

*Whither the News? Problematizing the Gendered Limits of Coverage on Women's  
Wartime Labour in Canadian Newspapers, 1939-1945*

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**Abstract**

During the Second World War, women's involvement in Canada's 'total war' effort meant increased domestic responsibilities, volunteering, enlisting, and joining the civilian workforce. Women's labour force participation more than doubled throughout the war, blurring gendered divisions of labour and rendering women's labour a subject for discussion in the public sphere. But what about in the news?

Using a comparative content analysis, this paper examines representations of women's labour (domestic, volunteer and wage) in commercial and alternative (labour) newspapers during the war period in Canada. It first considers theoretical and methodological issues involved in the historical study of news media and women. Then, applying a critical feminist lens, this paper argues that, despite the magnitude and significance of women's wartime labour, it received minimal newspaper coverage and, furthermore, coverage reinforced stereotypical values about women and minimized the social significance of their labour. Patriarchy was systemic both within and across commercial and alternative newspapers.

This challenges the idea that either the women's pages or alternative journalism offered a 'space' for more progressive and representative coverage than the gendered representations traditionally found in the news. As scholars accessing historical newspapers today, this study further demonstrates the value of a content analysis methodology in revealing patterns that may not be immediately evident using less systematic methods. Above all, this paper contributes to feminist media and media history scholarship in that it offers a way of thinking about women's history in terms of labour inclusively, but beyond the traditional and historical gendered division of labour.

Keywords: journalism history, feminism, media representations of women, war, content analysis

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## Introduction

*“It must, however, not be forgotten that a total war effort is needed to protect everything we hold dear, including the family and family life, and that the employment of women is essential to a total war effort.”*

— William Lyon Mackenzie King, Prime Minister of Canada, 1942  
(King, 1942, p. 9)

In a public address to the nation in 1942, then Prime Minister of Canada William Lyon Mackenzie King called on the nation’s “womanpower” to join the ‘total war’ effort of the Second World War (p. 5). Women presented a solution to the critical labour shortages on the home front caused by men enlisting for active duty overseas. For women, joining the war effort meant increased domestic responsibilities, volunteering, enlisting in the armed forces, and joining the civilian workforce. The war created the social and political economic conditions for women (single, married, and married with children) to extend their labour beyond the private sphere of the home and into the public sphere workforce—a blurring of the traditional division of labour based on sex that formed the patriarchal foundation of wartime society. By November 1943, the number of working women doubled to 1.2 million, not including part-time workers or the 800,000 women employed on farms (Final Report, 1944, p. 7; Pierson, 1986, p. 9). But, as the end of the war approached and the need for ‘total manpower’ subsided, government strategies and propaganda surfaced to return married women to the home and single women back into traditional occupations such as domestic service, nursing and teaching (Pierson, 1986, pp. 23, 61). Job preference went to returning servicemen, many war industries employing women shut down, and government incentives encouraging women to work outside the home terminated at the end of the war. By April 1945, more than one-third of women engaged in war work had been laid off and these “mass lay-offs” continued through August (Wartime History of the Employment of Women, n.d., p. 81). With little (if any) incentive or options to do otherwise, this inevitably placed women on a unidirectional path that led them back into the home or then returning to the lower-paying jobs they held pre-war. Over the course of the war, women’s labour became a subject for discussion in the public sphere, at least within government and industry circles. But what about in the news? Existing research addressing whether and, if so, how newspapers represented women’s labour in Canada during the Second World War, although limited, suggests a proliferation and celebration of women’s achievements in the workforce. This research, however, is based largely on case studies, historical overviews or individual newspaper articles taken as representative of broader trends without evidence of a systematic analysis.<sup>1</sup> The lack of such a systematic, longitudinal analysis reflects both a methodological and a knowledge gap in literature, raising doubt as to whether existing research sufficiently captures a comprehensive Canadian perspective on the social construction of gender in news of women’s wartime labour, using newspapers as an object of analysis.<sup>2</sup>

This research responds to these methodological and knowledge gaps with a comparative content analysis of commercial and alternative (labour) newspapers in

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<sup>1</sup> See Fiamengo, 2008; Gabriele, 2006; Keshen, 2004; Lang, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Some studies have explored this question using objects of analysis such as fiction writing, advertisements or women’s consumer magazines. Such Canadian scholarship includes Forestell, 1989; Korinek, 1996; Nash, 1982; Pierson, 1986; Prentice et al., 1988; Smith, 2008.

Canada that examines representations of women's wartime labour—domestic, volunteer and wage, with a focus on wage labour.<sup>3</sup> It first identifies the extent to which women's labour became a subject for discussion in the wartime news and offers empirical evidence to demonstrate who—or, conversely, who did not—shape the public discussion on women's labour in the news. Then, in comparing coverage within and across newspaper type, it identifies whether the invisibility and marginalization of women within and by mainstream, male-dominated news media, as posited by feminist media theory, persists in the commercial news coverage of the Second World War and, moreover, in alternative news media which are more apt to critique and challenge dominant social relations. The same feminist media studies framework also structures the comparison across the placement of news coverage: the male-dominated general news pages and editorials versus the female-dominated women's pages—the latter of which scholars have argued chronicled women's advancing status in society.

### **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This paper explores the following research questions: To what extent was there a public discussion of the subject of women's labour in Canadian newspapers during the Second World War? Whose representation of women's labour—or, rather, whose 'way of seeing' women's labour—was reflected in the pages of the press? And, given the challenge that women's entry into the paid workforce posed to the sexual division of labour, how were gender roles constructed and negotiated within and across the commercial and labour press?

To address these questions, research involved a comparative content analysis of representations of women's labour (domestic, volunteer and wage, with an emphasis on non-traditional wage labour) in commercial and alternative newspapers published in Canada during the war period. The stratified random sample comprised 342 newspaper issues (216 issues of the commercial press and 126 issues of the labour press), drawn from three commercial newspapers (*Toronto Daily Star*, *The Hamilton Spectator* and *The Halifax Herald*) and three independent labour newspapers (*The Labour Leader*, Toronto; *The Labor News*, Hamilton; and *The Citizen*, Halifax). These cities represent major urban centres in Canada employing the greatest number of women during the war. The sample is limited by the availability of a commercial and an independent labour newspaper in the same city/circulation area, which is why the study did not include the other two major urban centres in Canada. Neither Montreal nor Vancouver had an independent labour newspaper for comparative analysis with the mainstream commercial newspaper in each respective city. The analysis itself considered the following variables: the type of newspaper (commercial versus alternative) and the placement of media coverage (general news versus women's pages, versus editorials) to identify—applying a feminist media studies lens—the relationships among and between them.

Feminist media studies, as theorized by van Zoonen (1994, 1998), analyzes the construction of gender in media, arguing that both the content and production of media are gendered. It includes research on representations of women in mainstream

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<sup>3</sup> The research that informs this article is based on the author's doctoral dissertation, "Women in the Margins: Media Representations of Women's Labour in the Canadian Press, 1939-1945" (Ryerson University, 2012), cited in the reference list.

media, which points to the media's role in representing gender and transmitting stereotypical, patriarchal and hegemonic values about women and femininity (Carter, Branston, & Allen, 1998; Valdivia & Projansky, 2006; van Zoonen, 1998; and Wood, 2009). Feminist media theorists also consider media production, arguing that gendered realities are embedded in news work practices, whereby male ownership and control of media remains the norm and whereby women have, historically, remained comparatively invisible or marginalized in the profession (Carter, Branston, & Allen, 1998). This analysis also draws on feminist theories of war which maintain that gender is important in understanding war and that gender roles, reflecting a male-female dichotomy and hierarchy, are deeply embedded in times of war.<sup>4</sup>

## Results

Despite the magnitude and significance of women's wartime work as homemakers, volunteers and wage earners, there was minimal newspaper coverage on the subject of women's wartime labour. Only about half the newspaper issues analyzed in the commercial and labour press over the six war years (52 and 45 per cent, respectively) contained coverage of women's labour (domestic, volunteer and wage combined). Furthermore, despite surveying the news, editorial and women's sections in all 342 issues, as applicable, the search yielded only 263 individual news items or 'hits' (with a 'hit' being either an article, an editorial or a photo with caption): 190 'hits' in the commercial press and 73 'hits' in the labour press.

The subject of women's labour in wartime was not a priority on the overall news agenda, even though (by observation) a majority of news and editorial coverage did concern the war, focusing foremost on the battlefield. This is consistent with the gendered nature of war journalism, which results in media portrayals of war dominated by patriarchal and patriotic logic.<sup>5</sup> War and war news, therefore, becomes about military strategy and attack foremost. Traditional notions of 'womanhood' do not align with masculine concepts of 'war' or 'labour' for that matter, rendering news about women's wartime labour relatively minimal within the broader news agenda. As Poindexter, Meraz and Weiss (2008) argued, gender norms are entrenched in news work practices, which help to explain who makes it into the news and who does not and, in the end, issues of interest to women are often relegated to second-tier status.

Even though the Canadian government mobilized women's traditional (domestic and volunteer) labour on the greatest and most strategic scale during the Second World War, it was women's wage labour that received the greatest proportion of total coverage in the commercial and labour press (see Table 1). In the labour press specifically, this reflects the newspapers' mandate to cover issues pertaining to paid work, and since domestic and volunteer work are unpaid, this excludes them as topics of coverage. In the commercial press, however, the focus on women's wage labour signals the gendered realities of journalism. It speaks to the perceived newsworthiness of women's participation in the paid workforce and, concomitantly, the perceived lack of newsworthiness of women's traditional work, even though all forms of women's labour were essential to Canada's participation in the war. The non-traditional role

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<sup>4</sup> See Allan and Zelizer, 2004; Barker-Plummer & Boaz, 2005; Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Carruthers, 2000; Goldstein, 2001; Lemish, 2005; McLaughlin, 2002; and Ward, Murphy, & Donovan, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> See Allan and Zelizer, 2004; Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Carruthers, 2000; Lemish, 2005; McLaughlin, 2002; and Ward, Murphy, & Donovan, 2006.

women were called on to assume as wage earners during the war strayed from the pre-war domestic norm. Its ‘unusualness’ made it newsworthy (McKercher, Thompson, & Cumming, 2010). Furthermore, as unpaid work, women’s domestic and volunteer labour was not regarded as ‘labour’ in an economic sense and, at best, was perceived as being of lesser valuable than the paid work traditionally performed by men (Armstrong & Armstrong, 2010, p. 89; Eichler, 1985, p. 63).

	Domestic Labour	Volunteer Labour	Wage Labour
Commercial Press (N=190)	18%	13%	69%
Labour Press (N=73)	11%	0%	89%

Table 1: Coverage of Women’s Labour (Domestic, Volunteer and Wage), Distribution across Labour Type and Newspaper Type

Women’s wage labour held the greatest potential to challenge the sexual division of labour and, with that, the patriarchal status quo. But rather than challenge traditional notions of gender, representations of women as ‘wage earners’ in the newspapers analyzed upheld stereotypical values about women, marginalizing female labourers and minimizing the social significance of their work. News of women’s labour came filtered through male reporters and editors—through a male lens—leaving women’s voices and perspectives absent. This is also as true in the women’s pages as in the male-dominated news pages and also in the mainstream commercial press as much as in the alternative labour press, which challenges the idea that either the women’s pages or alternative journalism, respectively, offered a space for more progressive and representative coverage than the gendered representations traditionally found in the news.

### Women’s Wage Labour through a Male Lens

Most of the coverage on women’s wage labour, specifically, occurred in the male-dominated general news pages: 59 per cent in the commercial press (compared to 30 per cent in the women’s pages, for instance) and the labour press divided coverage of women’s wage labour between its two sections—general news and editorials—at a percentage ratio of 95:5. While the war created opportunities for women journalists who worked as general news reporters or editors (Freeman, 2001; Lang, 1999), most general assignment reporters and editors were still male during this period and practically all women’s page reporters were female.<sup>6</sup> Qualitatively, this means that men generated the greatest proportion of coverage on women’s wage labour. As Molotch (1978) noted, the formal news business “is essentially men talking to men” while the women’s pages “are a deliberate exception: Here it is the case that women who work for men talk to women” (p. 180). The predominance of men writing about women’s labour was especially prominent in the labour press because it did not contain a women’s section and, therefore, no ‘acceptable’ space for female voices.

<sup>6</sup> For discussions of the hard-soft news divide in journalism practice, see Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 2004; Lang, 1999; Mazepa, 2003; Marzolf, 1977; Molotch, 1978; Mills, 1988; Ross, 1936; Schudson, 1978; and Yang, 2000.

This reflects a broader “struggle to articulate labour in terms of gender” (Mazepa, 2003, p. 52). Historically, labour—in practice and scholarship—has been conceived of as “a largely male enterprise” (Palmer, 2010, p. 211) and, hence, the “male norm” or men’s experiences as labourers were presumed “the universal standard” (Baron, 1991, p. 10).

This means that women were comparatively less involved in drafting the story of their own labour. Even coverage in the women’s pages reflected patriarchal interests and influence, given male control and ownership of media. The lack of a genuinely female perspective on women’s (wage) labour resulted in a ‘story’—as chronicled in the pages of the press—that did not fully capture women’s voices and experiences of war. Feminist media scholars have argued that women bring different perspectives to their writing, which stem from their distinct cultural experiences as women.<sup>7</sup> Barker-Plummer and Boaz (2005) wrote that the absence of women and concomitant dominance of men writing the news results in news that is excessively masculinist in form. With respect to war specifically, feminist media scholars have argued that women’s accounts of war offer a different perspective on a conflict from that told in the official “War Story,” the “official state authorized story about why we go to war and how wars are won” (Hunt and Rygiel, 2006, p. 4). The War Story draws on essentialist notions of gender, evoking traditional “gendered tropes” said to be ‘natural,’ but that are in fact far from ‘natural’: “It is written in their genes that men shall be active and women passive” (Cooke, 1996, p. 16). Cardinal, Goldman and Hattaway (1999) argued that a ‘female perspective’ can complement, correct or reshape the war story told by men. However, given the consistency between government and media agendas during times of war,<sup>8</sup> combined with the control that men in the profession exerted over (war) news generally, where in the wartime press did such a perspective exist?

### **Whither ‘Her’ Voice? Exploring the Challenge to Women’s Journalism**

Such a ‘female perspective’ on war did not exist in the women’s pages of the commercial press which reflected power relations in the journalism profession and reinforced the masculine-feminine binaries that the War Story is based on.

This study explored the extent to which the women’s pages of the commercial press covered the different types of labour that women engaged in during the war, with particular interest in how the women’s pages discussed an ‘alternative’ conception of ‘woman’: woman as wage earner. The content analysis revealed that the general news pages contained the greater proportion of coverage on women’s wage labour and, concomitantly, the women’s pages contained the greatest proportion of coverage on women’s traditional labour—that is, domestic and volunteer work (see Table 2). Largely regarded as news written by women and for women, the women’s pages of the commercial press reflected a dominant patriarchal social order that defined and addressed women in terms of the private, domestic sphere. Newspapers sought to

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<sup>7</sup> Mills, 1997; Steiner, 1997, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> For a survey of research that suggests a consistency between government and media agendas during times of war, see Barker-Plummer and Boaz, 2005; Baroody, 1998; Boyd-Barrett, 2004; Cardinal, Goldman, & Hattaway, 1999; Carruthers, 2000; Cooke, 1996; Covert, 2001; Hallin, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988; Hunt and Rygiel, 2006; Keshen, 2004; Lasswell, 1972; McLaughlin, 2002; Robinson, 2004; Ward, Murphy, & Donovan, 2006; and Yang, 2000.

“include ‘feminine’ values” but were carefully managed so as not to “hand over any power to women” (Holland, 1998, p. 21) such that, although women ‘ran’ the women’s sections, men still controlled the newspaper and influenced coverage (Mills, 1988, p. 123). This patriarchal structure of news journalism reinforced patriarchal messages about women’s labour.

	General News	Women’s Pages	Editorials
Domestic Labour (N=35)	34%	52%	14%
Volunteer Labour (N=25)	32%	68%	0%
Wage Labour (N=130)	62%	31%	7%

Table 2: Type of Women’s Labour, Distribution across the Placement of Media Coverage, Commercial Press (1939 to 1945)

This included mixed messages of critique and praise in the women’s pages about women’s performance in the workforce during the war, which represented 45 per cent of topics covered. On the one hand, coverage criticized women for absenteeism and neglect at work and offered advice on maintaining health to ensure increased productivity on the job. For example, in the December 13, 1942 column “A Man Talks to Women” in the *Toronto Daily Star*, the (male) columnist scolded women’s frivolous and emotional behaviour, namely gossiping and their apparent inability to separate their work and home lives, as detrimental to workplace morale, productivity at work and, ultimately, the war effort. He presented women as overly-emotional and overly-sensitive to the conventions of the male workforce, urging women to behave more like men on the job: “Men are conditioned to work with each other, to take orders from bosses, to see things of which they disapprove but ... their emotions are trained to not interfere on the job” (p. 23). At the same time, coverage in the women’s pages also highlighted women’s workplace strengths but, interestingly, coverage often negotiated these strengths in terms of qualities associated with femininity, such as care-giving and servitude. For example, an article published in the women’s pages of the *Toronto Daily Star* presented images of Russian, Indian and American women working in logging and in railroad yards as well as manufacturing war goods, heralding these women as exceeding productivity expectations at “jobs their men would be doing in peacetime” (United Nations, 1943, p. 21). One of the photos depicted “four working mothers” who, combined, have 42 children including grandchildren. Women’s paid labour (whether in Canada or internationally, as in this case) was negotiated in relation to the men in their lives—literally and symbolically—and, concomitantly, in relation to gendered roles. This reminded readers that women were wives and mothers and grandmothers first. They were wage labourers second, working hard on-the-job to support their men and “[do] their part in the war” (Ibid., p. 21). Women’s identity, including their identity as wage earners, was bound by their lives in the home.

A close, systematic analysis of the distribution of coverage on women’s labour revealed patterns that raise doubts about the women’s pages as a space that enabled

more progressive identities to unfold. Coverage reinforced dominant patriarchal perceptions of women by replicating—and not challenging—a gendered division of labour. Such a challenge, however, was even less likely to occur in male-dominated general news and editorials, which led the discussion on women's wage labour specifically and, in the process, framed the story of women's wartime wage labour in ways that aligned it with their gendered, private-sphere roles.

So, if not in the women's pages, this still begs the question: Where in the pages of the press did more representative and/or progressive coverage of women's labour exist?

### **Whither 'Her' Story?: Exploring the Challenge to Alternative Media**

Alternative social meanings are more likely to flow through alternative news sources (Comedia, 1984; Curran, 2007). In theory, the alternative press should be more apt than the commercial press to portray women in less conventional ways and to provide 'alternative' frames on their experiences, including their experience as wage labourers during the Second World War, given the magnitude of women's participation in the wartime workforce and the labour press' explicit mandate to cover labour issues. In theory, the alternative labour press, specifically, should be particularly apt to portray women as wage labourers, given its mandate to cover labour news and issues. Yet, with respect to coverage of women's wartime labour in the alternative labour press, this was not the case.

As an illustrative example, the content analysis revealed that both the commercial and labour press framed women's wage labour foremost in ways that placed gender front and centre in the description of female labourers [see Table 3]. Newspapers referred to women as "workers" in 37 per cent of coverage on women's wage labour in the labour press and 21 per cent in the commercial press. However, this term rarely stood alone. Rather, across both newspaper types, the adjective "women" often preceded and qualified it—as in, "women workers" (Reception, 1943, p. 14). Similarly, both the commercial and labour newspapers described working women with a range of gendered descriptors such as "women wage-earners" or, more specifically, "women bomber and fighter pilots" (State Control, 1939, p. 4; Russ Women, 1942, p. 3). Interestingly, gender was not used as a qualifier in descriptions of male labour in either the commercial or the labour press and regardless of whether coverage appeared in general news, the women's pages or editorials. If an article simply referred to 'workers,' this implied male workers. This was evident because, when an article concerned labour issues specific to women, it indicated as much by referring to 'women's work' or 'women workers,' as previously noted. However, when an article concerned male and female labourers alike, it tended to refer specifically and explicitly to both 'men and women workers.' This reinforces the notion that the labour force was male domain. Mainstream and alternative news media, in labour-related coverage, associated 'labour' with 'male' by default, only labelling women's wage labour as "labour" in two per cent of coverage in the labour press and never so in the commercial press. At times, women's wage labour was described as "service," in keeping with traditional notions of women's familial role, but not "labour."

	Commercial Press (N=130)	Labour Press (N=65)
Labour(er)	0%	2%
Women's work, Women workers	21%	37%
Womanpower	4%	3%
Service	10%	9%
Temporary	13%	17%
Gendered Descriptors	22%	17%
Other	8%	6%
N/A	22%	9%

Table 3: Discursive Framing – Key Words to Describe Women's Wage Labour, Commercial vs. Labour Press (1939 to 1945)

Even the influx of women into the paid workforce during the Second World War—600,000 in Canada, 6 million in the United States and 7.75 million in Britain—did not alter gender-based stereotypes arising from the traditional sexual division of labour. Neither did the change in the pattern of female employment, given that many women worked in traditionally male-dominated industries and in jobs typically performed by men such as in shipyards, factories and munitions plants. News media rhetoric reinforced the idea that women did not have an inherent right to these jobs in the same way that men did. News discourse emphasized the temporary nature of women's employment, positioning working women as temporary replacements for men [see Table 3]. Women were not allowed to fully appropriate their workplace roles. News discourse reminded readers that women were always still doing “men's jobs” (Antheil, 1940, p. 26) and that they were “wartime additions to labour force” who worked solely to “release” men for other duties as a way to “hurdle the manpower problem” and “answer the Dominion government's call for maximum production” (Women Will Leave, 1945, p. 4; Women Replacement, 1941, p. 7; Girls Replacing Men, 1942, p. 24; Women in British War Industries, 1942, p. 2; Pretty Girls, 1942, p. 8). Women were not in the workforce to stay, and their recruitment was not a statement about gender equality. Framing women's labour as temporary and tenuous marginalized women's presence in the public sphere workforce, and the social construction of separate spheres for men and women—men were wage earners, women were not—went largely unchallenged in and by news media which privileged the patriarchal status quo.

The commercial and labour press presented women's labour in stereotypical ways that projected a patriarchal view of women's place in society. While it was in the commercial media's interests to structure women into domestic roles to attract

advertisers (for female consumers through the women's pages), the same cannot be said of the labour press whose mandate to address labour offered potential for more coverage and, as an alternative news source, more progressive coverage on the subject of women's wage labour. Also, alternative news sources can more readily offer perspectives outside the "established [patriarchal] order", the "capitalist system" and the "mainstream view of a subject" (Comedia, 1984, p. 95; Curran, 2007). Yet, a close analysis of coverage about women's labour across newspaper type through content analysis reveals that the alternative labour press did not, posing a challenge to alternative media history as not quite so 'alternative.'

## **Conclusion**

Canadian women participated in the 'total war' effort in unprecedented numbers through domestic, volunteer and wage labour. And given that Canada could not have participated in the Second World War as it did without the labour of Canadian women, this subject could (and should) have featured prominently in the pages of the press—if not in the male-dominated news pages, then at least in the 'chronicle' of the women's pages, and if not in the 'male-stream' commercial press than at least in the alternative labour press.

In the end, despite the magnitude and significance of women's wartime labour, the subject received minimal coverage in the newspapers discussed here. The lack of coverage on women's traditional labour during the war reflects its perceived lack of economic value in the public sphere as well as the newsworthiness of women's non-traditional (paid) labour. Women's entry into the workforce overshadowed news of women's domestic and volunteer labour, even though these two were mobilized on the greatest scale during the Second World War. Still, even with more coverage of women's paid labour, this still offered no greater promise for progressive coverage, with representations that reinforced stereotypical values about women and minimized the social significance of their labour. Newspaper coverage left little room for alternative or non-traditional conceptions of women, such as woman as 'wage earner,' by framing women's wage work in terms of the 'domestic.' Patriarchy was systemic not only within (that is, across the news, editorial and women's pages) but also across commercial and alternative print media. This challenges the idea that either the women's pages or alternative journalism offered a 'space' for more progressive and representative coverage than the gendered representations traditionally found in the news. As scholars accessing historical newspapers today, this further demonstrates the value of a content analysis methodology in revealing patterns that may not be immediately evident using the less systematic methods that dominate literature in this field.

The patriarchal structure of news journalism generally and war journalism specifically made it so that most images of women (textual and visual) were constructed by men, whether literally or symbolically. In this view, the representations of women's labour in the newspapers analyzed reflected not how women actually were in wartime society—1.2 million Canadian women were wage labourers—but, as Nash (1982) suggested of government recruitment films during the Second World War, how the men controlling the images (in this case, the 'male-stream' news media) wanted to see women and how these men wanted women to see themselves: as patriotic wives and mothers or aspiring wives and mothers simply doing their 'bit' for the war effort.

Gender served as a filter through which to communicate news of women's wage labour. This reflects and reinforces a social construction of gender which relies on a traditional division of labour that traps women in domestic identities with no prestige or power that inhibit their equal participation in the public sphere.

If the nation, as an 'imagined community,' as Anderson (1991) argued, is a way of organizing the world, then newspapers, which create an 'imagined community,' also offer a way of organizing the world—in this case, a gendered world. Applying Anderson (1991), if the developing consciousness of the nation was made possible in part by people reading newspapers, then women's exclusion or marginalization in the news (both as producers and subjects of news, for instance) resulted in women's exclusion or marginalization in public consciousness and (via the 'chronicle' left by these newspapers) in historical consciousness too.

This paper demonstrates the significance of gender for understanding how news media covered the subject of women's labour during the Second World War. In the process, it offers feminist media and media history scholars a way of thinking about women's history and, more specifically, the historical relationship between news media and women, that is inclusive (of women's paid and unpaid work), but that also extends beyond traditional and historical gendered divisions of labour.

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