

Spring 4-10-2014

# On-Air Mavericks: Breaking Through the Media Frames of Anchorwomen

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## Recommended Citation

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ON-AIR MAVERICKS:  
BREAKTHROUGH THROUGH THE MEDIA FRAMES OF ANCHORWOMEN

by

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B.S., Kaplan University, 2011

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Science

Mass Communication and Media Arts  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
May 2014

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

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in the field of Professional Media and Media Management

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04/09/2014

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## *Introduction*

Media works to influence public perception. Research suggests media framing has a great influence on the decision making of an individual (Terkildsen and Schnell, 1997). There has been extensive research on the frames most often associated with females who challenge the traditional gender roles in the media:

- The personalization and trivialization frame, which draws media attention to one's personal attributes, such as appearance, marital status, personal habits or style (Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997).
- A sexualization frame that frames women as objects relinquishing their subjectivity can also be found throughout much of the media coverage when a woman is working to make movements in a male-dominated role (Lind and Salo, 2002).
- A failure frame has been introduced as well that emphasizes the failures of women who attempted to break down traditional gender roles and were unsuccessful (Olson, 2012).

Kate L. Gibson argues this failure frame can be seen in the coverage of anchors Barbara Walters and Connie Chung as they each only lasted two years in their anchor chair. Their programs didn't launch their networks to the top of the rating charts and they were considered unsuccessful (as cited in Olson, 2012). This kind of media coverage breeds the notion that women can't do the job successfully, stopping many

people before they even try. Special attention will be paid to this particular frame as it may be the most stifling of all the frames.

### *Research Overview*

This research examines how three women, who have undeniably been exposed to such media frames, yet have worked past them while sustaining well-known careers as national broadcast journalists. The media has a strong hold over what the public perceives and this study will further bring attention to the impact and responsibility the press has in covering those who challenge traditional roles. Also, there is arguably a great importance to having diversity in newsrooms in order to deliver a more complete, just and fair representation of society (Correa and Harp, p.301, 2011). The role these women have taken on is not just a representation of how women are moving forward within broadcast news, but their position also works to expand the coverage of their programs.

There is an extensive amount of research into how women in broadcast journalism have been illustrated by the media. Entman explains that dominant media frames "enjoy an exclusion of interpretation," and consequently, the frame is understood by the audience as natural or reflective of common sense (as cited in Gibson). However, these women have not faltered or succumbed to this undermining of women journalists. Their ability to succeed and grow within an industry still adjusting to women entering the field must be recognized. It has taken these few progressive women to step into the spotlight and work past those media frames.

This research will be focusing on Amy Goodman, Rachel Maddow and Candy Crowley. They are a novelty of sorts and are changing the game in their field. Through an analysis of their work in the industry, a shift can be seen that they ignited to guide aspiring women anchors in not only the political news field but for all women as news anchors. They can be seen as novelties by not having to fall victim to the traditional frames the media insist as the only means to success. Maddow proved critics wrong when she was given her anchoring opportunity on MSNBC and then took the ratings by storm. Her second week on the air, Maddow beat the ratings suspenders off the mighty Larry King, topping King both in total viewers and in the 25-54 demographic (Colon, 2008). This side of their careers must be showcased and made aware to prompt change on a larger scale.

Kane and Parks noted "When reporting on women who participate in traditionally non-female arenas, the media constructs gender and enforces gender roles by either inattention to female participants, or by the exploiting their femininity through an emphasis on aspects of the women's appearance, sexuality, and personality over her actions and achievements" (as cited in Sanprie, 2005). These women are not an exception to media framing. When journalists have written stories or interviewed them, they have highlighted such things as appearance just like other female anchors. However "positive" the message may be in the article, the issue is still relevant that the material being published is different than what writers would capture from a male in the same field.

Damning women journalists with faint praise is worse than outright sexism in that it coats the backhanded compliments in sugary rhetoric about clothing, legs, smiles, and Miss Congeniality awards (Olson, 2012).

As DiNovella (2008) describes Goodman: “At fifty, she still dresses like she's in radio. Wearing black jeans and black sweater, her brown hair showing shades of gray, she lacks the power suits and shiny mane sported by most television anchors.”

When describing Rachel Maddow, Wallace (2012) writes, “From the start, Maddow's brand is not so much out lesbian or angry liberal, but full-on nerd: the chunky black glasses, the flailing limbs.” She often serves as a guide for many through the complicated, overhaul of information associated with politics.

Furthermore, although a rash of articles that can be found after a quick Google search of Candy Crowley, many of which are emphasizing her weight, Crowley has established international high profile in the journalism world.

These examples are brief but abundant when researching these women. Regardless of their exposure they haven't conformed to fit the expected mold of anchorwomen. They are a novelty of sorts for women in news anchoring, as they have aged and developed personas not often seen on-air. They have stepped away from what is often expected of women anchors and have established careers in broadcast journalism.

### *Career Overviews*

The Pacifica Radio station, WBAI in New York City, is where the career of Amy Goodman began. She volunteered at WBAI, a progressive and independent station that

provides news, arts, and music<sup>1</sup>. Working her way from volunteer to news director, she launched Democracy Now as radio show turned television program in 1996 (DiNovella, 2008). That very same show is now the largest public media collaboration in the U.S. It is also funded entirely through contributions from listeners, viewers, and foundations (democracynow.org). The show's ability to obtain such a prominent status while being fully funded by its audience is an obvious sign there is a need for diversity within the broadcast news industry.

Like Goodman, Rachel Maddow began her career in radio. Air America offered Maddow her own political talk radio show called *The Rachel Maddow Show*. Three years later in 2008, Maddow signed an exclusive contract with MSNBC as their political analyst. It wasn't long until the network would offer Maddow her own TV show, also called *The Rachel Maddow Show*. Her show debut has been the most successful of all the programs on MSNBC.

Candy Crowley moved from NBC to CNN in 1987 where she would eventually land her position as an award-winning chief political correspondent and anchor of State of the Union with Candy Crowley. Kaminer (2011) writes, "If it's a person, place, or event of political significance in America, chances are that CNN chief political correspondent Candy Crowley has covered it."

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<sup>1</sup> According to WBAI.org, WBAI is listener-supported radio. As a member of the Pacifica chain of radio stations, it provides a vast array of original programming to listeners in the Metropolitan New York City region and worldwide on this site.

### *Education and Early Careers*

One might assume that all of these women must have gone to school for journalism at the top notch schools, giving them an automatic “in” to the industry. However, their backgrounds are all quite different.

Goodman did attend an Ivy League college, but she didn't earn a degree in journalism, or any related field. She actually graduated Harvard with a degree in anthropology. Goodman merely stumbled across her future career at WBAI. "I was just completely shocked by this place I stumbled on," she recalls. "It was just raw. It was all the beauty and horror that is New York in all of its myriad accents. And I said, what is this place?" (as cited in Ratner, 2005).

Maddow's path is a bit more conventional, receiving a degree in public policy from Stanford. Also, as a Rhodes Scholar she furthered her education with a Doctor of Philosophy in politics. Despite her extensive education, Maddow worked a slew of side jobs before finally getting her break from an open DJ call at Northampton, MA radio station (Colon, p.35). It was from this position that she worked her way up to Air America and so on.

Crowley, like Goodman, had her sights set on something else while studying at Randolph College. She had a love of writing and pursued a degree in English and math. She also worked small jobs after graduation; still unsure journalism was her career path, still holding on to dreams of becoming an author. The transition happened slowly after taking a position as Mutual Broadcasting's first the first female radio anchor (Kaminer, 2011).

### *Making strides in Broadcast Media*

To gain a stronger understanding of how much these women have achieved, we must examine at broadcast media when women first began to make their appearance. Since the beginning of broadcast news, it has been the echoing tones of a strong, authoritative and masculine voice that flooded homes in the evening. For thirty years since the first broadcast in the 1940's, networks delivered all the public needed to know through the viewpoint of a man. Women have been making strides especially in the 1980's when women correspondents were given the opportunity to cover a wide variety of topics. Which Rhodes (1995, p.686-687) describes as, "Food, fashion [and] furnishings" (as cited in Gibson, 2009). Ruth Crane, Margaret McBride, and Kathryn Cravens were some of the first successful female radio-talk show hostesses. Their programs included home economics and other newsworthy content of interest to women (as cited in Howard-Byrd, 2004, pg.20).

Women have continued to fight for more equality among the airwaves ever since. Though, it was perceived that women simply could never possess the authoritative male voice the audience desired. Without this trait, the news was thought to be ineffective and unbelievable. A woman's voice is naturally thinner, with less timbre and range. It was not as appropriate for reporting crucial events, such as hard-core news; the depth and resonance of the male voice is indispensable (Howard-Byrd, 2004, p.19-20).

Such discriminatory ideals lessened the opportunities women would have in news broadcast. This is not to say determined women were not successful in their broadcast endeavors. Of course, their programs were centered on women's

housekeeping and public service programs; nonetheless they were successful as commercial writers and radio talk show hostesses (Howard-Byrd, 2004, p.20).

World War II had a more significant impact on women entering the workforce than any other event. Sanders and Rock explain, "The shortage of men due to military service forced executives to hire women as broadcast announcers" (as cited in Byrd, 2004, p.20-21). This was the beginning of women aspiring for a place in the broadcast world.

### *Impediments Remain in Broadcast Media*

There is no doubt a handful of women out there have been paving a path for others to rise up as on air talents. Women certainly play a more visible role as news personalities; they typically sit next to their older, veteran male anchor and offer a younger, fresh side to the show. Carole Simpson, a senior ABC news correspondent, said "that men are in the executive position and do the hiring and they often make their decisions according to their fantasies." (as cited in Howard-Byrd, 2005, pg. 43). The pressures are prevalent for an aging woman working in the industry with such an emphasis on age and appearance. Patricia Holland (1987) explained the predicament facing female news anchors:

On television the visual presentation of a head and shoulders image is always inadequate by itself. Something is missing; the image must be completed. In the case of a man it is unproblematically completed by what he has to say. In the case of a woman, the commentators point to an absence of a different sort. For them what is missing is the woman's body (as cited in Gibson, 2009).

With the emergence of television the desired attributes of journalists, male or female, shifted bringing their appearance to the forefront (Meltzer, 2007). However, studies suggest women face more criticisms than their male counterparts when it comes to appearance. This holds especially true for women in TV news, who, in their attempts to gain credibility as journalists, have had to cope with societal expectations of appearance and beauty over the years.

According to Marlane (1999), "The progress of women in society depends on their acceptance and value as competent professional who are able to compete on equal footing with the men with whom they work" (p. 46). There is no doubt there are certain looks that the camera loves, but stripping away appearance, talent and hard work should be found at the core of any successful news anchor. However, a troubling survey found most women still find appearance as their most prominent career barrier (Engstrom, 2000).

Women anchors still rank an overemphasis on physical appearance as their strongest barrier, which does not rank the same as a perceived career barrier for their male counterpart. In fact, Engstrom's research found appearance to be on the lower end of males perceived career barriers. One male anchor who was surveyed noted, "Women are subject to more scrutiny regarding their appearance." Another reiterated, "The women have it much tougher!" One anchor admitted that he doesn't get nearly the same attention regarding his appearance: "Viewers constantly make note of female anchors' new hairstyle or clothes. No one calls about my appearance" (Engstrom, 2000).

The study illuminates the pressures and emphasis the media frames as the ideal for women. There certainly has been some speculation that anchor legends such as Edward Murrow became such an icon because of his looks. However, Meltzer (2007) points out there wasn't a particular pattern or necessary physical attribute for the prominent faces on the industry; when it was white men leading the pack. Their most common denominator was their believability.

### *Fox News*

It can be concluded as women began to find a place in broadcast news, there has always been a premium on appearance for them (Mundy, 2012). To most typical observers, it is obvious certain stations emphasize a certain look more so than others. Mundy wrote,

“As for Fox, suffice it to say that there is a YouTube montage devoted to leg shots of Fox anchors, who are often outfitted in body-hugging dresses of vibrant red and turquoise, their eyes enhanced by not only liner and shadow but also false lashes.”

This focus on personal appearance and ideal appearance of women is from the perspective of a male gaze (Lind & Salo, 2002). The show business side that emerged in the television era created an even stronger, superficial agenda that was often found to be a more critical asset than that of journalistic ability (Marlane, 1999).

By taking a look at industry giant, Fox News, their style of programming is obvious. FOX has remained on top of the ratings chart for twelve consecutive years as the most-watched cable news network among both total viewers and ages 25-54

viewers (Knox, 2014). In an NPR article, Gabriel Sherman, author of “The Loudest Voice in the Room: How the Brilliant, Bombastic Roger Ailes Built Fox News - and Divided a Country” explains,

“Anyone who turns on Fox will see that the anchors are - the female anchors are very attractive. They're often blonde. They have a lot of personality. And that's the way Ailes programs it to appeal to a mostly white, middle-class, male audience. And sex appeal is at the heart of one of the reasons why Fox is such a - successful at transmitting political messages.”

Sherman suggests that Ailes' approach to journalism has divided a country by presenting the news in an ideological fashion, with sex appeal being one of the driving forces to their success. Anchor Bob Sellers remembered Ailes once calling the control booth. 'I was doing the weekend show with Kiran Chetry. He called up and said, 'Move that damn laptop, I can't see her legs!' (as cited in Sherman, 2014).

However, this kind of approach has created a culture for women journalists that suggest the only way they will be successful is if they can maintain a youthful, vibrant and attractive appearance. As Goodman said in an interview, “it's just reinforcing old stereotypes. A man can pursue his profession, but a woman has to care what she looks like.”

### *Failure Frame*

As women made their presence more known in broadcast news the media began displaying their attributes in a different light than most male anchors. When Katie Couric announced her plans to transition from the Today Show and debut as the first woman to

solo anchor the network evening news, the media quickly weighed in. The consensus seemed to overshadow her triumphs and reinitialized her position as a man's space. (Gibson, 2009, p.51).

“As the end credits rolled, Couric, wearing a white jacket over a black shirt and skirt, was leaning against the edge of her desk, showing her famous legs”

-David Bauder, 2006. AP

This kind of media attention ultimately reinforced traditional ideas about women by trivializing Couric's performance through frames of sexualization and personalization (Olson, 2012, p8).

As Gibson (2009) explained, “A variety of feminist scholarship continues to demonstrate how the media undermines women, particularly those who challenge traditional gender role” (p.51). This scholarship demonstrates how press coverage of women who seek participation in spheres of activity that are traditionally male often serves to delegitimize women's participation and to re-demarcate the male identity of particular spheres of public life. Olson added, “The failure frame says that the media document women whom they determine have not been successful in a traditional sense, and then use those so-called failures to predict another woman's failure” (Olson, 2012, p.8).

Stephen Winzenburg (2006) of Broadcast & Cable Magazine, warned Couric before she began to solo anchor the evening news, to take note of all the women who have failed before her in evening news, and added the only way to be successful is to

be rightfully paired with a man (as cited in Olson, 2012, p. 6). Winzenburg was sure to note in his article that men can only be truly successful in such a position.

Men have not often had the same problem. Former morning show hosts Walter Cronkite, Jack Paar, Harry Reasoner, Charles Kuralt, Tom Brokaw and Bryant Gumbel all went on to successful evening careers. Male anchors are accepted by viewers whether paired with others or working solo (USA Today, 2006).

Diane Sawyer noted the serious implications of women who are overexposed to such ideals, "It's always a danger for women, it seems to me, who have a sense, in any case, that every mistake they make is a terminal one, which has indeed been true a lot of time, but it breeds a kind of timidity." (Paisner, 1989, p.213).

New research developments on the cognitive and attitudinal effects of media framing suggest that the ideas presented by the media not only set the public agenda but also dictate to the public how to think about certain matters (Igartua and Cheng, 2011). In other words, aspiring female journalists are being exposed to such ideals that women are not capable of achieving success unless they are able to fit properly into the acceptable frames. This is a crippling cycle, hindering a female's ability to further break through these stereotypes and progress.

#### *Leading Women, On-air Mavericks*

Rhodes (1995) explains, "A variety of research has demonstrated that the dominant or stock media frames that shape the coverage of women who challenge gender norms overwhelmingly trivializes their efforts (as cited in Gibson, 2009, p. 51). Media frames clearly hold a powerful amount of ability to shape a natural perspective of

women. Despite such strong forces against them, Goodman, Maddow and Crowley have not shied away from the profession.

Despite being let go from her professional home at Pacifica Radio after a hostile internal shake-up, and when she was only being aired by twenty or so affiliate stations (Ratner, 2005), on that tragic day of September 11<sup>th</sup> in New York City, Goodman, then host of a small, muckraking radio program Democracy Now!, unwaveringly took to her microphone. Unknowing fully of the events causing such destruction and chaos around her, yet determined to deliver what she was aware, just blocks from it all Goodman stood strong at her post while others evacuated the horrific scene (Ratner, 2005).

Twelve years later Goodman has catapulted that very program into a worldwide success. She is now executive producer and host of Democracy Now!, a national, daily, independent, award-winning news program airing on over 1,100 public television and radio stations worldwide (democracynow.org, n.d).

In an interview Goodman said the success of her show was due to the way mainstream news organizations deliver their pundits, it leaves people wanting more. Goodman said, "They just mine this small circle of blowhards who know so little about so much. And yet it's just the basic tenets of good journalism that instead of this small circle of pundits, you talk to people who live at the target end of the policy" (as cited in Lizzy, 2005).

Maddow is the host of the Emmy Award-winning "The Rachel Maddow Show" on MSNBC. "The Rachel Maddow Show" features Maddow's take on the biggest stories of the day, political and otherwise, including lively debate with guests from all sides of the

issues, in-depth analysis and stories no other shows in cable news will cover (nbcnews.com, n.d.).

According to MSNBC, Maddow's show was the most successful launch in the network's history. The show and Maddow, individually, have received a multitude of accolades and awards for their performance.

Crowley is CNN's award-winning chief political correspondent and anchor of State of the Union with Candy Crowley (CNN.com, n.d). Her show is a weekly broadcast that highlights the most prominent political issues through interviews and analysis.

So, how were these women able to obtain such respected positions within national news broadcast media without succumbing to the apparent media frames other anchorwomen have fallen victim to?

For instance, when it was announced that Crowley would moderate a presidential debate, the media jumped to criticize. As the first female to host such an event, the critiques and social media began calling emphasis to not so much her ability, but her weight.

*@candy crowley cnn hope you & your big fat over weight ass, have the courage to stand up to #obama and ask him some tough questions at debate*

*@Candy Crowley may be fat on the outside but it's what inside that counts. And what's inside is doughnuts, gyros, milkshakes, chips..*

*@Wonder if fat ass LibProg moderator Candy Crowley will allow questions regarding Michelle #Obama's War On Obesity at POTUS town hall. #TCOT*

As the onslaught of tweets came in, the media began pouring them out. Article after article brought more attention to the issue of her body, than the responsibility she had as a moderator.

Crowley seemingly didn't pay much mind to the opinions. She didn't binge diet to drop weight or shy away from the event. A year after social media attacks and unnecessary coverage from the press, Crowley sticks to what she believes represents a good journalist despite what the media perceives. She said in an interview:

"Whatever medium you present through, if you go and you see a plane crash, a presidential election, a meeting of the [International Monetary Fund], if you cannot communicate to people what happened, then you're the only one that knows. That's not very helpful. You can't just study journalism in class. You have to "know how to communicate." (Flounders, 2010).

#### *What this Means for Newsrooms*

Seemingly, these women do not have much in common during their early careers. Their closest tie would be their start in radio. Also, Goodman and Crowley did not set their goals from the beginning on being a journalist. How the media would cover them throughout their careers, however, is something they can all relate to. As well as their desire to have control over their programs.

Asa Kroon Lundell, (as cited in Patrona and Ekstrom, 2011), comes to the conclusion that in political interviews,

“Journalists are perhaps more in control of their on-air performances than ever before. This so-called ‘staged-ness’ seems to have become a general trend within contemporary political television journalism, but has attracted little in-depth scholarly attention – at least from the point of view of conversation analysis.”

(p.90)

Maddow and Goodman do have significant control over their programs. They also have a certain audience base that differs from other platforms. As Alessandra Stanley (2012) explains, “MSNBC has pumped up its ratings by recasting itself as a left-leaning riposte to Fox News” (New York Times). Goodman explains her show has been able to thrive because it offers an independent and diverse source of news and information that corporate media is unable to do because of their obligations to their shareholders (democracynow.org, n.d.).

As mentioned above, different networks prioritize the appearance of their on-air talents differently. Fox network’s style has previously been referred to as “Fox glam.”

Mundy suggests,

“The best explanation may be the channel's largely conservative audience. An argument can be made that conservative women are typically less squeamish than progressive ones about embracing what the sociologist Catherine Hakim calls "erotic capital," otherwise known as using your looks to get ahead (Mundy 2012).

Rhodes (1997) highlights the issue of progressive women who fight against the traditional roles a woman is expected to portray they are often ridiculed and when they do succumb they are seen as vain or hypocritical. Despite these challenges, Goodman,

Maddow and Crowley have stayed true to their program and personal style, while sustaining a successful position as an on-air talent.

Programs with women journalists, who are able to obtain a larger viewership, may affect the priority, coverage and framing of the stories produced by the organization (Correa and Harp, 2011). When it comes to the business side of news, smart managers will recognize the need to have a variety of personalities and genders on their staff. Amy Howell, CEO of Howell Marketing Strategies, says women have a unique set of strengths and, “the gender balance that we achieve in the workforce is greatly enhanced by women at the table” (as cited in Wade, 2014).

### *Conclusion*

Despite not having many similarities in their early lives, education or careers, these three women have established a national audience with their talent, knowledge, and on-air personas. They are the lighthouse for other aspiring journalists to not conform to what the media portrays as a female’s rightful spot in broadcast news. Furthermore, they are an example to all upcoming anchors, male or female, as they have proven that mainstream stereotypes are not what makes or breaks a career.

While new and different personas fill the anchor seat, journalists must be aware of typical media frames in order to understand the gravity their work holds when they report on people who are challenging traditional gender roles. Olson (2012) wrote, “Powerful women will not be fully accepted until they can first achieve the position and then receive media coverage that will change the perception that women are not competent to cover ‘serious’ political news stories.” Journalists must understand the

implications of their reporting and the style or light in which they present other journalists.

Gibson (2009) pointed out a NY Times article during Couric's debut that wrote, "Ms. Couric's debut will not be a test of feminism; they will be a measure of viewer's flexibility." Goodman, Maddow and Crowley are prime examples of how viewers may not want the same typical anchorwoman the media has persisted is best. Their program ratings and viewership attest to that. As Gibson also noted, we must bring more attention from scholars and the public alike, in order to alter the media coverage of women in general and of those who are challenging the norm. The only way to accomplish this is for newsroom managers and directors to understand the power of good journalism. Goodman says she built Democracy Now on the notion that, "what matters is pursuing a story...People respond to authentic voices digging deep. People go beyond the surface." She further noted that when it comes down to it, appearances are just a distraction and that journalistic ability will always hold more weight (personal communication, March 29, 2014).

That is how women will continue moving forward within broadcast news. That is why the success of these current on-air mavericks needs to be showcased. By focusing on what it takes to deliver the truth in a story and by putting good journalism at the forefront of their endeavors.

It is crucial for aspiring journalists to be aware of this and that there is a market for those who do not fit the typical on-air personalities. Goodman said that if she had paid mind to the emphasis on physical appearance and looks she wouldn't have been

able to move forward in journalism. If the industry keeps placing so much value on physical traits, the profession's ability to attract talented journalists will lessen.

Ultimately this will affect the media's ability deliver accurate, well balanced coverage.

This is exactly the reason why newsrooms must continue to strive for this kind of diversity in their workforce. Many studies suggest when women are absent or not of prominent force within a newsroom, a negative portrayal of them is found due to lack of identification with them (Correa and Harp, 2011). This is the very same concept for employing diversity among genders as well. To reach a larger mass of the population, newsroom managers must be aware of this in order to staff accordingly.

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Research Paper Title:  
On-Air Mavericks: Breaking Through the Media Frames of Anchorwomen

Major Professor: David Yepsen