

Female Leadership in the New News Ecosystem

By Meg Heckman



tions, data-driven projects and niche sites covering topics like sports, politics, science and technology.

Female leaders are slightly more common in this new ecosystem than in legacy newsrooms where, according to a 2013 survey by ASNE, they represent about 35 percent of managers. But a deeper look at digital news landscape shows the replication

John Ward leaned over his lunch plate and said something that was beginning to sound familiar: “Most of my heroes in this business are women.”

Ward is the publisher of RedBankGreen.com, a hyperlocal news website in New Jersey. We were among the roughly 75 people who had gathered in Chicago last fall for the inaugural summit of the Local Independent Online News Publishers, or LION, a trade group that was formed to support locally owned, locally focused digital news organizations. LION was a year old and growing fast, and Ward was there to advise newcomers launching publications in their communities. I’d traveled to Chicago for a different reason: Nearly 50 percent of LION’s members were female, giving the group a kind of gender parity that’s rare in the male-dominated news business.

Ward and other LION members were quick to list the women who had developed the framework for local digital news: Debbie Galant, who launched one of the first hyperlocal news sites, BaristaNet.com, in 2004; PlanetPrinceton.com founder Krystal Knapp; and Teresa Wippel, whose network of local sites covers suburban Seattle. It was fantastic to see such gender balance at a journalism convention, but the broader implications remain unclear. Are these hyperlocal publications creating a pipeline of talented, entrepreneurial women who will find new ways of practicing — and paying for — digital journalism? Or is the concentration of women at the hyperlocal level a new symptom of old barriers that have kept all but a few women from reaching the top ranks of the American media?

Over the last two decades, sweeping technological disruptions have changed the way journalists build their careers. In describing what he calls a “diaspora of journalism,” Harvard’s Nicco Mele explains that “news is migrating to all kinds of places, some of them unexpected, all of them small. Gone are the days when a job as a cub reporter in a city paper was the start of promising career in journalism.” Instead, there are new — and varied — avenues to professional advancement for journalists. Hyperlocal sites like those operated by LION members are one feature of this new media ecosystem; other varieties of startup include investigative founda-

of familiar gender disparities. Women represent nearly half of the leaders at small, hyperlocal publications but remain in the minority at larger digital news outlets. Organizations of all sizes can — and do — produce meaningful journalism, but this lopsided distribution of women has practical and professional consequences. Hyperlocals may be less likely than larger news organizations to carry full-time salaries and benefits, and the jobs they offer may lack the prestige necessary to advance in the industry.

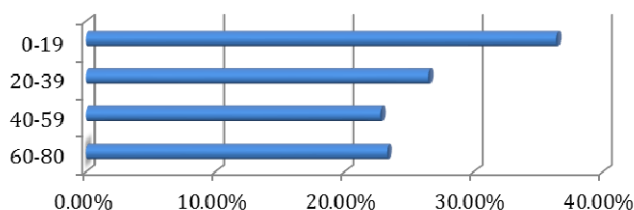
The aim of this study was to quantify the extent of women’s leadership in digital news organizations that have emerged in the United States in the last two decades. Data was gathered from four publicly available directories:

- The Columbia Journalism Review’s Guide to Online News Startups.
- The online news organization section of the Nieman Journalism Lab’s Encyclo.
- The membership roster of the Local Independent Online News Publishers.
- Michele’s List, a database maintained by journalist Michele McLellan.

None of these lists are definitive directories, but each provides a useful snapshot of modern journalism. The final sample included a total of 402 organizations that vary in size, scope, focus and business model. Women’s leadership roles were determined based on names and contextual information in the database.

Men outnumbered women in leadership positions in all four databases. The LION membership list comes closest to gender parity with 45.1 percent women. Nieman’s Encyclo has the most lopsided

Female leadership by publication size

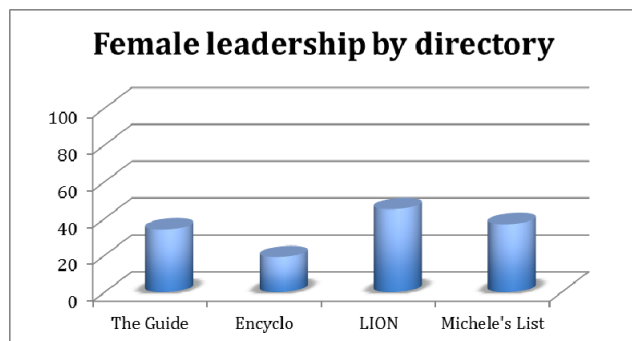


representation with 19 percent — something that may be explained by the Encyclo's limited inclusion of the hyperlocal organizations where women are more likely to work. In the middle are CJR's The Guide with 34 percent of leadership positions held by women and Michele's List with 37.6 percent.

Women are the most likely to hold leadership positions at the smallest news outlets. Although some of these small news organizations are focused on niche coverage of sports, the environment or other topics, the vast majority are hyperlocal publications. CJR's The Guide shows that female leaders are the most likely at organizations with fewer than 20 staff members. Although only some of the Encyclo records include staff size, the same trend appears to be true in that directory. The demographics of the LION membership list also support this trend. Most LION members have two to five employees, and women comprise nearly half of named members.

The concentration of women at small, community-focused publications is nothing new. When reporter Ishbel Ross wrote *Ladies of the Press* in 1936, she marveled at the freedom women had in what she called "country journalism." At the time the book was published, Ross counted more than 300 female editors and publishers working at small papers across the United States. These women had a smaller audience, but, as Ross noted, "a freedom of expression denied the metropolitan reporter. She can push a local cause, mix freely in political fights, write what she likes." That perception of freedom holds true today. Many of the women I spoke to during my research launched hyperlocal sites because of a perceived lack of coverage and felt they had the skills to meet the community's information needs. These kinds of locally owned, locally focused news organizations are crucial to maintaining civic life in the digital age, but it's unclear how they'll be perceived. Will the hyperlocal space be viewed as a robust, important area of digital journalism? Or will it be feminized, marginalized and turned into a modern version of the "pink ghetto" of women's pages?

Hiring women to lead larger digital news-



rooms is important, but it isn't enough. It's also necessary to value the work they're doing to redefine journalism on the local level. Failing to do so could seriously limit our chances of finding distribution and business models to support journalism in the decades to come.

References:

Nicco Mele, "Small Pieces, Loosely Joined," *Nieman Reports*, Spring 2013.

Emily Metzgar describes hyperlocals as "geographically-based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organizations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue or region and to promote civic engagement." Emily T. Metzgar, David D. Kurpius, and Karen M. Rowley, "Defining Hyperlocal Media: Proposing a Framework for Discussion," *New Media & Society* 13, no. 5 (August 1, 2011): 772-787, doi:10.1177/1461444810385095.

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Niedringhaus Award, from Page 1

impressed with Niedringhaus' talent and dedication that his foundation provided the funds for her to attend Harvard University as a Nieman Fellow in 2007. Upon learning that Niedringhaus had been shot by a gunman in East Afghanistan on April 4, 2014, Buffett told the IWMF: "I considered Anja a friend who represented the best of photojournalism. By creating this award, we ensure her spirit lives on. Anja's voice may be silenced but our hope is that other voices who share her commitment become louder."

In the tradition of the IWMF Courage in Journalism Award which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, the Anja Niedringhaus Courage in Photojournalism Award will honor women photojournalists who set themselves apart by their extraordinary bravery. Facing and surviving danger to uncover the truth, they raise the bar for reporting under duress.

The Howard G. Buffett Foundation (HGBF) is a private family foundation working to improve the standard of living and quality of life for the world's most impoverished and marginalized populations.

Founded in 1990 by a group of prominent U.S. women journalists, the International Women's Media Foundation is a Washington-based organization that is dedicated to strengthening the role of women journalists worldwide.

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