29

well as the content of the essay itself along the line of eight key variables.<sup>3</sup>

These variables provide an analysis of key characteristics of gender against subject area with a few specificities around the authors' professional background, region and expertise, relative to the subject area under discussion. It was decided at this point to limit the analysis and not include more complex notions of author identity, including ethnicity, in part because of the difficulty of determining these characteristics accurately in print.

## Hypotheses

A series of hypotheses were developed based in part on the existing literature but also expanded through an in-depth interview with a leading op-ed editor in Canada, the *Toronto Star's* Mr. Fred Edwards, conducted in February 2010:

1. There is a gender imbalance in op-ed authorship; more by men than women.
2. "Liberal" publications, like the *Star*, have a higher percentage of female authors.
3. "Hard News" content (e.g. politics/economics) is more common within op-eds.
4. "Soft News" content (e.g. social issues/arts) is more often female-authored.
5. Male op-ed authors write outside their expertise, and female authors less so.
6. Previously unpublished op-ed authors are more common than published authors.
7. Female op-ed authors are more likely than males to be professional writers.

Fred Edwards explained that the *Toronto Star* editorial pages are overseen by three individual editors that assist in filtering out the vast amount of submissions. However, editors are ranked and some may have their own connections or sources to publish on the page. This influence of networks and connections within the media or the publication itself is an interesting factor. Another factor of selection is convenience, Edwards notes: "[There is] a tendency to go back to familiar contributors. An issue surfaces, and the frequent response is, well, I'll get old-so-and-so to write a piece" (personal communication, February 23, 2010). The newspaper operates on a strict time constraint and favours credibility and validity in its publication, which is most likely the cause of the tendencies to use personal and professional connections to experts. However, this presents an even greater obstacle for new voices and first-time submitters. If there is already an imbalance between genders, among ethnicities, ages, professions, etc. how will the forum sustain its purpose for open debate and diverse contributions? Edwards concedes that there is in fact a gender bias, and

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<sup>3</sup> The coding variables were divided into two categories: (a) Author-related: gender, profession, expertise city/region, frequency; (b) content-related: publication, subject area, date.

that women are not as prominent on the op-ed pages (personal communication, February 23, 2010).

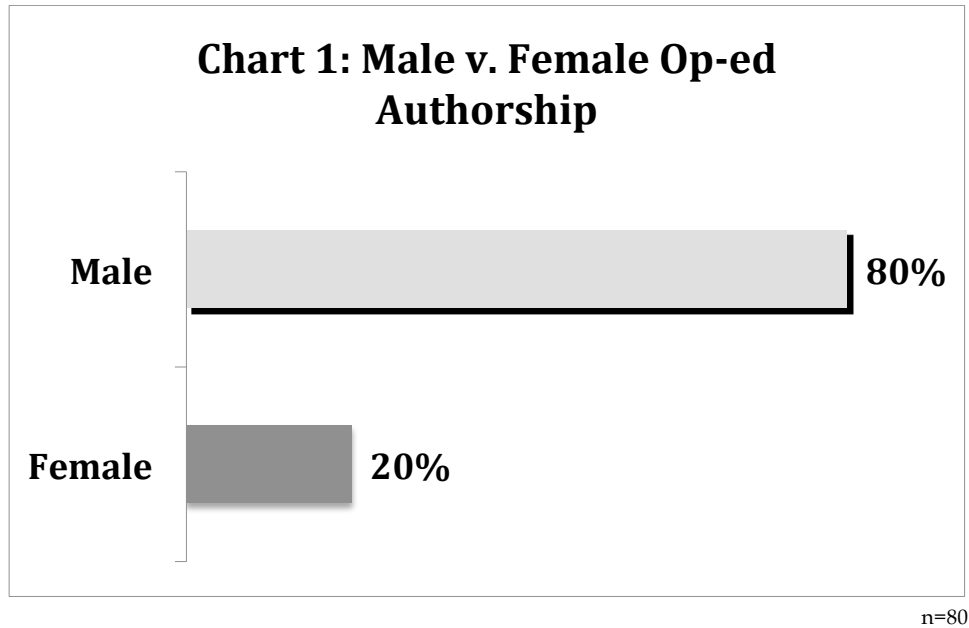
Subject matter and familiarity of the contributor are additional factors that Edwards suggests affect op-ed selection, but more importantly, these criteria seem to be more commonly favouring men. Most importantly, the *Toronto Star* wants to publish op-eds on key issues and current debates, which, according to Edwards, means an inordinate concentration on politics, economics, and foreign policy as common subject matters. Once the subject matter is deemed relevant, the next step is to select a piece that is written by “name” contributors, which are those who are well-known in the industry, within the media, or to the public (personal communication, February 23, 2010). This presents another layer of the filtering out of women, because apparently each set of criteria seem to be more commonly met by men, which is hindering even the editors' attempts to increase the presence of women on the op-ed pages.

## Research Findings

Findings are organized along the lines of the hypotheses discussed above.

*Hypothesis #1: There is a gender imbalance in op-ed article authorship.*

Within the sample of Canadian newspaper articles analyzed, men authored 80% of the op-ed pieces and women contributed only 20% of those published. This represents a statistically significant difference and demonstrates a profound imbalance in the authorship of op-ed articles along gender lines in Canada's two major English-language publications. As opposed to some thinking which might suggest a more equal role for women in mainstream editorial writing in Canada, this result is effectively the same as found in previous studies of op-ed authorship in the United States.

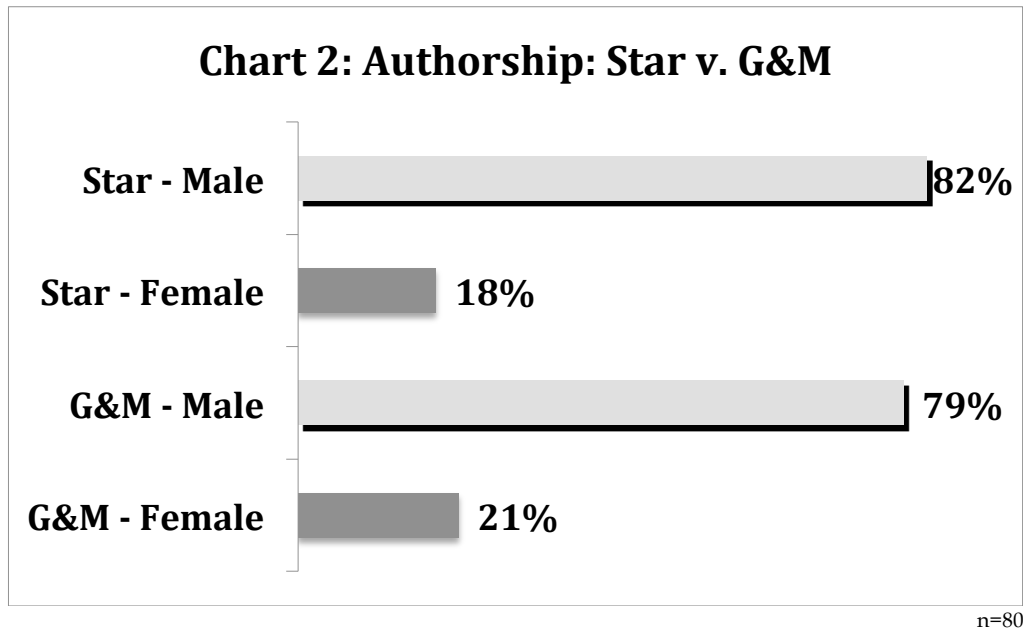


*Hypothesis #2: "Liberal" publications, like the Star, have a higher percentage of female authors.*<sup>4</sup>

Bivariate analysis of author gender and newspaper source found no significant difference between levels of female op-ed authorship in the *Star* (18%) and the *Globe and Mail* (21%). In other words, the specific hypothesis that a newspaper widely perceived as liberal would give more space to female op-ed authors is not supported by our research.

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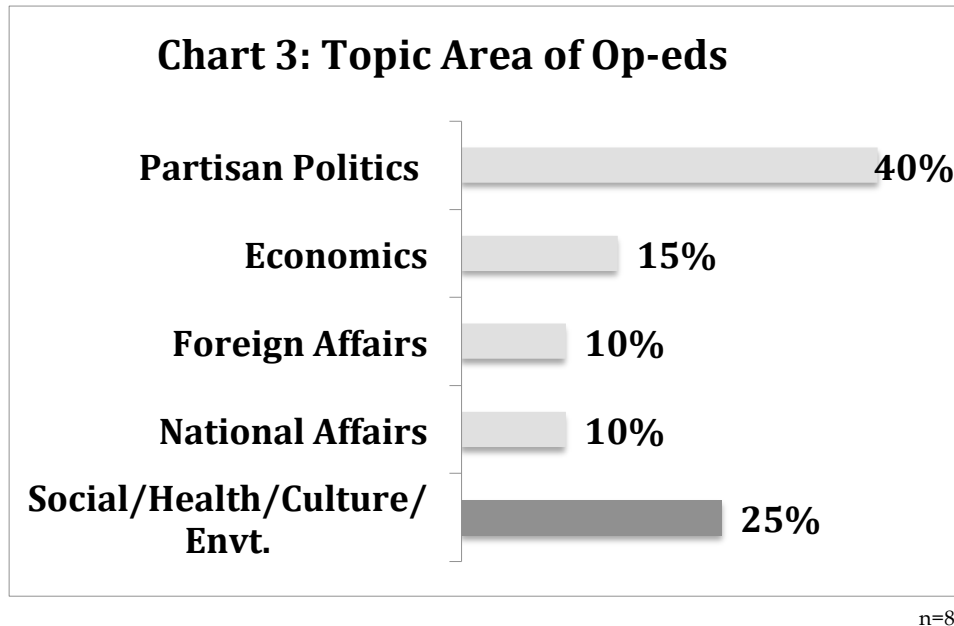
<sup>4</sup> *The Toronto Star* operates on "liberal" principles of inclusion and social justice articulated by founder, Joseph E. Atkinson (publisher from 1899-1948). In 1958, the current owner – TorStar Corporation – complied with the willed request of Atkinson that a series of values, know today as the 'Atkinson Principles', be upheld in the operation of the newspaper. Of the six key principles two include: 1) "Social Justice: Atkinson was relentless in pressing for social and economic programs to help those less advantaged and showed particular concern for the least advantaged among us;" and, 2) "The Rights of Working People: The *Star* was born out of a strike in 1892 and Atkinson was committed to the rights of working people including freedom of association and the safety and dignity of the workplace" (Taylor, 2008).



This reflects findings from other Canadian and international studies of the news production process that suggest any stated editorial bias in a media outlet appears to have less impact on actual content production than structural biases in the news work process itself (c.f. Gitlin, Hackett, Fletcher & Everett). Even in the choice of specifically editorial content one would have to examine further how the stated political orientation of a particular publication impacts op-ed author choice relative to practical work processes.

*Hypothesis #3: "Hard News" content (e.g., politics, economics) is more common.*

Univariate analysis of the topic area covered in published op-eds shows the majority of articles are written to address the traditional "hard news" subjects of politics and economics.

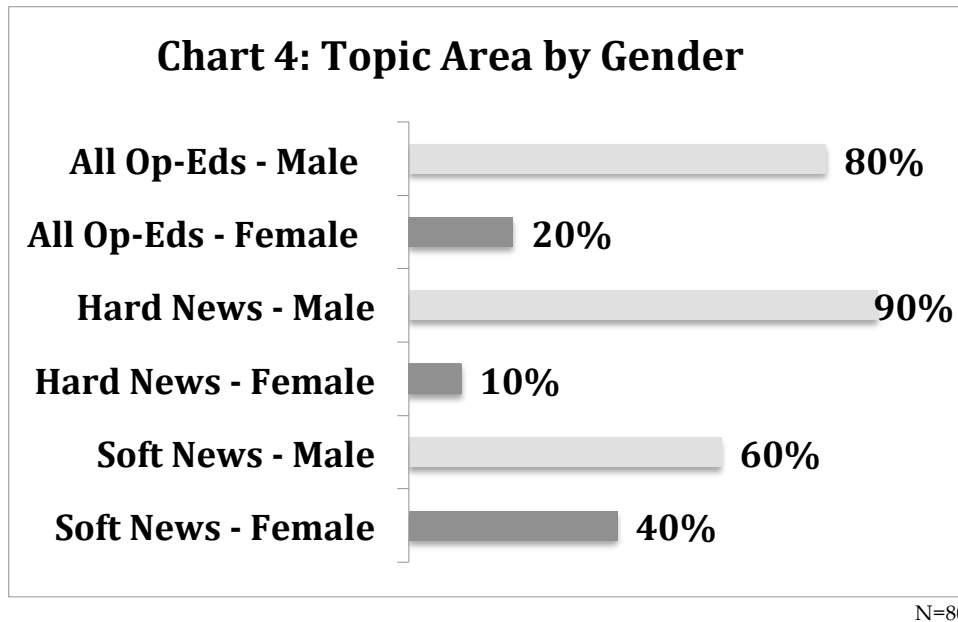


The four most common subject areas addressed in the Canadian op-eds were: Politics (40%); Economics (15%); Foreign Affairs (10%); and National Affairs (10%). The remaining quarter of op-eds (25%) was split among traditional “soft news” subjects such as social issues, health care, arts, and the environment.

*Hypothesis #4: “Soft News” (e.g. social issues/arts/environment) is more often female-authored.*

Bivariate analysis shows that whereas women comprised 20% of total op-ed authorship, their proportion of authorship in the “hard news” subject areas dropped by half, to 10%. Men were the authors of 90% of op-eds in the areas of politics, national and international affairs, and business/economics. By contrast, in the “softer” subject areas of social issues, the arts and the environment, female authorship rose to a figure representing something approaching parity (40%). Keep in mind that this area of soft issue op-eds represents only a quarter (25%) of all published op-eds in the sample.

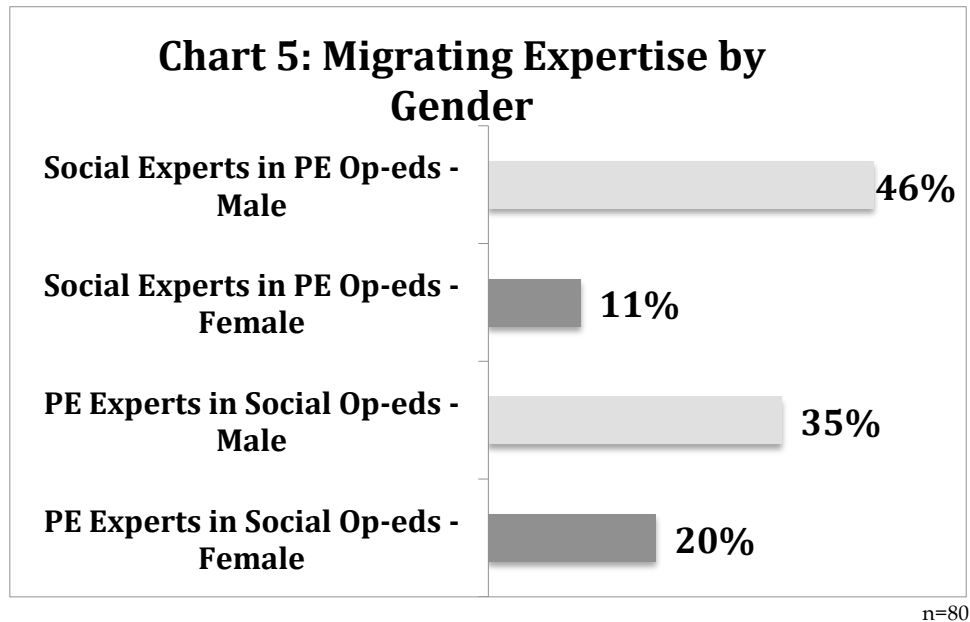




An analysis of the profession of women writing op-eds conforms to the subject analysis. In other words, the women who are writing the op-eds tend to come from professional backgrounds most associated with the “softer” news subjects, i.e. they are self-designated health care, social services, culture, and environmental experts.

*Hypothesis #5: Male op-ed authors write outside their expertise, and female authors less so.*

Multivariate analysis of three variables — gender, area of expertise and op-ed topic — was conducted to determine the gender of op-ed authors who write within and outside of their area of expertise.

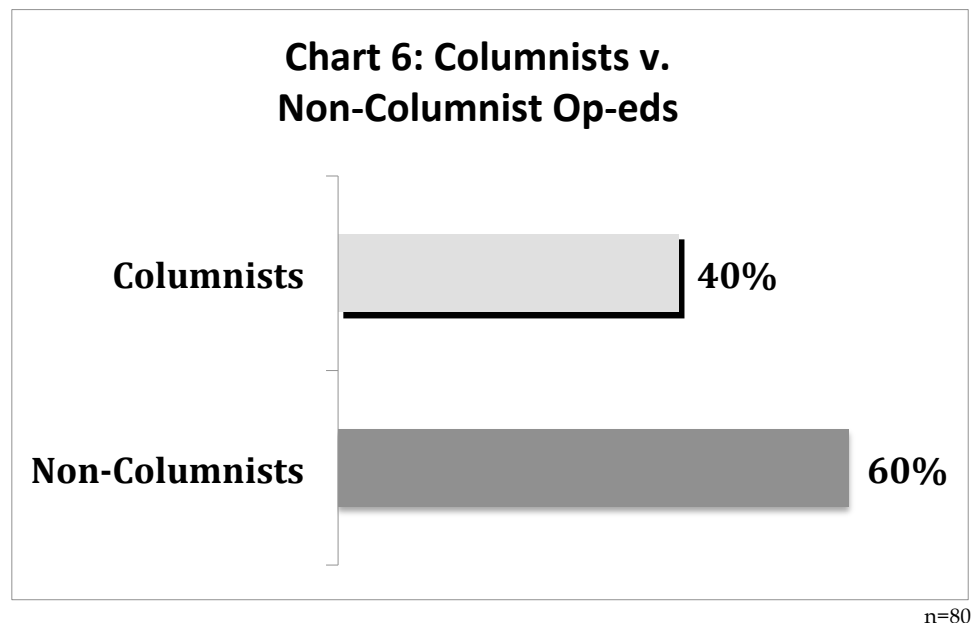


The results show that 46% of male authors who can be identified primarily as experts in social issues authored op-eds that dealt substantially with economic and political topic areas. In other words, almost half of all male experts in social issues felt free to and indeed were published outside of their stated area of expertise. However, only 11% of the female experts in social areas “strayed” from social topics into the harder news of politics and economics. A similar distinction was found among the economics and politics experts using a gender breakdown: 35% of male experts in economics and politics wrote about social issues, while only 20% of the female political and economic experts branched out to write op-eds on social issues.

In the authorship of published op-eds it would appear that female authors “stick to their knitting,” that is, to their expertise, significantly more so than do male authors. In this sample of Canadian op-eds, women are marginalized against offering opinion on the non-political and non-economic “hard news” of the day. But there seems to be no similar injunction – either ideally or practically – that would prevent males from espousing in “soft news” arenas of public life. Male op-ed authors appear to knit softly, but no lack of skill in the area prevents them carrying the big sticks.

*Hypothesis #6: Previously unpublished op-ed authors are more common than published authors.*

Univariate analysis found that within op-ed articles, four in ten of all authors (40%) were identified as “Opinion Columnists” in the byline, i.e. they are recurring contributors. This lends some support to the hypothesis that op-eds are a source for new voices, as the original theory behind them would suggest. However, given only a slight prevalence of previously unpublished op-ed authors, it suggests that the op-ed space is not primarily the domain of new voices to the media. Further, it begs the question: who comprises the 40% of recurring op-ed writers?



*Hypothesis #7: Female op-ed authors are more likely than males to be professional writers.*

A bivariate analysis of gender and professional media writing found that for both men and women, there were significant numbers of op-eds authored by people with columnist-type writing in their background – nearly half of male authors (48%) and three-quarters of female authors (73%). This level of professional contribution to “new voices” is considerably higher overall than was expected, but also bears out the hypothesis that among the smaller group

of women writing op-eds, professional columnists make up a surprisingly large proportion.

In practice this suggests that op-ed editors turn to known contacts within the media industry for op-ed contributions, but especially when they run female-authored articles. There appears to be a small number of “trusted” female voices that already have some voice within the media, shutting out even further the new female voices for whom op-ed pieces could be a forum.

## Conclusion

Op-eds remain a key part of the journalistic function in modern media – both in published newspapers and various on-line environments. Their value journalistically is to allow alternative perspectives and new voices beyond the traditional voices of journalists or spokespeople interviewed by the journalists. But when we ask who gets to speak in op-eds and what they get to speak about, we find that the range is considerably smaller than one might expect.

Looking particularly at the role of women in the authorship of published op-eds, this content analysis was able to demonstrate only one in five op-eds within the representative sample studied is female-authored, and with little difference between the two papers under study, including the *Toronto Star* which is perhaps surprising given that the *Toronto Star* operates on articulated “liberal” principles of inclusion and social justice. Furthermore, the range of topics within op-eds remains concentrated on much of the hard news topics that are found within the rest of the newspaper. Insofar as non-political and non-economic “soft” issues are covered, they remain on the margins of the op-ed discourse. In addition, women only begin to approach parity as authors on the “soft” topics, whereas male authors dominate 9-to-1 on the “hard” issues. This is further compounded by one-way expertise flow-though that allows men who are considered experts in the soft issues to also comment on hard issues but does not allow women the same level of crossover writing. Finally, the evidence from the content analysis suggests that when women are included either in hard or soft news op-ed writing, they are drawn from a very small group of established “low-risk” authors who, for the most part, have already published extensively in these publications. Unfortunately, this seems to exclude even expert, experienced and articulate women in political, and academic realms, among others. “Stick to your knitting” appears to be the op-ed *modus operandi*.

Some will argue that it is difficult to establish this reality based on a small sample of only two English language newspapers sampled over one year. We are among the first to recognize the limitations; more research of this kind deserves to be done both with a larger range of media (more newspapers and

other media forums that have op-eds or their equivalents) and over a much larger and inclusive sample (e.g., multi-year French-language and multi-language environments throughout Canada). Nevertheless, these preliminary results between Canada's two largest circulation newspapers are troubling for the directions they suggest, especially insofar as they conform to earlier international work, which suggests a discouragingly large gender disparity.

More significantly, these results appear to refute the expressed purposes for which op-eds in modern media were created: namely, to nurture a range of new voices bringing diversity of insight on a range of matters of public concern. It is possible to see how this research, even in its preliminary form, supports the importance – expressed often by op-ed editors themselves – of providing practicable tools for women and other marginalized groups to generate a voice within mainstream media.

Advocacy groups like the Op-Ed Project work on the premise that changing the diversity of content in media requires practical changes in the range of op-ed authors deployed. In particular, those from “marginal” backgrounds (including women) should attempt to meet the real daily journalistic work requirements of newspaper and other media editors. To that extent we cannot disagree with advocates, like the Op-Ed project, which argue: “the obvious solution is to get more women to submit essays, by... training women at universities, foundations and corporations to write essays and get them published.” (Cohen, 2007).

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## Appendix: Coding Schedule and Manual

### Coding Schedule

Case	var 01: Newspaper	var 02: Gender	var 03: Recurring	var 04: Profession	var 05: Specialty	var 06: Location	var 07: Topic	var 08: Level of Analysis	var 09: Date
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### Coding Manual

<b>Var 01: Newspaper</b>	<b>Var 07: Topic/ Subject Area of Essay</b>
1. Globe and Mail	1. Politics
2. Toronto Star	2. Economics
<b>Var 02: Gender</b>	3. Health
1. Male	4. Social Issues (Education, unemployment, etc.)
2. Female	5. Culture
<b>Var 03: Recurring/Frequent Writer</b>	6. Race, gender, religious issues
1. Yes	7. Human Rights
2. No	8. Environment
<b>Var 04: Profession</b>	9. Other
1. Academic	<b>Var 08: Level of Discussion</b>
2. Politician	1. National
3. Private business	2. Local (Provincial/Municipal)
4. Healthcare Professional	3. American
5. Engineer	4. International
6. Media	5. General/Not Applicable
7. Artist/Writer	<b>Var 08: Date</b>
8. Other	1. Dec. 29
<b>Var 05: Area of Expertise/Specialty</b>	2. Nov. 18
1. Politics	3. Oct. 23
2. Business	4. Sept 10
3. Economics/Finance	5. Aug. 4
4. Education	6. Jul. 17
5. Healthcare	7. June 25
6. Arts and Culture	8. May 2
7. Foreign Affairs	9. Apr. 16
8. National Affairs	10. Mar. 28
9. Environmental issues	11. Feb. 6
10. Social problems/issues	12. Jan. 29
11. Other	
<b>Var 06: Location of residence</b>	
1. Toronto	
2. Ottawa	
3. Other Ontario cities	
4. Quebec	
5. British Columbia	
6. Alberta	
7. Manitoba	
8. U.S. cities	
9. European cities	
10. Other	