

The Gendered CEO: A Media Analysis of Marissa Mayer

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Abstract

When Marissa Mayer became the CEO of global Internet corporation Yahoo in July 2012, popular press portrayed her as a successful young executive who was also pregnant with her first child. Several subsequent major media episodes, including coverage of Mayer's maternity leave, the decision to revoke Yahoo's work-from-home policy, and a photo shoot in *Vogue*, revealed the use of gendered language and a "motherhood" lens to describe Mayer, rather than focusing on her abilities as a leader, or her background in the industry. Would similar language be applied if Mayer had been male, single, or child-less? How might the use of gendered language, over time, impact public opinion about Mayer's decisions? Though news media reporters and editors are stretched to do more with less, the media still play a powerful role in influencing public opinion, culture, and an understanding of the world. During a time when large American companies are naming more female CEOs, it is important and interesting to note whether the news media coverage about these female leaders is framed through a lens of hegemonic ideologies. Through a textual analysis of traditional and digital media framing of Mayer, this study will seek to explore and analyze the potential implications of media coverage of female CEOs.

The Gendered CEO: A Media Analysis of Marissa Mayer

Multinational Internet corporation Yahoo named Marissa Mayer as its new CEO in July 2012. She was framed through popular media outlets as, “famously high-energy and driven, and has an exceptional background” (Miller, 2012, para. 8). However, the article’s author also chose to include this particular descriptor in the *eighth* paragraph of a *New York Times* blog post. The article had already gone into detail about Mayer’s pregnancy and what her role as a mother meant for her new role at Yahoo. After the company announced that Mayer would assume the role of CEO, news media began to tell the rest of her story; beginning with the fact that she was young (37 at the time), glamorous, pregnant with her first child, and a key hire who had been successful in her previous position with Google. Subsequent news media stories focused on Mayer through a “motherhood” lens before focusing on her abilities as a leader or her background in technology. For example, early reports about Mayer represented her as an example for working moms rather than an example to her peers or employees; “Mayer is a role model who will be closely watched, not just by those interested in whether she can turn around Yahoo, but by working parents” (Miller, 2012, para. 9).

A July/August 2012 article in *The Atlantic* by Anne Marie Slaughter titled “Why women still can’t have it all” sparked a renewed debate about parenthood, working, women in leadership roles, and the idea of work-life balance. A few months earlier, an online petition started by 14-year old Julia Bluhm changed the course of how *Seventeen* magazine chooses to airbrush photos shown in their magazines – a topic that demonstrates how one person, with the right megaphone, can make a difference – whether that megaphone is a group of influential supporters, a sum of money, a grassroots campaign or the media. When Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg published

her book, *Lean In*, in March 2013, it became clear that the topic of women in leadership positions would not be quelled.

As of August 2012, only 20 female CEOs led America's largest companies (Howard, 2012, para. 1). Interestingly, that number is a record high. Though females represent only four percent of Fortune 500 CEOs, "more than half—11—landed the top job between 2011 and 2012" (Howard, 2012, para. 1). During a time when large American companies are naming more female CEOs, it is important and interesting to note whether the news media coverage about female leaders stands out among media coverage of their male counterparts. Would news media coverage of male CEOs generally include information about marital or parental status, as it does in the case of Mayer? Why or why not? What does the news media coverage of these CEOs say about the current culture in America?

When the news that Mayer would join the ranks of very few women before her as CEO of a Fortune 500 company was announced, reporters noted that she was pregnant, which was mildly interesting to the general public, but not major news. That is, until it was reported several months later (and just after the birth of her son) that she had decided to no longer allow Yahoo employees to work from home. A wave of news media coverage around the apparent "fairness" of this choice made it clear that the decision by the media to frame Mayer as a mother first, CEO second might shape how the opinion of the general public is formed. Would people have been as upset about the revoking if Mayer had originally been covered in the media in a similar fashion as other technology company CEOs? Or, did this response come because she was characterized as a mother first, CEO second?

Today, most newsrooms are stretched thinner than ever. Reporters barely have time to write a story before they have to move on to the next one, and news outlets now have multiple

platforms – traditional, digital and mobile – with which to keep up. However, the media still play a powerful role in influencing public opinion and our understanding of the world. Over time, the frames that the media choose to use when writing a story, the language that is used to describe a person or topic and the placement of certain stories all contribute to what readers, viewers and audiences think about that person or topic. In the case of Mayer, was the reason for the backlash around the decision to revoke Yahoo’s work-from-home policy actually a response to initial media coverage of her as a mother? Does this media coverage reveal concerns about the ability of a working mother to effectively lead a Fortune 500 company? How might these concerns impact future female CEOs?

This study will seek to explore the potential implications of media coverage of female CEOs through a critical textual analysis of traditional and digital media coverage of Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer. The study will primarily focus on four major media “episodes,” including when Mayer was named CEO of Yahoo, her maternity leave, the decision to revoke Yahoo’s work-from-home policy, and Mayer’s first feature article, published in *Vogue*. Through a critical textual analysis, this study seeks to explore the following major research question: How might the media framing of Marissa Mayer as the CEO of Yahoo reveal hegemonic ideologies concerning female CEOs?

Literature Review

To fully understand any set of communicative practices, it is necessary to situate them within the contested historical and material contexts that have co-constructed, suppressed, and/or resisted particular ways of understanding such practices (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003). Several media-related theories have helped shape the context of this study, including cultivation theory,

agenda-setting theory and framing theory. After reviewing research on each of these three theories, I will then examine existing research on gendered language as the topic of my study. Finally, I will review research on “the gendered CEO” and conclude with additional research questions to be examined as part of this study.

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory was developed by George Gerbner, Professor of Communications and Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, who was interested in media analysis as, “the study of the relationships between institutional processes, message systems, and the public assumptions, images, and policies that they cultivate” (Gerbner, 1970, p. 71). He defined the cultural transformation during his early studies as a transition from, “the industrial-technological revolution into the sphere of message production” (Gerbner, 1970, p. 69). During the early 1970s, American culture was shifting as technology allowed for messages to be spread more quickly than ever through various forms of media – particularly through the growth of broadcast television. Gerbner’s research centered on the production and distribution of messages out of concern that decisions about those messages were being made more rapidly than ever (1970, p. 69). He suggested that analyzing “cultural indicators” was important to communication, public policy and even socialization (Gerbner, 1970, p. 69), and he defined cultural indicators as, “indicators of the mass-produced symbolic environment that I call the common culture” (p. 70). In other words, he wanted to better understand the various messages and symbols that were shaping the cultural understanding and attitudes of most Americans at the time. What Gerbner theorized was that large companies that owned media outlets were making decisions that were shaping American culture, and that there was little

diversity of opinion on the topic. He argued that, “a mass produced message system is the result of institutional processes selecting some things to be brought to public attention and ignoring or rejecting others” (Gerbner, 1970, p. 73).

As Gerbner (1970) looked at some of the common assumptions that message systems cultivate over time and how those assumptions might shape public affairs, he developed three areas of analysis:

- Message systems analysis, which studies “the composition and structure of large bodies of mass mediated messages,”
- Institutional process analysis, which studies “organizational forms, functions, and decision-making that compose and structure these systems,” and,
- Cultivation analysis, which studies “the relationships between institutional processes, message systems, and the public assumptions, images, and policies that they cultivate” (Gerbner, 1970, p. 71).

Thus, cultivation analysis was born. Gerbner (1970) explained cultural indicators in the following words:

“These indicators will not necessarily tell us what people think or do. But they will tell us what most people think or do something *about* and in *common*, and suggest reasons why... They will help to understand, judge, and shape more intelligently the changing symbolic climate that affects all we think and do” (p. 81).

At the request of the National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence, Gerbner (1969) chose to study cultural indicators and message system trends through the lens of violence on television. Though he chose to study the issue of violence to illustrate the need for cultural indicators research and analysis, the same could be applied to other issues or topics

featured in any mainstream media (Gerbner, 1970, p. 81). In fact, over time, the Cultural Indicators project expanded and took on a wide range of topics and ideas (Gerbner, et al. 1986).

Gerbner (1973) explained that cultural indicators may not only be helpful for policy-makers, but may also be helpful to the general public, “in arriving at sounder judgments concerning the role of mass communications” (p. 556). Gerbner (1973) explored the institutional roles, relationships and centers of power represented in mass media through institutional process analysis (p. 562). He described message system analysis as a scheme that provides a framework for gathering and reporting “comprehensive, cumulative and comparative information about mass-mediated message systems” (Gerbner, 1973, p. 566). After institutional process analysis and message system analysis, cultivation analysis investigates, “the contributions that these systems and their symbolic functions make to the cultivation of assumptions about life and the world” (Gerbner, 1973, p. 567).

Culture, context and time are all taken into consideration in cultivation analysis, which is a long-term focused approach to mass communication research (p. 569). Gerbner & Marvanyi (1977) reiterated this point when studying foreign news media systems, saying that, “we must assume that the ability of different people to relate to each other depends largely on what they know – or think they know – about each other” (p. 4). A 1978 study that used cultivation analysis to determine representation of women and minorities in public broadcast programming concluded with a plea for annual or bi-annual check-ins in order to, “consistently monitor changes in programming practices” (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1978, p. 59).

Most cultural indicators research must be done over a period of time to show shifts, changes or inconsistencies. After all, “it takes but a few degrees shift in the average temperature to have an ice age” (Gerbner et al., 1986, p. 21). Cultivation theory focuses on cumulative,

consistent exposure to generalized messages, values and images of a culture, and is based on the, “persistent and pervasive pull of the television mainstream” (Gerbner, et al., 1986, p. 21).

Cultivation is a process that is multidirectional, interactional, dynamic, and gravitational (Gerbner, et al., 1986).

As the Cultural Indicators Project continued into the 1990s, Gerbner (1995) stayed consistent in focusing on “recurrent and inescapable images of the mainstream of the cultural environment in which we all live and which contribute to the shaping of power relations in society” (p. 125). The findings of cultural indicators research of images of women and minorities on television indicated, decades after the first cultural indicators project, that mainstream television images were “frozen in a time-warp of obsolete and damaging representations,” (Gerbner, 1995, p. 133). However, Gerbner (1995) warned that, as media mergers continue and media outlets are being driven more and more by marketing, content may be homogenized and alternative perspectives swept by the wayside (p. 134).

Since 2000, hundreds of cultivation research studies have been conducted. As of 2010, the most widely-known version of the “cultivation hypothesis” stated that, “those who spend more time watching television are more likely to perceive the real world in ways that reflect the most common and recurrent messages of the world of fictional television” (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 337). According to Morgan and Shanahan (2010), we are, “living in a symbolic environment in which certain types of institutions with certain types of objectives create certain types of messages, tends to cultivate (support, sustain, and nourish) certain types of collective consciousness” (p. 339). Current developments in cultivation research include genre-specific cultivation, fear of crime, cognitive explorations and narrative implications, and gender roles (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). As the media environment continues to change, cultivation

analysis is more relevant than ever, and, “while the number of channels continues to multiply (mostly for marketing purposes), the need to pay attention to their common messages and lessons becomes even more urgent” (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010, p. 350).

Agenda-Setting Theory

Former newspaper reporters Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw developed agenda-setting theory as the result of a study of the 1968 presidential election and an understanding that, “the information in the mass media becomes the only contact many have with politics” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 176). In what is now known as the "Chapel Hill study," researchers found a significant correlation between what a group of undecided voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina thought was the most important public issue and what issues were being reported by the news media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). They hypothesized that “the mass media set the agenda for each political campaign, influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues” (McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). While McCombs & Shaw were certainly not the first to theorize that the media has an impact on people’s opinions or understandings of topics, (see Lippman, 1922 and Cohen 1963), they were the first to formalize an agenda-setting hypothesis based on the results of the Chapel Hill study.

Agenda-setting theory grew and expanded quickly over the next couple of decades as more researchers became intrigued by the impact of indirect media effects. McCombs and Shaw went to the field again in 1977 with two objectives: to replicate their original findings on the basic agenda-setting hypothesis, and to investigate the contingent conditions that enhance or limit media agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw 1993). Several other researchers (see Weaver, Graber, McCombs, Eyal, 1981) carried agenda-setting hypotheses into the 1976 election season,

and extended the idea of agendas into candidate characteristics, which later developed into attribute agenda setting (McCombs 1993, 2005). As scholars used the agenda-setting theory to illuminate their own studies, research in this area became more widespread, appearing in “a number of social science, communication, and journalism subfields” (McCombs, 1993, p. 60).

Rogers and Dearing (1988) outlined three types of agenda setting:

- Public agenda setting, in which the public's agenda is the dependent variable (traditional hypothesis)
- Media agenda setting, in which the media's agenda is treated as the dependent variable (agenda building)
- Policy agenda setting, in which elite policy makers' agendas are treated as the dependent variable (political agenda setting)

Agenda-setting theory focused on the interdependent relationship of these three publics – the general public, the media, and ultimately those who create policy. In other words, “the agenda-setting process is an ongoing competition among the proponents of a set of issues to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites” (Rogers & Dearing, 1996, p. 6). However, no matter how definitions of agenda setting changed, the issue of salience remained central. “The heart of the agenda-setting process is when the salience of an issue changes on the media agenda, the public agenda or the policy agenda” (Rogers & Dearing, 1996, p. 8).

Researchers turned to agenda-setting theory more frequently as it illuminated the concept of corporate or CEO reputation, which was found to directly impact a company or organization's bottom line (Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Both the influence of news media on awareness and recognition of a company or a CEO, and the influence of the attributes and descriptions used in

the news media are important to monitor, as they may impact behavior and/or stock market pricing (McCombs, 2005, p. 553).

McCombs (2005) stated that, “this research has grown far beyond its original domain – the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda – and now encompasses five distinct stages of theoretical attention,” including basic agenda-setting effects, attribute agenda setting, psychology of agenda-setting effects, sources of media agenda and consequences of agenda-setting effects (p. 543). Each of these areas of agenda-setting research continues to be studied and expanded upon, particularly as the agenda of the news media continues to be analyzed as it takes on new digital and mobile forms. McCombs argued that the agenda of the news media may, in fact, not be as diverse as others claim. McCombs (2005) explained that, “it would hardly be surprising to find that online sites present agendas that largely match the agendas of traditional news media and that the online sites show considerable resemblance to each other” (p. 545). However, he reminded us that the transfer of salience remains central to agenda setting in both traditional and attribute agenda-setting effects. McCombs (2005) stated it this way:

The core proposition for these two stages, sometimes called the first and second levels of agenda setting, is that elements prominent on the media agenda become prominent over time on the public agenda. The media not only can be successful in telling us what to think about, they can also be successful in telling us how to think about it (p. 546).

Jeffres, Neuendorf, Bracken, and Atkin (2008) integrated cultivation and agenda setting using the third-person effect. They found a larger third-person effect with cultivation-related issues than with agenda setting, and argued that this suggests that “audiences recognize differences in how media affect them” (p. 488). In other words, readers may understand that

messages delivered through media may have a specific impact on them, including potential for motive. This sets the stage for even further research into each of these theories, with particular emphasis on emerging technologies.

Framing Theory

News media frequently use “framing” to shape public opinion of a phenomenon, object or person. In communication research, the concept of framing has been discussed and studied for decades (see Bateson, 1972, Hackett, 1984). However, framing lacked a central, clear definition until 1993, when scholar Robert Entman sought to give the concept an agreed-upon definition. Entman (1993) argued that as a multi-disciplinary concept, framing “illuminates the precise way in which influence over a human consciousness is exerted by the transfer (or communication) of information from one location-such as a speech, utterance, news report, or novel-to that consciousness,” (p. 51-52). He defined framing as a process by which we “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). In other words, the choosing of particular aspects of a story, for example, and the telling of those aspects are how one might frame that story.

Entman (1993) also defined the locations in the communication process where framing takes place: the communicator, the text, the receiver and the culture. Frames “define problems,” “diagnose causes,” “make moral judgments,” and “suggest remedies” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). News media frequently act as the communicator, text and culture for audiences, therefore

allowing many to play the role of passive receivers and allowing media frames to become public opinion.

Reese, Gandy and Grant (2001) found that news media often rely on well-known frames, or scripts, that function as “organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world” (p. 11). Readers can find common scripts in many news articles, broadcasts and posts – scripts that may be a combination of phrases or images. Reese, Gandy and Grant (2001) made an important distinction between media framing and media bias, noting that framing is more complicated and more sophisticated than simple bias, which may be pro or con, positive or negative. Instead, “framing adds the possibilities of additional, more complex emotional responses and also adds a cognitive dimension (beliefs about objects as well as attitudes)” (Reese, et al., 2001, p. 96). The authors (2001) also argued that media framing, “recognizes the ability of a text – or a media presentation – to define a situation, to define the issues, and to set the terms of a debate” (p. 96). These small differences between framing and bias are difficult to define but very meaningful, and have encouraged some researchers to take a harder look into the hypothesis of media hegemony, “a situation in which one frame is so dominant that people accept it without notice or question” (Reese, et al., 2001, p. 96). If audiences do not know that the stories they hear are being framed in specific ways, and if they hear those stories over and over again with similar frames, then their opinions on the issue at hand may already be shaped for them.

Research on media framing is a constant work in progress. Ideas about different types of frames (generic, gendered, or issue-specific, for example) are pinpointed and researched every day. DeVreese (2005) alleged that, “the empirical contributions [to framing research] are flourishing resulting in heterogeneity in terms of findings and theory advancements” (p. 60). Just

as communication is an ongoing process, media framing, “is not static, but rather a dynamic process that involves frame-building (how frames emerge) and frame-setting (the interplay between media frames and audience predispositions),” (deVreese, 2005, p. 51). However, frames are not always meant to influence public opinion in a negative way. In fact, they allow the media to “construct stories that not only ring true to their audiences but also are compelling and engaging narratives about the world in which we live” (Burns, 2008, p. 8). News media co-construct narratives that include the major and minor characters, plot lines, and settings; but they do so with limited space and time, making scripts a necessity in creating great stories (Burns, 2008).

Stephanie Norander (2008) went a step further to explain the media-framing phenomenon when she wrote that, “in other words, media representations are inseparable from daily life” (p. 101). When the news media represent one aspect of a leader’s life, for example, that representation becomes the lens through which readers/listeners/viewers think about that leader as a subject or text. “News and popular media provide us with a cluster of histories, anecdotes, and other narrative fragments that solidify into taken-for-granted knowledge and assumptions about organizations and the people that populate them” (Norander, 2008, p. 101). That taken-for-granted knowledge has significant power. “The creation and distribution of news media represent acts of power, leading to discursive formations, or social texts, which generate and set boundaries for persons’ subjectivities” (Norander, 2008, p. 101).

Khan and Blair (2013) gave an example of the framing phenomenon by claiming that, “the co-construction of Bill Clinton’s campaign role in the 2008 Democratic Presidential Primary results in media coverage of President Clinton that consistently frames his actions as the popular, patriarchal head of the Democratic Party” (p. 57). The authors maintained that the media

coverage came as a result of media scripts that “rely on gendered discourses of the presidency” and could have potentially resulted in the defeat of Hilary Clinton in the 2008 primary (Khan & Blair, 2013, p. 57). This particular example shows how something as simple as media framing could, over time and repetition, result in unintended public opinion and sometimes-dramatic consequences.

Gendered Language/Gendered Mediation

A wide array of research has been conducted over decades about the images and messages that news media create and the process of message production in the news. The process of message production creates images that “can be treated as texts that take many forms – visual imagery, sound, and language” (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992, p. 397). This study will focus on the subtleties of the language that news media use when describing a female public figure – in other words, the gendered language choices of the media. However, as pointed out by Gamson, et al., (1992), tracking the underlying messages in texts is difficult due to the, “problem of layers of meaning” (p. 380). “One cannot take texts at face-value since they contain sub-texts; a whole set of texts may have an even more invisible metamessage” (Gamson, et al, 1992, p. 381). Focusing on gendered language helps the researcher understand what meaning may lie behind specific texts and language choices, including the meaning that may be “naturalized,’ that is, it comes to us in the form of taken-for-granted assumptions” (Gamson, et al., 1992, p. 380-381).

Studies of gender representation and messages in news media became more prevalent in the late 1990s when the concept of “gendered mediation” was introduced, representing, “a new phase in the study of women, politics, and the media,” (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999, p. 48). Not to

be confused with stereotyping by news media, Gidengil & Everitt (1999) asserted that gendered mediation is a “more subtle but arguably more insidious form of bias” that applies existing frames (in this case, political frames) to female leaders (p. 49). Often, these frames “reflect men’s traditional dominance,” causing the Gidengil & Everitt (1999) to ask about the implications of females being framed in traditionally masculine ways (p. 49).

Another way in which researchers have come to understand the concept of gendered mediation is through “gendering,” which, “refers to the highlighting of a person’s gender, when this is not particularly relevant to the context” (Devere & Davies, 2006, p. 65). According to Devere & Davies (2006), gendering involved understanding male gendered language as the “norm” and female gendered language as remarkable in one way or another (p. 65). In media coverage, gendering included under-representation of women, or “an emphasis on their appearance, marital and maternal status, and personality rather than the policies and issues of debate” (Devere & Davies, 2006, p. 66). Researchers may consider this emphasis on specific characteristics similar to attribute agenda setting, since in both cases, specific attributes relative to the public figure’s gender are called out, regardless of the relevancy to the issue at hand. While much of the existing research on gendered mediation has focused on media coverage of the political arena, many of the findings apply to other female public figures that have experienced that, “the focus on their status as wives and mothers is paramount” (Devere & Davies, 2006, p. 68).

Some may understand gendered mediation as a more cognizant “type of framing that results when journalists use language differently depending on the sex of an individual or the gender-relevance of an issue” (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008, p. 398). Gendered mediation often occurs when discrepancies are found in the amount and/or content of reporting based on gender

of the person who is the topic of coverage (Burke & Mazzarella, 2008, p. 398). Burke & Mazzarella (2008) explored the “gatekeepers” of journalistic practice, those who “make decisions about which stories to cover to begin with, as well as which stories are worthy of that lead slot” (p. 410). The gatekeepers are frequently editors who have the final say on what gets printed and what is left out.

Sumi Kim (2008) argued that feminist media studies over the years identified repeatedly that the media represents women as either sex objects or homemakers (p. 393). Even though feminism has become more popular in recent years, media representations have served to reify dominant patriarchal codes, whether or not that was the intended outcome (Kim, 2008, p. 393). The hegemonic role of mass media remains powerful.

Khan and Blair (2013) found in their study of the traditional gender scripts that functioned to reinforce hegemonic discourses about Bill and Hilary Clinton that, “though Bill Clinton may have sought to play the role of supportive spouse...his actions in concert with the media framing of this support reflected traditional gender scripts and functioned to reinforce a link between the presidency and hegemonic masculinity” (p. 67). The intention of the news media is certainly not always the outcome that results from the media’s use of scripts or frames, as is the case in many studies of gendered language usage in media. There is a discrepancy within existing research about gendered mediation – whether or not news media reporters and those who are involved in the process try to treat each gender equally, or whether gendered mediation comes as such second nature that it is done without intention. Gidengil & Everitt (1999) stated that, “we should emphasize that we are not suggesting that this is a conscious process. On the contrary, we assume that reporters and anchors consciously strive to be fair and objective” (p. 53). Regardless of whether the news media consciously or sub-consciously use

traditional gender language or gendered mediation, it has been shown time and time again to reinforce cultural gender norms.

The Gendered CEO: Gendered representation of female CEOs

Norander (2008) stated that HP CEO Carly Fiorina, “represents a relatively new discursive formation – the regime of woman CEO” (p. 100). Fiorina became CEO of Hewlett-Packard Company in July 1999, and became the first woman to lead one of the 20 largest public corporations in the United States (Norander 2008). Norander (2008) argued that, when required to write about a relatively new concept or issue, news media are unable to use “often taken-for-granted gendered leadership scripts” (p. 100). Instead, media may fall back on existing gendered scripts about women, or perhaps be forced to find another way to frame female CEOs.

Norander (2008) was among the first to investigate the “gendered CEO” from the perspective of widespread news media coverage. This is likely due to the fact that women did not hold the role of CEO for large public corporations in the United States until Fiorina was named so. Nonetheless, media coverage of CEOs in general paved the way for research concerning “the gendered CEO,” particularly in building the scripts and frames about CEOs that continue to be repeated today.

Research on the role of CEOs in the news media dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, and grew alongside the growth of the public relations profession (Arnold 1988). News media began looking to company CEOs as spokespersons and CEOs began looking to news media as a communication channel. Arnold (1988) said it best when he explained that, “if the 1970s showed how a company’s financial performance could be affected by non-economic events, the 1980s are showing how a company’s communications can have an impact on profits, marketing

effectiveness and productivity” (p. 6). According to Arnold (1988), “a 1976 Conference Board study revealed that 89 percent of CEOs believe public perception is critical to the success of their company” (p. 7). However, even as CEOs were beginning to understand the importance and impact of the news media on their companies, very few researchers focused on the media coverage of CEOs until a 2004 study that focused on the coverage of CEO images in news media between 1990 and 2000. The study by Park & Berger (2004), “contributes to a thin literature on the topic by developing a baseline of data about CEOs and press coverage” (p. 93). Initial findings revealed that some CEOs became “media stars” in the 1990s as news coverage about CEOs increased overall (Park & Berger, 2004). Often, CEOs were “personalized” in the media during the 1990s, as “the personalization aspect was apparent in the number of CEO personal stories or features in the sample and in the frequency of the personal image dimension in coverage” (Park & Berger, 2004, p. 115). However, the article did not once allude to differences in coverage of male and female CEOs, further clarifying a need to research gendered media coverage of CEOs.

Research about women in the role of CEO will change over time, as it becomes less and less of a phenomenon and more culturally accepted that women and men may serve equally well as CEOs. As Khan and Blair (2013) stated, “evaluating cultural discourses as static...proves detrimental to a nuanced understanding of the dynamic nature of social constructs” (p. 58).

The gendered CEO is a topic worth revisiting, which is why this study will seek to answer these sub-questions in addition to the primary research question:

1. Does the media framing of Marissa Mayer include gendered language, which may reveal underlying hegemonic meaning and/or ideologies?

2. Does the media framing of Marissa Mayer set an agenda for social discourse about women in the role of CEO?

Method

This study consisted of a textual analysis of traditional and digital media coverage of Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer to explore the potential implications of media coverage of female CEOs. The study will primarily focus on four major media “episodes,” including:

1. When Marissa Mayer was named CEO of Yahoo (July 16, 2012)
2. Marissa Mayer’s maternity leave (Sept-Oct 2012)
3. The decision to revoke Yahoo’s work-from-home policy (Feb 2013)
4. When Marissa Mayer was featured in an article published in *Vogue* (Aug-Sept 2013)

These four episodes were chosen because they each represent time periods when popular press covered Mayer and because they represent a variety of topics (CEO hiring, maternity leave, an HR decision and backlash from a feature article).

Procedure

As opposed to quantitative content analysis, qualitative textual analysis helps the researcher to capture the context in which the media text becomes meaningful. “Media texts present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding that justifies special scholarly engagement. The narrative character of media content, its potential as a site of ideological negotiation and its impact as mediated ‘reality’ necessities interpretation in its own right” (Fursich 2009, p. 238). For the purpose of this study, I chose to focus solely on the media text for textual analysis rather than the decisions of reporters or editors before a story is

published, or the reactions of readers or audience members. The media content is worthy of analysis on its own, for the content itself provides insight and, when studied along with a set of media articles, can reveal cultural ideologies.

Sample

To conduct periodical archival research, I chose the *Newspaper Source Plus* database, which contains the full text of articles in over 149 national and international newspapers, including *The New York Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *USA Today*, and *the Washington Post*; and contains selected full text from 410 additional U.S. newspapers and transcripts of radio and television broadcasts. I searched for “Marissa Mayer,” which came up with hundreds of results. I limited the search to only include articles that were published during each of the media “episodes” outlined above, that had the full text available, and that were sourced from U.S.-based newspapers, radio and television broadcast television transcripts. I also limited the searches to only include articles published within the first few days after news about the episode broke (some media events happened on a specific day, such as the naming of Mayer as CEO; and others were stretched out to a few weeks, such as her maternity leave – I focused on the first articles published on the topic at hand). If one of the articles included directly referenced another article, I made sure to include it on the list as well.

The *Newspaper Source Plus* database does not include every single article published about Marissa Mayer or the work-from-home debate during the time frames outlined; however, the articles represented give a broad overview of the coverage by newspapers that have a high readership in the U.S. I left out articles that included Marissa Mayer on a list of board members and articles that mentioned her name as part of a list of news items but did not elaborate. I also

left out articles that were heavily technical and focused on the technology itself, rather than Mayer's decisions or leadership capabilities. The culling described resulted in a sample of more than 60 total articles.

Analysis

Selected media articles were analyzed using several techniques. First, the coverage within each media "episode" was examined through the lens of attribute agenda setting. A notation was made about what characteristics about Marissa Mayer were included (or not included), and how the inclusion of those characteristics may or may not have changed when compared to other articles within the same media episode. The primary facts and the ordering of those facts were determined, and any trends that were revealed over time were noted. For example, were facts about Mayer's gender or parental status included within the first paragraph of a majority of articles in each media episode? Within each media episode, what are the primary facts noted within the first sentence or paragraph? What might the ordering of those facts reveal about cultural ideology around female CEOs? Key words or phrases used within the articles – particularly language related to gender – were recorded and analyzed, with a focus on the implications of that gendered language. These techniques of analysis were similar to those used by Khan & Blair (2013) and Norander (2008).

By employing these techniques of analysis, the goal of this study was expose the use of gendered language through the media framing of Marissa Mayer, and to draw conclusions about how social discourse (using that gendered language) might reveal potential hegemonic ideologies about female CEOs.

Research Findings

This study consisted of a textual analysis of the media coverage surrounding Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer during four major media episodes. The analysis covered a total of 62 articles using the sample and methodology previously described.

Media Episode 1: Another New CEO for Yahoo

The first media episode was triggered when Mayer was named the new CEO of Yahoo on July 16, 2012. What began as a fairly standard CEO announcement became the focus of a larger media story around working parents when it was revealed a few hours later that Mayer was pregnant with her first child.

Twenty-one articles were analyzed for this media episode, each of which were published within three days of the initial announcement about both Mayer's hiring and her pregnancy. Upon an initial reading of the articles, it is hard to miss the parallel narratives at play: the obvious challenge Mayer had ahead of her as CEO of a struggling company, and the potentially equal challenge of birthing and raising her first child. The undertone of each article asked the same question – would she be prepared to handle both of these challenges at the same time?

During the first few days after it was announced that Yahoo had chosen Mayer as CEO, the news focused heavily on Mayer – her credentials, her personality, and her personal life. Nearly every text included Mayer's name either as part of the headline or the first sentence. The *San Jose Mercury News* was the first outlet to publish the announcement of Mayer's hiring as Yahoo's newest CEO. In that initial article, there was no mention of Mayer's marital or parental status and no mention of her age or education, although she was aligned with Hewlett-Packard

CEO Meg Whitman, “as one of the most prominent female business leaders in Silicon Valley” (Owens, 2012, para. 1). A radio broadcast on *All Things Considered* (NPR) also called Mayer “one of the most powerful women in tech,” a theme that continued throughout the media coverage in this first episode (Sydell & Cornish, 2012, para. 8). The initial media narrative solidified Mayer’s story as another chapter within a larger story about women and work, even before the news broke later that day that Mayer was pregnant.

Early narratives about Mayer’s appointment as Yahoo CEO frequently mentioned that several other CEOs had been chosen to lead Yahoo during the previous few years – an indication of skepticism about whether she could handle a position in which many others had failed to thrive. One broadcaster pointed out that Mayer would be Yahoo’s fifth CEO in four years, (Hudson & Gharib, 2012, Mayer section, para. 1). Another commented that, “I think having a baby and running a company and trying to put on a massive turnaround is going to be pretty challenging” (Phillips & Harlow, 2012, para. 7).

While the media coverage makes it clear that Mayer was already well-known among the technology industry, calling her a “tech world star,” the announcement of her pregnancy created a need for popular press to dig deeper into discovering a bit more about her (Henn, 2012, para. 1). After the news of Mayer’s pregnancy broke in *Fortune* magazine, which included a comment that Mayer planned to take a short maternity leave and work throughout it, Cornish (2012) summed up a shift in tone by noting that, “as you can imagine, [the maternity leave comment] has amplified this moment as a significant one in the history of women leaders in Silicon Valley” (para. 2).

The *Fortune* magazine article not only broke the news that Mayer was pregnant, it also went into detail about her relationship with her husband and the process that Mayer went through

to break the news to the Yahoo board (Sellers, 2012, para. 8). In the article, Mayer notes that the Yahoo board had not shown concern about hiring her while she was pregnant, saying, “they showed their evolved thinking,” (Sellers, 2012, para. 7). The article’s construction reveals that the author, Patricia Sellers, anticipated that the audience would want to know whether the board knew about the pregnancy before they made the offer, and how board members felt about the decision to hire Mayer while she was pregnant. The article ends with a note that the board did choose to move their September board meeting to California from NYC to accommodate Mayer’s due date – a sign that, even though they say they support hiring a pregnant CEO, some concessions would have to be made (Sellers, 2012, para. 11).

Once the announcement about Mayer’s pregnancy was made, a second parallel narrative about how difficult her job would be began to emerge in media coverage. Several reports continued to focus solely on the idea that Yahoo was a struggling company that would be difficult to turn around, and wondered aloud whether Mayer would be a good fit, considering her background at Google and her strengths in engineering and design (without mentioning her pregnancy). “Admirers of the veteran Google executive say Mayer has the engineering credentials to reinvigorate Yahoo’s embattled workforce and develop new technology products to help the company compete...some questioned whether Mayer has the expertise for that job” (Bailey, 2012, para. 3). Many tech industry-focused articles carefully left out details about Mayer’s job, family or pregnancy, and focused solely on her education and background as the measures by which her feasibility as CEO should be determined.

Other reports focused on Mayer’s life, noting everything from how many college acceptances and job offers she received to how she likes her cupcakes and how many houses she and her husband looked at before choosing one (May, 2012, para. 1). An article in *USA Today’s*

Money section was one of the first to combine the two parallel narratives and begin aligning the two challenges at hand, claiming Yahoo's decision to hire Mayer was in hopes of "birthing an improbable comeback" (Swartz, 2012, para. 1). The phrasing used here is an unmistakable pairing of these two narratives. When describing Mayer's decision to leave her position as a VP at Google, another report again used maternal terminology: "Mayer...abruptly cut the cord with the search giant she had helped raise nearly from birth as employee No. 20 and as its first female engineer" (May, 2012, para. 5). The fact that this media coverage used maternal terminology to describe Mayer is notable and begs the question, would they have used similar terminology had Mayer not been pregnant?

Media coverage during this first media episode also paints an image of Mayer as smart and very intentional about her choices, carefully balancing between masculine and feminine imagery. "Driven and sharply competitive, Mayer is really two personalities" (May, 2012, para. 9). She is portrayed as fashionable, a risk-taker, and a self-proclaimed "geek." In two articles, masculine imagery was used to describe Mayer. One painted an image of Mayer as the captain of a ship, claiming that she had, "inherited a wayward ship with an uncertain future," (Swartz, 2012, To-do list section, para. 11). Another claimed that Mayer was a master technologist (Ward-Bailey, 2012, para. 5). Feminine imagery included stories about Mayer's love of fashion and her idea of a perfect cupcake.

As media coverage began to focus on her pregnancy and her role as a female tech CEO, they pointed to previous interviews in which Mayer had played down her role as a female leader and played up her identity as a passionate technology nerd. The maternity leave comment was not the first time that Mayer had touted her workaholic side. "I think Silicon Valley is a great place for women. But that said I tend to think of my experience there, especially at Google, not

as one of a woman but as a geek” (King, O’Donnell & Rose, 2012, para. 6). She often shifted questions about women in the tech industry in a similar fashion, and her comment about a short maternity leave may have been an attempt to steer the conversation again toward the work instead of her gender. The media coverage reveals that Mayer prefers to frame her experience through a work-related lens rather than through the lens of womanhood or motherhood, potentially separating herself from experiences of other women in similar positions. Whatever her intention, the media coverage reveals that Mayer’s pregnancy news was “shining the spotlight on working mothers” (King, O’Donnell & Rose, 2012, para. 2).

A couple of phrases that emerged multiple times during this media episode were that Mayer was one of Silicon Valley’s most famous faces and that she had been one of the spokespersons for employer Google. These phrases could reveal subtle tendencies toward Mayer’s looks and personality, particularly when coupled with some of Mayer’s attributes, such as her age and background information.

Much of the media coverage during this media episode also exposed hegemonic ideas about the “importance” or “weight” of work done outside the home when compared to work done inside the home. This is a theme that we will see crop up repeatedly throughout this analysis. The idea is that accomplishment is still more connected to work success than family or home success. In one reporter’s words about Mayer, “she’s clearly possessed of an ambition that allows her to accomplish loads more than I could ever dream” (Wilner, 2012, para. 9).

Media Episode 2: Birthing a turnaround

The second media “episode” focuses on fourteen articles written during the three weeks immediately following the birth of Mayer’s son, Macallister Bogue, on Sept. 30, 2012. Media

coverage of the occasion continued the existing conversation about Mayer's ability to handle both the job of Yahoo CEO and the job of first-time mom, while Yahoo's decision to hire her while pregnant was hailed in one account as a "breakthrough for women" (Leidtke, 2012, para. 4). The tone of the media coverage during this media episode is one of cautious celebration – the baby is born, and there is good news for Yahoo ahead, but it is still very early and there are many challenges that remain for the company.

As soon as it was announced that Mayer had given birth to a son, media coverage revisited the narrative of Mayer's path to Yahoo, reiterating how the news about her pregnancy "amplified the buzz" around her move, and how Yahoo's decision to hire a "soon-to-be mom as its CEO was hailed as a breakthrough for women" (Leidtke, 2012, para. 3). Media coverage also began to look past the pregnancy to the next big step for the company – a third-quarter earnings call that was scheduled for October 22, just three weeks later. Echoing earlier reports about Mayer's decision to take a very short maternity leave, a Yahoo spokesperson assured reporters that Mayer would be back in the office full-time in one or two weeks.

As anticipation began to build leading up to the earnings call, several reporters speculated about whether Mayer could handle the two jobs of CEO and first-time mom. One writer pointed out that attention around the birth, "intensifies the pressure as she tries to engineer a long-awaited turnaround," and, "she is likely to be surprised by some of the difficulties that torment working moms" (Leidtke, 2012, para. 8). An *Associated Press Top News* story even mentioned that her hiring caused people to wonder, "what her pregnancy meant for all working women" ("Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer," 2012, para. 4). The work-home balance debate continued in a *USA Today* article that speculated about how Mayer might handle taking a phone call from her son seven years in the future, asking, "does she take the call? The answer is yes" (Paddison,

2012, para. 1). The argument pointed out that 71 percent of moms with kids under age 18 are working moms, a signal that corporate life is changing and will continue to change, and that, “non-traditional hours are the new work day of the growing legions of women feeling called both to family and to the marketplace” (Paddison, 2012, para. 5). In the fall of 2012, it seemed as though no article could mention work/life balance and female executives without grouping many of the most well-known working moms together, comparing and contrasting their approaches and arguing for which approach might last. At the time of Mayer’s son’s birth, balance seemed to be a key word that many authors lifted up as the ideal. Interestingly, articles written during this time often left out any mention of Mayer’s husband or details about how Mayer planned to approach balancing work and home life.

As anticipation continued to build toward the earnings call and a fascination emerged concerning how Mayer would hold it together, a few writers took to the debate over working moms to help determine how Mayer’s legacy would be shaped. Would she simply be known as the woman who was named CEO while pregnant? Would she be known as the anti-Sheryl Sandberg? At the same time that Mayer went on her very short maternity leave, Sandberg announced her upcoming new book, *Lean In*, in which she gives a, “frank assessment of what it will take for women to move forward as equals to men” (Tiku, 2012, para. 5). A couple of articles about Sandberg’s approach used Mayer as an example of a seemingly opposite, “work-first” approach, which is framed as being a nearly impossible feat for most women (Tiku, 2012, para. 2). Interestingly, the articles written during this time period leave out information about Mayer’s previous mentoring relationships with emerging female leaders.

Within the first few days of Mayer’s birth announcement, a reporter leaked an email that Mayer had sent to close friends and family asking for input on the baby’s name, which led to

questions about whether she was intentionally trying to “crowdsource” the naming of her baby. While these articles might appear a bit trivial or random upon a first reading, a deeper look reveals that they continue the existing narrative that Mayer is a hip tech trendsetter. Faircloth (2012) noted that, “the company was making hay of the notion that Ms. Mayer is creating some hot new parenting trend by soliciting input,” (para. 3).

Two weeks after giving birth, Mayer returned to her Yahoo office full-time. What was her first order of business that day? Announcing a new hire in the position of Chief Operating Officer – a hire made from Google (like Mayer herself). Media coverage of the announcement quickly set a tone that Mayer was not going to pontificate publicly about the trials and tribulations of balancing work with motherhood. The first articles written about new COO Henrique de Castro revealed that Mayer’s first priority was to get right back to business (Leidtke, “Yahoo CEO raids Google,” 2012). In fact, the story that broke the news about Castro’s hire did not even mention the birth of Mayer’s son (Leidtke, “Yahoo CEO raids Google,” 2012). Just two days later, another company announcement was delivered by the media: Yahoo was planning to close their operations in South Korea. Once again, media coverage around this announcement focused on the business impact, and not on Mayer’s personal life.

On October 22, 2012, just three weeks after she gave birth to her son, Mayer led her first earnings call as Yahoo’s CEO. Headlines touting the results of the call were overwhelmingly positive. One even hailed Mayer as “well-respected” royalty, citing that, “Yahoo CEO starts reign with encouraging 3Q report” (Leidtke, 2012, headline). Through their articles, reporters covering the earnings call came across as genuinely excited to hear from Mayer and eager to understand her vision for the company moving forward. “Mayer, 37, underscored her determination to turn around Yahoo by returning to work just a few weeks after having her first

baby,” one article boasted (Leidtke, 2012, para. 3). Though Mayer’s pregnancy and motherhood news were no longer in the headlines of Yahoo articles, the fact that she had been able to pull off a positive earnings call and a strong first quarter while giving birth and setting a vision for the company seemed to prove to media that she might just have what it takes. At least, for now.

As mentioned, the Oct. 22 earnings call was also the first time that Mayer had publicly stated her vision for Yahoo’s future, focusing heavily on her desire to recruit and retain great talent and make Yahoo a “great place to work” – two points that were exposed in media coverage when Mayer was first hired (Leidtke, 2012, para. 20). While these are simple mentions in media coverage following the call, they bring to mind some deeper questions that may come up in the months to follow – what does a “great place to work” mean for Mayer?

On the whole, media coverage following the positive third quarter earnings call quickly moved away from questioning whether Mayer could handle both jobs, and focused more on Mayer’s job as CEO. This second media episode provided a shift in Mayer’s narrative – away from motherhood vs. work and toward a CEO challenged by a great task. Though the focus on her home life began to blur, the focus on the challenges at Yahoo began to come into sharp focus. Mayer had beaten early predictions by media and analysts alike, and had hailed the job as “tailor-made” for her, (Martin, 2012, para. 4). However, articles written near the end of this second media episode reveal some remaining questions, wondering, “can she [continue to] pull it off?” (Gharib & Hudson, 2012, para. 4).

Media Episode 3: A Controversial Debate on Working from Home

In late February 2013, just four months after Mayer’s maternity leave ended and after successful third-quarter earnings call, an internal Yahoo memo explaining a change in the

company's work-from-home policy was leaked to the press. The memo, which revoked the existing policy allowing some employees to work from home and implemented an in-the-office policy instead, sparked a national debate on the pros and cons of flexible working conditions, particularly for parents. Eighteen articles were analyzed for this third media episode focused on Marissa Mayer as the CEO of Yahoo, beginning on February 25, 2013 and covering the eight days following.

One of the first articles to break the news about the gutsy move by Mayer was a front-page *New York Times* piece that focused on Yahoo's competition with Google and Facebook, both of which "strongly stress in-person collaboration" (Miller & Rampell, 2013, para. 20). The writers laid out a central question that reverberated with readers and was echoed in articles to follow: does the ability to work from home lead to greater productivity, or inhibit innovation and collaboration (Miller and Rampell, 2013, para. 4)? Experts from across a wide spectrum of workplace examples were consulted as many wondered why a CEO (who also happened to be a new mother) would choose to make such a drastic decision.

According to media coverage around this episode, the decision to revoke Yahoo's work-from-home policy was not intended to spark debate outside of the company. The decision was shared via an internal memo meant for Yahoo employees, and only after it was leaked a few days later did it become the subject of controversy on a national scale. Yahoo responded to the debate with a simple statement: "This isn't a broad industry view on working from home. This is about what is right for Yahoo right now" (Miller, 2013, para. 2). Company spokespeople did not respond to media requesting more information, as they considered the memo and policy change an internal issue.

During her first few months as CEO, Mayer continually focused on the company in media interviews and avoided or reframed questions about work/life balance or her personal status as a working mother. Media coverage during the first two media episodes covered in this study reveal that Mayer considered herself a tech industry veteran whose goal was to attract talent and turn around a struggling Yahoo. However, with the immediate backlash against the decision to revoke Yahoo's work-from-home policy, it becomes clear that many workers – both inside and outside of Yahoo and the tech industry – were hoping that Mayer, “would make the business world more hospitable for working parents” (Miller & Rampell, 2013, para. 10). Mayer did not publically claim to be a champion for work/life balance, yet the media response in this third episode remained strongly divided on the issue, echoing assumptions that by hiring a pregnant CEO, Yahoo would prove to be an example for working moms with Mayer as a leading case study. One reporter noted that Yahoo was, “trying to distance itself from the broader national debate over workplace flexibility,” (Miller, 2013, para. 6). However, Mayer was a central figure in this debate, whether that position was her intention or not.

Upon an initial reading of the 18 articles in this episode, several themes about work flexibility emerge. One of those themes is the idea that working from home might prove to help productivity, but that working in face-to-face collaboration with team members may be the key to innovation. In several articles, Mayer's bold decision in the name of innovation gained respect, and as one outlet put it, “the need of companies to create the jobs of the future relies more on getting innovation right than on telecommuting or flextime” (*Christian Science Monitor* editorial board, 2013, para. 4). “In order to be what we would call a serial innovator...you need all hands on board,” another expert stated. “It's not an emotional decision” (Mates, et al., 2013). Expert after expert agreed with this line of thinking in subsequent articles, echoing the sentiment

that, “if you look at what actually makes people effective, still the biggest predictor is face-to-face communication” (Conan, 2013, para. 29).

Some articles highlighted the numerous benefits of telecommuting, specifically for productivity but also for a host of other reasons. One journalist listed specific benefits: “Telecommuting is a social good. It reduces the carbon footprint of lots of workers. It makes it easier for people with families to juggle work and home” (Carroll, 2013, para. 3). Others said that telecommuting might not fit for everyone, stating that, “the right employees are going to be disciplined whether they work from home or at an office” (Hall, 2013, para. 27). Put another way, “it goes back to...some people are capable of self-managing and can be far more productive working remotely, while others cannot” (Conan, 2013, para. 39). While much of the media coverage that emerged during this media episode centered on the question of whether at-home workers were productive, the central concept remained constant: this decision was yet another step in Yahoo’s attempt to turn itself around and compete with the likes of Google and Facebook. “This is not a productivity issue. It’s an innovation issue” (Mates, et al., 2013, Mayer section, para. 19).

In some cases, Mayer’s decision to scale back on allowing employees to work from home was hailed as a powerful and creative move, stating that, “in clamping down on remote work, Yahoo is going against the grain...telecommuting has more than doubled since 2005” (Noguchi, 2013, para. 19). One article even described Mayer as one of humanity’s “daring pioneers,” (*Christian Science Monitor* editorial board, 2013, para. 1). These characterizations of Mayer’s approach remain consistent with the previous two media episodes – Mayer is subtly being framed as consistently committed to doing whatever it takes to see Yahoo succeed, frequently by making unpopular, extreme choices.

A more subtle but important theme that emerged in this third media episode took a more ironic tone, pointing out the paradox that exists when a company that develops technology decides not to use available technology to use, “a cloud office rather than a conventional one” (Dowd, 2013, para. 7). In a move that some would consider a public relations stunt, one co-working company offered to help Yahoo employees re-enter the workplace by allowing them 10-day passes to use their offices. Would the backlash have been quite this strong if this decision had been made by a different kind of company that was not focused on communications technology?

It is notable that this decision was portrayed as controversial, when in the short time Mayer had been at the helm of Yahoo, the company had already seen positive financial results. At the time of this media episode in late February/early March 2013, the company’s stock price was up about 50 percent (Weise, 2013, para. 8). Despite this fact, comments about Mayer often took an “uber-woman” tone, linking her with Sheryl Sandberg as rich and saying, “the amount of household help they can afford to manage their family lives isn’t a reality for the vast majority of women and never will be” (Bamberger, 2013, para. 11). Some media coverage pointed to the luxuries afforded Mayer that are not afforded to most working women, including, “her penthouse atop the San Francisco Four Seasons, her Oscar de la Rentas and her \$117 million five-year contract” (Dowd, 2013, para. 8). Other comments included that Mayer, “seems oblivious to the fact that for many of her less-privileged sisters with young children, telecommuting is a lifeline to a manageable life” (Dowd, 2013, para. 8); or that, “most of us don’t have the salaries that Marissa Mayer has” (Conan, 2013, para. 50).

A few of the articles studied in this third media episode surrounding Mayer pointed out that the debate may have been escalated by the fact that Mayer was a woman and a mother.

Would the same amount of debate have occurred if the CEO had been male? At least one commenter leaned toward an answer, saying that, “on the other hand...if she were a man, I think the tone would be slightly different” (Ludden, 2013, para. 11). Another reporter pointed out that, “California-based Yahoo stirred debate because its decision was made by a female CEO, Marissa Mayer, 37, who last year returned to work just two weeks after having her first child” (Hall, 2013, para. 6). Were Mayer’s non-traditional, un-balanced work habits to blame for the escalation of the work-from-home policy reversal?

Media Episode 4: A Sexy and Successful CEO

The fourth and final media episode follows Mayer in mid-August 2013 after a lengthy feature article in *Vogue* was published, highlighting her first year as Yahoo’s CEO. The article, titled, “Hail to the chief,” featured a stylized photo of Mayer in a sleek blue dress and framed her as a smart, fashionable “geek” – echoing the same sentiments that were revealed when she was first announced in the role. The article expertly juxtaposes Mayer’s appearance, age and penchant for style and design with her attention to detail, love of numbers and unmatched drive, claiming that, “it might also strike you that the paradox of being both glamorous and a geek explains Mayer’s rapid progress in reviving what only a year ago looked like a moribund giant” (Weisberg, 2013, p. 824).

This article reveals that Mayer is strict about staying consistent with her messaging about the various topics that had been reported during the first year of her reign. For example, when asked about her decision to ban working from home, Mayer reiterated that, “she never meant it as any kind of larger statement about society, but simply as the right decision for Yahoo” echoing the responses that were given at the time the decision was made. She also stays

consistent in downplaying herself as a female role model for the technology industry, claiming that she “hadn’t noticed” what it felt like to be a leading woman, and that, “I really had just been very blind to gender...and I still am” (Weisberg, 2013, p. 825). The reporter calls Mayer’s bluff just slightly when she claims that she had not planned to become CEO of a huge technology company, but that, “it just sort of happened” (Weisberg, 2013, p. 825). Mayer’s claim that she is just a shy geek who likes coding is said to be quite an understatement considering her successes at Google.

The article goes a long way to humanize Mayer, who, during the previous three media episodes, was consistent about focusing on revealing more about her professional rather than her personal decisions. As part of the interview, she talked about her family and allowed the reporter to shadow her during meetings and parties, revealing more about her day-to-day life. The article ended on an optimistic and professional note, with Mayer rattling off a list of how Yahoo’s strengths match the “daily habits” of what most people do digitally (Weisberg, 2013, p. 897).

As news about the high-fashion photo shoot and subsequent *Vogue* article spread, several other media outlets took note. “Ms. Mayer, already a celebrity in Silicon Valley circles, was featured in a stylized photo shoot befitting a Hollywood star,” one reporter quipped (Alden, 2013, para. 2). The article went on to remind readers that Mayer had appeared in *Vogue* before, and that she, like several other female executives before her, “has long embraced her glamorous side” (Alden, 2013, para. 5). It also pointed out that the feature emphasized, “an angle that sometimes makes powerful women in business cringe: fashion choices” (Alden, 2013, para. 8). Other articles point out that this was the first in-depth interview she had given since taking over the CEO role, and that she covered several hot topics including motherhood, acquisitions, and a vision for the future of the company (Swartz, 2013, para. 2).

Media responses to the article once again focused on Mayer's position as a leading female role model, despite her attempts to remove herself from being framed as such in previous media coverage. Though she had downplayed her appearance in previous interviews, Mayer's depiction in the Vogue article and accompanying photograph was decidedly focused on a more glamorous, fashionable side of the CEO. Her words about being a geek were juxtaposed next to a photo of her posing as a fashion model – a depiction that was, “so far removed from most women's realities” (Drexler, 2013, para. 3). One argument wondered if the Vogue piece was an “affirmation” for Mayer, and others wondered why the response to a “flattering” and “sexed-up” photograph was so profound, (Drexler, 2013, para. 4-5). Once again, a move by Mayer drummed up debate on a national level about women in leadership positions.

It is interesting to note that, under Mayer's leadership, Yahoo had already been through major changes – most of which were highlighted in media coverage. Just as the Vogue story was published, another piece of good news for the company was revealed: that Yahoo had beaten Google in web traffic in July 2013. The news was a huge win for Mayer, and the media pointed out that fact, claiming, “it puts a badge of success on the firm's high-profile CEO, Marissa Mayer” (Trumbull, 2013, para. 2). When talking about Yahoo's focus on search results, Mayer focused once again on user experience – another testament to her ability to stick to stated goals (Trumbull, 2013). Somehow, the fact that Yahoo had beat out Google, no matter how insignificant the statistic, helped to validate that the company was, in fact, turning a corner.

Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to expose the use of gendered language through the media framing of Marissa Mayer, and to draw conclusions about how social discourse (using

that gendered language) might reveal potential hegemonic ideologies about female CEOs. This study focused on the subtleties of the language that news media use when describing a female public figure – in other words, the gendered language choices of the media – and how that language might reveal cultural ideologies. After analyzing media articles within the four media episodes identified, the following themes emerged.

The role of the media

Looking back over the four media episodes, it is hard not to notice that Mayer is quite savvy in how she uses media coverage to advance the image she wants to portray – for herself and for the company. According to media coverage, it seems that a major business announcement or win is almost always planned (or expected) around media episodes – the pregnancy and hiring announcement were made at the same time, the earnings call with positive news happened just after the birth of Mayer’s son, and a logo redesign was to be revealed just as the *Vogue* article was printed. Numerous other announcements, acquisitions, earnings reports and news items were posted constantly during the first year of Mayer’s reign. As news about Yahoo’s win over Google for traffic waned, Yahoo announced a redesign of its major sites and its logo. At the conclusion of her first year as CEO, media coverage of Yahoo certainly positioned Mayer as a “corporate rock star” in every sense of the phrase (Montagne, 2013, para. 3). However, media coverage during the media episodes did not simply focus on these endeavors. Instead, it set an agenda for social discourse about women in the role of CEO.

Mayer was quoted as saying that she hoped to attract talent and make Yahoo a “great place to work,” but media coverage in these four media episodes had yet to explore what a “great place to work” meant to Mayer. Instead, media coverage focused on Mayer’s decision to abolish

the work-from-home policy in place at Yahoo. In a statement, Yahoo said that the decision was not a broad view on working from home, but instead a move that was specific to Yahoo during a specific time. Yet media coverage on the topic stirred national debate about Mayer's decision. Media coverage steered the conversation and shaped public opinion.

Through this media analysis, it is clear that media still plays a powerful role in influencing public opinion and our understanding of the world. The hegemonic role of mass media remains influential in identifying and shaping our cultural understanding of gender roles. Regardless of whether the news media consciously or sub-consciously use traditional gender language or gendered mediation, this analysis reveals that media texts frequently reinforce cultural gender norms. Though Mayer seems to understand and take advantage of the role of the media in shaping public opinion about Yahoo, the underlying symbols and language around gender and motherhood have built public opinion about Mayer as a workaholic CEO who does not understand working mothers. She deflects questions and conversations about debates over work/life balance, and does not seem to recognize the power of the media's sub-texts and frames.

News media frequently act as the communicator, text and culture for audiences, therefore allowing many to play the role of passive receivers and allowing media frames to become public opinion. As already mentioned, there is an interdependent relationship between the media, advertisers and consumers. The role of the media is continuing to change, but the fact remains that it has a very powerful and influential hand in shaping public opinion in a culture that is flooded with messages.

Motherhood as a media frame

This study adds to the conversation about media framing, which Entman (1993) defined as the selection of specific aspects of a perceived reality and highlighting them in a communicating text in such a way as to define a problem, determine cause, imply morality or make recommendations. In other words, the media frame stories by choosing and telling certain aspects of a story. According to Burns (2008,) media frames allow media (reporters and editors) to determine what stories will ring true for and be engaging for readers. The choosing and telling of the motherhood lens of Mayer's story was notable in this study. News media acted as the communicator, text and culture for readers, allowing them to play the role of passive receivers and, over the time frame of one year, allowing media frames to influence public opinion.

Echoing Park & Berger (2004), this analysis contributes to a thin literature on the specific topic of CEOs and media. Through this analysis it became clear that the decision by the media to frame Mayer as a mother first, CEO second shaped public opinion about Yahoo's decision to revoke its work-from-home policy. Media framing and the language that was used to describe Mayer's role(s) contributed to what readers/viewers/audiences thought about both Mayer and the issues of working parents and female CEOs.

This study explored whether media coverage revealed concerns about the ability of a working mother to effectively lead a Fortune 500 company, and how those concerns might impact future female CEOs. By framing Mayer as mother first, CEO second, and by using gendered/motherhood language when describing Mayer's decisions at Yahoo, the media coverage revealed underlying hegemonic meaning and/or ideologies that absolutely set an agenda for social discourse about women in the role of CEO, as evidenced by the explosion of discourse around the work-from-home debate, a debate that Mayer herself did not plan to tackle

as part of her role. The framing of Mayer's non-traditional, un-balanced work habits was to blame for the escalation of the work-from-home policy reversal in popular press. The choosing and telling of Mayer's story reveals frames that, either consciously or sub-consciously, are unable to separate the idea of Mayer as a female CEO from the idea of Mayer as a mother.

One question that this analysis considered was whether media would have used similar terminology had Mayer not been pregnant. Considering the dominance of the motherhood frame that extended into each of the four media episodes, the answer is clear – the media would not have used similar terminology had Mayer not been pregnant, and would likely not have questioned Mayer's ability to balance her work and life as part of media coverage about the new CEO.

The Gerbner perspective: Understanding a culture

This textual analysis was similar to a cultivation analysis, as it studied, “the relationships between institutional processes, message systems, and the public assumptions, images, and policies that they cultivate” (Gerbner, 1970, p. 71). Media coverage of Marissa Mayer revealed unavoidable, repeated images of a hard-working, sometimes glamorous working mother who was framed as unbalanced and a risk-taker. The prevalence of motherhood messages and images associated with Mayer reveal much about today's cultural environment, especially as it relates to working mothers and the debate on working from home vs. working on-site. In order to better understand the prevalent ideals of today's culture, it is important to take notice of cultural indicators such as those that are revealed in media coverage. Applying a Gerbner perspective to cultural indicators would aid in tracking whether the hegemonic ideologies concerning gender and leadership roles have changed over the last several decades, or whether a shift in ideology is

moving at a much slower pace than anticipated. The goal of Gerbner's approach is to encourage readers to arrive at sounder judgments concerning the role of the media when it comes to shaping public opinion. Applying this lens to media coverage of Marissa Mayer reveals that it is impossible to separate the idea of female CEOs from the national work/life debate.

The growth and expansion of popular press media outlets is not likely to slow down at any point in the near future. Many media outlets have a goal of appealing to readers in order to impact sales. Readers on the media to shape broad public opinion, advertisers rely on the public to buy their products, and the media relies on advertisers to continue their existing business model. This cycle of message production dictates an urgent need to note and track common messages and symbols, using an approach that reveals the implications of such mass message production over time. Each article, story, and descriptor that is published adds to the public's understanding and often taken-for-granted assumptions about brands, individuals, organizations and culture. If neither the media industry, consumers of media, advertisers nor the government are able to take up the cause of continued cultural analysis, it may be left to academia to take up this important, culture-shaping work.

Conclusion

This textual analysis of media coverage of Marissa Mayer has added to academic literature that explores the power of the media, especially in regards to the power to shape social discourse and public opinion. A review of media-related academic literature reveals that this has been a topic of interest for researchers for at least a century. As the media landscape continues to change, so will the need for continued research around the power of media and content creation.

There are important implications that have resulted from this analysis. If Mayer's first year in office is a sign that women in leadership roles are still questioned in popular culture, it is important that the subject of media hegemony and the impact of media framing continue to be researched. Media coverage can serve as a cultural indicator about the role of women in leadership positions, as long as researchers continue consistent check-ins about this cultural indicator. Attention should continue to be paid to the attributes and descriptions that are used in media coverage of female CEOs and women in other leadership positions, as the coverage has been shown to impact behavior and pricing.

This analysis reveals large-scale concerns about the ability of a working mother to handle the running of a Fortune 500 company, which has implications on future female CEOs who might question whether a CEO position is a good fit for a mother. It also reveals that it is impossible to separate the idea of female CEOs from the national work/life debate. The framing of Mayer's non-traditional, un-balanced work habits was to blame for the escalation of the work-from-home policy reversal in popular press. Media coverage of Marissa Mayer uses gendered language and reifies hegemonic ideologies concerning gender.

This study will help nudge researchers into taking a harder look into the hypothesis of media hegemony, "a situation in which one frame is so dominant that people accept it without notice or question" (Reese, et al., 2001, p. 96). It is among the first studies to focus on the concept of the "gendered CEO," and reveals hegemonic ideology concerning traditional gender roles, specifically when it comes to motherhood and workplace leadership. If left unexamined, this existing cultural hegemony will continue, leaving little room for women to succeed in the C-suite.

Project Benefits

This study serves to advance the academic conversation around how word or phrase choice in media content, no matter how subconscious, may serve to shape public opinion and culture, specifically regarding gender. In addition, this study should help reporters, editors and content creators take a more critical look at the words and phrases they use in everyday reporting, narration and scripting. In early conversations with a local newspaper editor, it was noted that, because of the constraints on time and resources and because of her goal to “sell,” she has never thought critically about the impact of word choice in overall public opinion or social/cultural discourse over time. The results of this study reveal the power of gendered language in shaping public opinion and, therefore, the power of those who generate content in news media and elsewhere. It is not simply the influence of one reporter or editor over his or her readers – it is also the power of one phrase that “catches on” and is used time and time again to describe a person or phenomenon (especially if those words or phrases are used as part of a headline or lead sentence). Those phrases and words influence all of us, which brings up a second benefit of this study: audience criticism. We, as individuals, audience members, readers, community members and listeners should remain critical of the media content we absorb. This study should help all of us to realize that we digest content and tend to regurgitate the same content without fully processing the power and meaning of the words we choose to repeat. Thinking critically about these issues is a responsibility of both the media and the audience.

Limitations

This study is purposefully limited in scope, as the goal is to thoroughly analyze one example that may provide a glimpse into a larger trend. However, the scope of the study may

also prove to be a limitation, because there is no way to prove that the same phenomenon is happening in media coverage of other people or topics. In addition, this study is subject to researcher bias. While some gendered language may be obvious, language can also be interpreted subjectively at times. This study does not make assumptions about whether media (writers, editors, etc.) were purposefully using gendered language or setting an agenda. It also does not attempt to ask readers/viewers/listeners for their opinions about stories they experienced. It is limited to the media as the text that was being analyzed. Other limitations include a lack of gender notation for the authors of each article analyzed and a lack of understanding of the editorial process for each outlet.

Recommendations for Further Study

Several questions that arose within this study were not addressed, including whether the backlash over Yahoo's work-from-home policy would have been as strong if the decision to revoke the policy had been made by a different kind of company that was not focused on communications technology, and whether the same amount of debate would have occurred if the CEO had been male. Further studies might address these questions to expand upon this research. Other recommendations for future research include studying the relationship between gender of the author and the subject, the editorial processes for media outlets as they report on a series of stories, other CEOs, both female and male, representing companies in a variety of industries. To better understand the translation of hegemonic ideologies into popular culture, future research might also analyze the full spectrum of messages production and absorption, from the editorial meeting in the newsroom to the text itself and then to the consumer.

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Media Episode 4

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