

Chapter 8

Absent Women: Research on Gender Relations in IT Education Mediated by Swedish Newspapers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a study on the use of research based information on gender and IT education disseminated by Swedish newspapers between 1994 and 2004. The predominant content of the newspaper articles concerns the lack of women, and refers mostly to reports presenting statistics. A gender-blind discourse is almost nonexistent in the articles, meaning that the small proportion of women in IT education on the whole is understood as a problem. A masculinity-connoted discourse – assuming a close relationship between masculinity and technology – and a feminized discourse – based on the idea that women have qualities and skills important in the area of IT – are both given a significant voice, so that the link between masculinity and technology is strengthened and that a gender dichotomy is confirmed. However, a differentiated discourse, which acknowledges gender variations among women as well as men, has had little impact in the newspapers.

INTRODUCTION

Some ten years ago, somewhat surprisingly to most politicians, gender researchers, and educators, the proportion of women studying IT started to decrease. The decline started several years before the dot.com crisis, which therefore cannot explain it, and it occurred at about the same time in several countries in Western Europe (Valenduc et al., 2004)¹. Different

interpretations of the decline have been suggested, e.g. that young women find IT boring and are not interested in training for an IT job, or that young women believe that women are treated badly in the sector and therefore do not want to be part of it.

Media as Constructors of Social Reality

Television and daily newspapers are two of the main sources of information about the IT sector

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available to most people outside the sector. They do not, however, innocently reflect some kind of reality, but are influential producers of social reality, such as gender relations. Like all of us, the media participate in the everyday business of doing gender. The contributions of newspapers and television journalists, however, are the most widely spread, and their constructions of gender thus have an impact on a larger public. Television, making use of pictures as well as sound, is of course a more powerful medium than newspapers. Though younger persons read newspapers less often than elderly persons do, there is reason to believe that the traditional newspapers do have an influence also on young women.²

In order to discover what kind of information is disseminated about the ICT sector, the project *Gender relations and working conditions in the ICT sector*³ has conducted a systematic analysis of contents of Swedish newspaper articles between 1994 and 2004 as they discuss the ICT sector and women.

THE NEWSPAPERS

Four Swedish national newspapers were selected for the analysis: Svenska Dagbladet (SvD), Dagens Nyheter (DN), Aftonbladet (AB) and Computer Sweden (CS). Two of the newspapers – SvD and DN – are traditional morning papers, though both have lately changed to a tabloid format. AB, a traditional tabloid, used to be an evening paper, but is now published in the morning. CS is a newspaper explicitly covering IT-related information and is published three times a week. DN is politically liberal, SvD is politically conservative, AB is social democratic and CS is ‘politically neutral’. On the whole, SvD is the morning paper preferred by conservatives, DN has readers all over the political spectrum, while AB is the evening paper preferred by social democrats.⁴ The political leanings of these newspapers have an impact mainly on the edito-

rial page; the news desks of the papers make a point of being autonomous.

Database Searches

The *Presstext* database comprises all articles published in DN since 1994, the *Mediearkivet* database comprises articles from SvD and AB, also since 1994, and the *Affärsdata* database contains all articles published in CS since 1992. These databases have been used for article searches in the papers for a ten-year period, from 1994 to June 2004. The search criteria used were ‘wom* and IT’ (in Swedish ‘kvinn* and IT’). The Swedish kvinn* captures kvinna (woman), kvinnor (women) as well as kvinnlig (female) and kvinnlighet (femininity).

More than 7,000 articles in the four newspapers matched the search criteria. In quite a few of these articles, the ‘IT’ hit did not refer to information technology at all, but, for example, to post-*it* notes or, more often, to ‘*it*’ in English song texts such as ‘*It’s a man’s world*’ or ‘*It’s raining men*’. These articles were excluded. A number of articles mentioning ‘wom*’ and ‘IT’, but in different contexts and without any connection, were also excluded.

The remaining 1,280 articles (201 from DN, 224 from SvD, 300 from AB and 555 from CS) connect the terms in a meaningful way and have been subject to analysis. Figure 1 shows the distribution of these articles in the four newspapers over the ten-year period.

We see that the distribution of articles follows a similar pattern in the four newspapers. Articles on ‘wom* and IT’ increased in the four newspapers during the second half of the 1990s, reached a peak in 2000 and then dropped to a low level by 2004. The small number of articles during the early years is not surprising, as the IT concept became established in Sweden only in the mid-90s, gradually replacing the concept of computer (in Swedish ‘dator’ and derivations of that term). But the reason for the decrease from

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