

Actively Searching for Women's Opinion on Male-Dominated Subjects



In brief

There is a contradiction evident in today's Bulgarian media: the deregulation that followed the end of Communism has liberated a flood of sexist images, yet the effects of pre-1990 gender equality policies persist, and women occupy many high-level positions, both editorial and managerial, in media organisations. Despite this, hard news and opinion-making is largely still a male preserve.

Founded in 1936, *Trud* (Labour) is Bulgaria's oldest and most prestigious and influential daily newspaper. Its website attracts 50,000 visits each day. Conscious of the restricted range of women's contributions in its pages, *Trud* decided to go out and find new and promising female contributors. Its editors therefore encourage young writers, bloggers and members of NGOs to submit contributions to the paper. Contributors are not expected to be professionally qualified, just expert in the topics on which they write.

The presence of more women's voices acts as a monitoring system for the newspaper's content, and gives space to minority views. *Trud's* readers appreciate the greater variety of viewpoints the paper now contains, and the practice has generated a snowball effect by encouraging other women with something to say to come forward. For some contributors, their participation has led to career progression.

Two contradictory trends

Of all the institutions in Bulgaria, the mass-media system was the one that responded fastest to the transition to democracy after November 1989. This led to thoroughgoing decentralisation and the emergence of pluralistic print and electronic media. Although the journalistic community adopted an ethical code in 2004, it failed to build mechanisms to sustain it and in many cases the media still react inadequately to significant public issues and to professional problems.

Several trade unions for journalists were established, but they have failed to defend basic professional rights and responsibilities. Legislation, or rather the manner of its implementation, has also failed to create a media environment that is equally distanced both from political and business interests, and can serve the public interest. While there is no law that regulates the printed media in Bulgaria (slander and libel are covered by the penal code), electronic media are regulated by the Radio and Television Act and the Telecommunications Act, both adopted in 1998, and both repeatedly amended.

In gender and media issues, two often contradictory trends are found. On the one hand, democracy and liberalisation have filled the media with sexualised images of women. On the other hand, there is a positive gender balance within media organisations, with many women featuring in top-level editorial and managerial positions. The turning point was during the first years of the transition (the 1990s), when women in middle-ranking positions had the chance to move into top management.

There has also been a long tradition of women journalists who have explored dangerous, 'masculine' fields such as conflicts and wars, mafia investigations, organised crime and corruption. These features of the system are seen as a legacy of the socialist regime, which encouraged women to work and succeed in all areas of their life (successful career, motherhood, active participation in the community and in society). In conclusion, the media in Bulgaria are not to be considered as a male-dominated environment; at the same time, gendered patterns in news-making persist, and hard news is still male-dominated. It is only men who become opinion-leaders and only men who are invited to appear as experts in many fields.

Searching for women contributors

Trud (Labour) is the oldest and most prestigious Bulgarian newspaper. Its first issue was printed in 1936 and its website is read by over 50,000 people each day. To redress gender imbalances it has instituted the practice of actively searching for women's opinions on male-dominated subjects. This address the problem that the persistent gender imbalances in access to expression led to a biased and hence low-quality representation of the world.

Deputy editors and editors-in-chief at *Trud* actively seek women's opinions by recruiting them from among popular and competent bloggers, freelancers and civil society organisations. Women who are willing to collaborate with *Trud* are not expected to be professionals or to be officially recognised as expert in any field: they just need to be competent in the topic covered.

The practice has partly compensated for the gender bias *Trud* was suffering from, by enabling women to express their views and their analysis of social and political reality. Young women writers and newcomer female bloggers were trusted and encouraged to develop their skills.

Correspondingly the newspaper's readers could benefit from a stronger gender perspective in the newspaper's coverage and from an enriched cultural offer on general matters ("fresh, insightful, profound interpretations of subjects such as politics, social policies, educational process, financial subjects"). The newspaper (staff and product) itself has benefitted greatly, because it has become a pioneer in giving a chance to talented, enthusiastic non-professional female writers and bloggers to step in and share 'outsider' perspectives.

By recruiting new female authors willing to collaborate with the newspaper, the practice helps them to gain prestige. It broadens the range of themes women have access to, especially hard news and the key issues in public debate. The practice explicitly aims to counter women's segregation into 'pink issues' and also increases the attention paid to women's social, economic and cultural issues. Not only are women's opinions more visible, but the opinions of women from civil society are visible as well, because many of the authors engaged by *Trud* through this practice are independent bloggers. This further benefits the media's principle of pluralism.

The practice is grounded in the monitoring that *Trud* has undertaken of its own content, and its acknowledgement that its coverage is gender-unbalanced. Conversely the practice contributes to monitoring the newspaper's content, since data on women's expression through the newspaper are used to adjust the selection of women to be invited as external authors.

Snowball effect

The practice has produced permanent changes by allowing the voice of independent female authors to be heard in an influential newspaper such as *Trud*, and this has generated a snowball effect: the audibility given to women's voices has encouraged more female writers to dare to express their voices.

The method has not only achieved its original purpose of enabling women to express their opinions and perspectives on significant subjects, but has also turned out to be a channel for the expression of specific groups of women, such as women from ethnic minorities, single mothers, women with handicaps, older professional women and young women who face difficulties in finding adequate career chances because they are 'marriage and child raising suspects'.

Besides fostering women's visibility, the practice has had a positive impact on the wider environment by changing readers' expectations: over the years, readers have shown more and more appreciation for the quantitative and qualitative growth of female perspectives in *Trud's* coverage.

Internal evaluation and monitoring show a definite positive effect. The tool has been effective in achieving the gender equality objectives initially set and women have benefitted: for a number of female bloggers and writers the chance they had to write for such an influential newspaper was a springboard to promotion, as they gained social recognition and self-esteem. The editorial staff has developed a good professional relationship with some contributors, and seeks their opinion on themes and topics within their expertise or experience.

Unearthing rough diamonds

The practice compensates for the biases in media coverage caused by gender imbalances, by increasing the visibility and weight of women's voices in *Trud's* coverage of issues of collective interest and of traditionally male-dominated subjects. It enables women to express themselves in an influential newspaper and on a variety of subjects, including hard news and opinion-shaping topics. It has introduced a gender perspective into *Trud's* coverage, and given a voice to minority women. It has opened up career prospects for some contributors.

The practice succeeds because *Trud* recognised the need for a female perspective in news and current affairs, and editors took a proactive approach to finding promising female authors/bloggers. It sought contributions on a variety of subjects, including hard news, not just 'pink issues'. Above all, readers appreciate the result.

The method used may be low-cost, but it requires constant effort on behalf of editors to unearth 'rough diamonds', and would benefit from being made more efficient, for instance by recruiting through mailing lists, newsletters and social media. Nevertheless, it could be used equally easily in other countries.

One lesson learned from the practice is that trusting women and enabling them to express their opinion in an influential newspaper is likely to generate an appreciable emulation effect, encouraging more women to contribute. But this will only redress gender imbalances if the women's opinions are canvassed across the board, not just on 'pink issues'. The enhanced gender perspective that results benefits pluralism, increases the quality of the media's representation of social reality, and boosts readers' loyalty. However a high level of commitment is required on the part of editors as it requires them to act as talent scouts and find promising female writers.

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