

Gender Bias in Vermont Reporting An Analysis of Six Months of Seven Days & VT Digger Legislative Coverage



Representative Becca White with Monica Drimbarum and Kate Fain

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INTRODUCTION

The news media plays a central role in providing information to citizens and policy-makers – information that enhances the ability to participate in the public discourse and meet normative democratic goals.¹

In this research project we examine the concept of source diversity, by comparing two Vermont media outlets coverage of the Vermont Legislature during the months of January and February in 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Researchers have found that sources influence the focus of the news coverage.² Limiting source diversity can limit the information available to citizens and policy-makers and constrain policy outcomes by reducing the options under consideration.³

To understand the impact of source diversity we also draw on the concept of media standing.⁴ Standing is a measure of how “accepted” the source quoted in a media article is as a regular and valid contributor to the policy debate on a particular policy issue.⁵ Standing is a measure of cultural power as cited organizations and sources have been chosen to speak in the contested policy domain. “Media standing is the endpoint of a contest over which sponsors of meaning will have an opportunity to appear in a mass media forum that defines membership in terms of political power.”⁶ Indexing is a related concept, in which the media index their stories and sources to the dominant narratives and voices, limiting other perspectives and voices.

Literature Review

A large body of media research examines how journalists rely on sources when developing and producing news stories.⁷ Researchers have found that news sources play a critical role in defining and directing the form of a news story.⁸ For example, some studies have indicated that more than half of news stories originate from sources. In debates about public policy, sources influence how social problems are defined or framed in the public discourse, which, in turn, can influence both public opinion and policy outcomes.⁹ How issues are framed is a “powerful form of social control” that can define policy debates and constrain and circumscribe the policy outcomes that emerge.¹⁰ A dominant “policy monopoly” can occur when a set of actors establishes jurisdiction over an issue in the media.¹¹ By limiting the debate to one or two sources the conversation is limited to the range of viewpoints those actors promote, often favoring the status quo.¹² Sources also play an important role in how readers perceive the story line and the story as a whole.¹³ A story that has a more diverse set of sources can increase the credibility that readers attach to the news story.¹⁴ We illustrate the success of the frames and the actors in the news media discourse through the concept of media standing

Researchers have found that government and industry sources are often the most prominent sources for journalists on issues related to domestic policy.¹⁵

Methods

We collected articles from both Seven Days and VT Digger through their websites, to find articles written about the Vermont Legislature (more than 50%) for the months of Jan and Feb in the years 2018, 2019, 2020.

We created 12 separate word files, that contained the headline, byline and dateline but removed all the other formatting, including photos and hyperlinks.

In total 112 VT Digger stories were collected and 85 from Seven Days.

Table 1. Number of articles collected from each source for 2018, 2019 and 2020.

	Digger	Seven days
2018	22	21
2019	26	31
2020	64	33
TOTAL	112	85

We then uploaded these articles into the NVIVO and created 2 cases, VT Digger and Seven Days with 6 sub-cases each based on source, month and year: Seven Days January 2018, Seven Days February 2018, Seven Days January 2019, Seven Days February 2019, Seven Days January 2020, Seven Days February 2020, VTDigger January 2018, VTDigger February 2018, VTDigger January 2019, VTDigger February 2019, VTDigger January 2020, VTDigger February 2020. Therefore, in total there were 12 cases.

We coded the file to the case it falls under (for example, for January 2019 articles from Seven Days we coded the file to the case “Seven Days” and sub-case “Seven Days January 2019”). Rebekah then read through each file, coding it for 5 different themes:

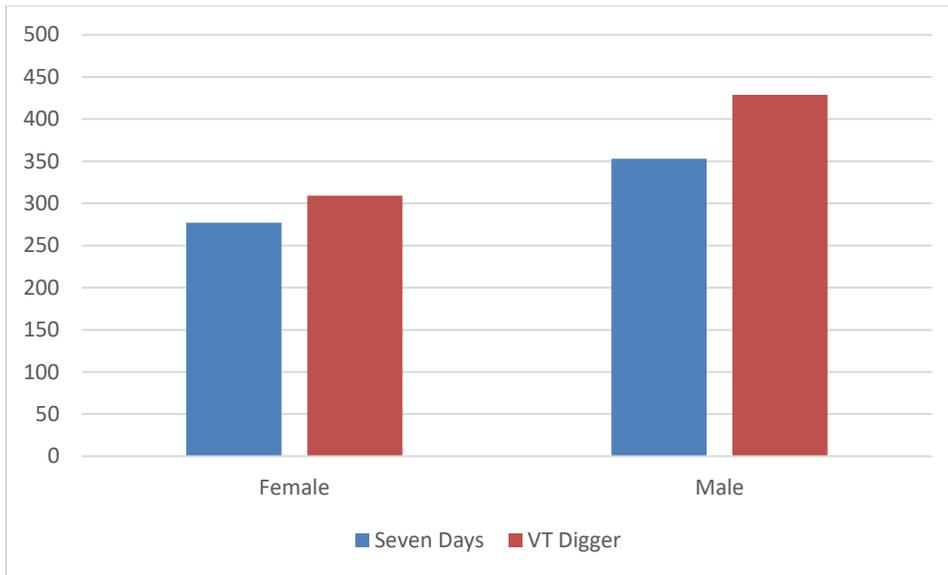
1. Background
Coded the title, date, and reporter.
2. Age
Coded the age of the source quoted if the age of the source quoted was mentioned.
3. Type of article
Coded the title of the article under one of the following topics: policy issue, personality profile, education, campaign, and budget.
4. Type of source quoted
Coded direct quotes or paraphrases to one of these categories:
 - Business
 - Citizen
 - Non-profit- more specifically, an individual speaking for or representing a non-profit organization
 - Elected official- an official who is elected to the state legislature specifically
 - Other elected official- an official who is elected to an office that isn't the state legislature (for example, Governor Phil Scott and Attorney General T.J. Donovan)
 - Government official: an individual who was appointed to represent a government entity (for example, Rebecca Kelley, Governor Phil Scott's spokesperson).
5. Gender of source quoted or paraphrased
For each source that was quoted or paraphrased, we coded the source to one of the following: male, female or unknown.

FINDINGS

Overall women were quoted less often than men in both media sources.

	Female	Male		percent
Seven Days	277	353	630	44%
VT Digger	309	429	738	42%

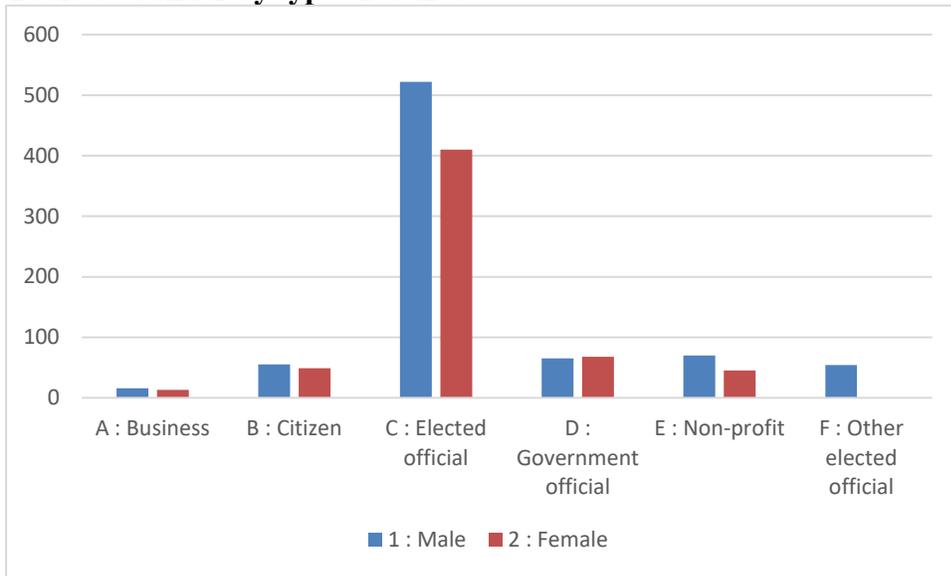
Table 2. Quotes by gender



Gender diversity in type of source quoted was very close. Governor Scott as the “other” elected official is the one obvious difference.

	A : Business	B : Citizen	C : Elected official	D : Government official	E : Non-profit	F : Other elected official	Total	Percent
Male	16	55	522	65	70	54	782	57%
Female	13	49	410	68	45	0	585	43%
Total	29	104	932	133	115	54	1367	

Table 3: Gender by type of source



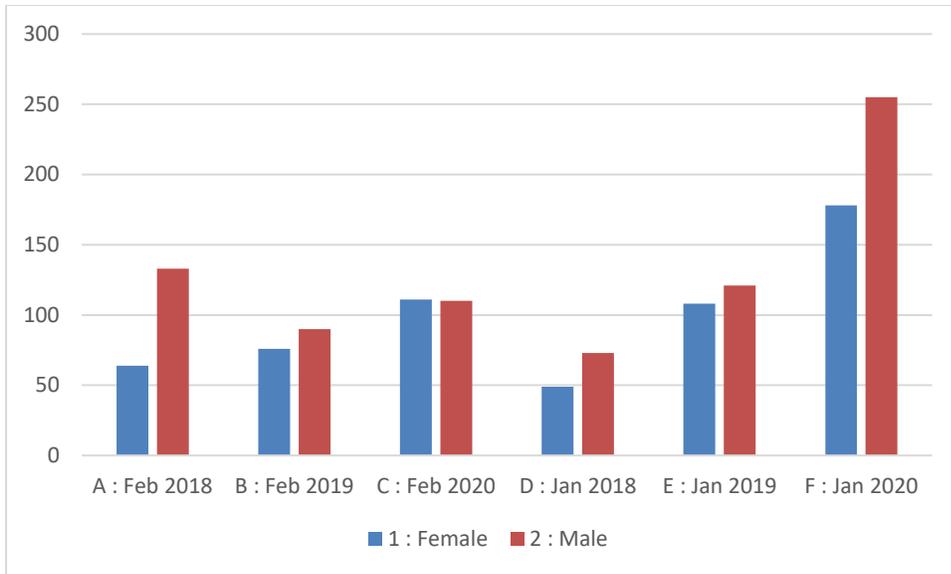
However, if you only look at the data on legislators, removing other statewide elected officials, including Governor Scott, the number of quotes or attributions to women legislators still lags behind men.

Table 5. By gender elected official

Gender	Elected official	
1: Male	522	56%
2: Female	410	44%
Total	932	

In only one of the six months studied, women cited or quoted or quoted outnumbered their male counterparts – in the month of Feb., 2020 -- 111-110.

Table 4. Gender citations by Month



A simple word count tells us that Governor Scott is the most mentioned individual in the articles appearing 595 times, followed by Sen. Ashe (305) and Speaker Johnson (243). Unlike the above analysis, this is any mention or appearance of the name in the text.

Table 7. Appearances in text, word count

	Seven Days	VT Digger	Total
Governor Scott	210	385	595
Sen. Ashe	105	200	305
Speaker Johnson	86	157	243.

About the Authors

Rebekah Silver graduated from UVM in May 2020. During the spring semester she served as a legislative intern for Rep. Rebecca White. When the legislature went remote, Rebekah started this research project at the request of Rep. White. Rebekah is the principal researcher on this project, collecting and analyzing the data.

Richard Watts is the Director of the Center for Research on Vermont and led the legislative intern research service project in the Spring of 2020.

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- ¹ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *Elements of Journalism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2007).
- ² Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States"; Robert M. Entman, "Framing Bias: Media in the Distribution of Power," *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (2007): 163-173; Regina G. Lawrence, "Researching Political News Framing: established ground and new horizons."
- ³ Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*; David C. Coulson and Stephen Lacy, "Newspaper Economic Coverage of Motor Vehicle Emissions Standards," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (1998): 154-66.
- ⁴ Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993; Gamson 2005; Roth and Vander Haar 2006; Carragee and Roefs 2004
- ⁵ (Gamson 2005).
- ⁶ " (Gamson 2005, p. 116).
- ⁷ Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States"; Leon V. Sigal, "Sources Make the News," in *Reading the News*, ed. Robert K. Manoff and Michael Schudson (NY: Panteon Books, 1986), 9-37.
- ⁸ Arvin W. Murch, "Public Concern for Environmental Pollution," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (April 1, 1971): 100-106.
- ⁹ Shanto Iyengar, *Is anyone responsible? How television frames political issues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); D. R. Kinder and L. M. Sanders, "Mimicking political debate with survey questions: The case of White opinion on affirmative action for Blacks," *Social Cognition* (1990); Robert M. Entman, "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White Houses Frame After 9/11," *Political Communication* 20 (2003): 415-432; Regina G. Lawrence, "Researching Political News Framing: established ground and new horizons"; Brian Steensland, "Why do Policy Frames Change?: Actor-Idea Coevolution in Debates over Welfare Reform," *Social Forces* 86, no. 3 (2008): 1027-1054.
- ¹⁰ Shanto Iyengar, "Framing Responsibility for Political Issues: The Case of Poverty," in *Do The Media Govern*, ed. Shanto Iyengar and Richard Reeves (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997), 282.
- ¹¹ Steensland, "Why do Policy Frames Change?: Actor-Idea Coevolution in Debates over Welfare Reform."
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Frederick G. Fico and Stan Soffin, "Covering Local Conflict: Fairness in Reporting a Public Policy Issue.," *Newspaper Research Journal* 15, no. 4 (1994): 64-76.
- ¹⁴ Raluca Cozma, "Source diversity increases credibility of risk stories," *Newspaper Research Journal* 27, no. 3 (2006): 8.
- ¹⁵ Coulson and Stephen Lacy, "Newspaper Economic Coverage of Motor Vehicle Emissions Standards"; Kandice L. Salomone et al., "A question of quality: How journalists and news sources evaluate coverage of environmental risk," *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 4 (1990): 117-131. Lance W. Bennett, "Toward a Theory of Press-State Relations in the United States," *Journal of Communication* 40, no. 2 (1990): 103-127; Regina G. Lawrence, "Researching Political News Framing: established ground and new horizons," in *Doing news framing analysis: Empirical and theoretical perspectives.*, ed. Paul D'Angelo and Jim A. Kuypers (New York: Routledge, 2010); Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1978).