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# Gender Imbalance in the Media: Time Lag or Hysteresis?-French Newspapers, Gender Parity Shocks, and the Long and Winding Road to the Demasculinization of Political Reporting (1990–2020)

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## **Gender imbalance in the media: Time lag or hysteresis?**

French newspapers, gender parity shocks, and the long and  
winding road to the demasculinization of political reporting  
(1990–2020)

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**Abstract**

A large corpus of scientific literature details how the media generates an imbalance in their portrayal of society and thus contributes to the reproduction of extant power structures, particularly gender. However, there has been scant attention paid to understanding how the media adapt to changes in the social environment, especially with power structures modified by exogenous shocks such as new laws requiring gender parity in politics. This study examines how such shocks affected gender imbalance in the coverage of politics in France between 1990 and 2020. It highlights the shortcomings of an overly linear approach to the time lag effect in understanding the parameters and substance of gender imbalance in political news and advocates instead for utilizing the concept of gender imbalance hysteresis to understand why media stories do not demasculinize as quickly as the gender composition of Parliament.

**Keywords:** gender imbalance, media, politics, France.

## Introduction

Much research has been devoted in media and communication studies to measuring the gender gap in media contents. Despite differences in the contexts studied and in the methodologies used, this research converges on the evidence of a systematic, significant and enduring representation gap in favor of men. Research on this issue, though, faces a major obstacle : the difficulty to compare the evolution of the gender gap in media stories with the evolution of the same gap in the 'real world' the media are dealing with. As a consequence, the media's own contribution to the reproduction of extant gendered power structures in society is hard to identify. To help overcome this obstacle, this article adopts a longitudinal and sectoral perspective on the coverage of a recently changing reporting environment from a gender perspective : parliamentary politics.

The case of France — one of the first countries to implement quotas in parliamentary elections, a policy now adopted in more than 80 countries worldwide — offers a good illustration of such changing political environments. Following an intense public debate in the second half of the 1990s and a law passed in 2000 making gender parity mandatory in candidacies for the National Assembly, the share of men elected as « Député » (MP) has fallen from nearly 95% in the 1990s to slightly above 60% in the last two elections of 2017 and 2022. In this article, I consider this major and unlikely change in the sociology of the French legislative assembly as an exogenous gender parity shock impacting the real-world conditions of political reporting. Looking at how and how fast the media adapted to this changing political reporting environment, I measure the importance of various variables such as the gender of the reporter, newsroom choices, and the gender parity agenda in the slow deconstruction of masculinization patterns that shape political reporting in France.

The main finding of this study is that gender imbalance in French political reporting does not derive from a gender imbalance in politics, not even with a time lag. Indeed, the pace at which the media adapted to the demasculinization of the French Parliament since the 1990s varied greatly. Unlike Parliament, where the number of male MPs decreased at an accelerating speed between 2000 and 2020, the demasculinization of media stories relating to MPs slowed down during the same period. Using a term coined to describe the persistence of past habits despite changes occurring in the social world in which they were formed, I call this process the *hysteresis* of gender imbalance in the media. The results of this research suggests that gender imbalance in the media should not be considered a simple reflection of the relative power of men and women in society but instead a complex social construction with its own rules, and one that can resist exogeneous social change.

## **Literature review**

Research on gender bias in the media has followed two complementary paths: the measurement of quantitative *gender imbalance* and the qualitative analysis of *gender stereotyping*. In the 1970s, the growing demands for gender equality and the development of new media such as commercial television channels and magazines engendered research in these two directions, aiming to understand how the media reflects and thus reinforces society's dominant values. The gender imbalance and the stereotyping of male and female roles were then analyzed together, for example, in the study of television dramas. To quote a famous study in that field of research, "representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner, 1972 : 44). Gaye Tuchman systematized the "symbolic annihilation" perspective by putting forward a central hypothesis. According to this "reflection" hypothesis, the symbolic world of media productions is a reflection of dominant societal values, not of social reality. Thus representation

gaps between men and women have a normative dimension. Absence or erasure of women in the media means condemnation and trivialization. Central to this reflection hypothesis, according to Tuchman, is the notion of « time lag » in cultural habits. Due to their dependency on symbols and not on reality, the media tend to lag behind society when it changes. « Nonmaterial conditions, which shape symbols, writes Tuchman, change more slowly than do material conditions” (Tuchman, 1978). According to this set of hypothesis, gender imbalance in the media should reduce slowly but gradually with reducing gender inequalities in society as a whole.

Since then, a great deal of research has examined gender imbalance in the media and its evolution. Several empirical strategies have been used to do this work. The first one is the closest to Tuchman’s proposal, arguing that the gender imbalance is rooted in how the wider society is “reflected” in the media. It consists of studying media content covering all aspects of the life of society over a given period. Several American studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s showed, for example, that women made up less than 10% of the people mentioned in articles in major newspapers (Davis, 1982; Potter, 1985). A study based on the content of the New York Times between 1885 and 1985 showed that, despite a reduction in gender stereotyping, the gender imbalance did not change dramatically over the long period studied (Jolliffe, 1989). Another study estimated that women are, on average, three to four times less represented than men in US national and local newspapers (Armstrong, 2004). More recently, a study of the most important American newspapers and many digital sources estimated that women’s share of representation had evolved but at a low rate, from less than 20% to only 27% between 1983 and 2008 (Shor et al., 2015).

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) is the most ambitious project to measure this average gender imbalance (GMMP, 1995; George et al., 2000; Gallagher, 2005; Macharia, 2015, 2021). Its findings show that after a decrease in the gender imbalance and associated stereotypes

in the 1990s and early 2000s, the following period is marked by a surprising stabilization. The proportion of women represented or cited in the surveyed media rose from 17% in 1995 to 24% in 2010 but has not increased since 2020, when a “progress without revolution” of 1 percentage point was noted (Macharia, 2021).

To understand the role of the media in the production of gender as a power relationship between men and women (Scott, 1986) and to consider the media as “technologies of gender” (Lauretis, 1987), another avenue of research has been taken up. It consists of studying not a snapshot of society as a whole, at the risk of comparing men and women whose societal positions differ, but studying smaller and more homogeneous social groups. Research on the media coverage of women and men in politics has been particularly fruitful in this direction. In terms of stereotyping, many studies have shown that female politicians are portrayed differently from their male counterparts. (Bystrom et al., 2001; Falk, 2010; Ross et al., 2012). This stereotyping of women in politics is frequently accompanied by a gender imbalance working to their disadvantage, as demonstrated in various elections such as the 2010 British elections (Ross et al., 2012). In general, studies devoted to national level elections have shown a high level of gender imbalance (Coulomb-Gully, 2009; Falk, 2010; Heldman et al., 2018). A strong relationship between gender imbalance and stereotyping has also been observed outside of election periods in the coverage of members of the US Congress (Niven, 2005). However, the results of the extant research are not always so clear as stated in the first meta-analysis conducted recently on 90 studies covering 750.000 media stories (Van der Pas and Aaldering, 2020). In some cases, the increased number of women elected to parliaments has led the media to adapt their reporting to this new reality and the political projects of these women (Braden, 1996). In other cases, women candidates in high-level elections may also have received very high media exposure, equal to or even higher than male candidates, but often at the cost of strong negative stereotyping (Wasburn and Wasburn,

2011). Contrasting results have also been obtained for lower-level contests in which the gender imbalance may be non-existent or even somewhat favorable to women, for example, in the US gubernatorial elections (Kahn, 1994), Senate and Representative elections (Bystrom et al., 2001) or mayoral elections (Atkeson and Krebs, 2008). In other contexts, gender imbalance may persist while stereotyping of female candidates decreases (Rohrbach et al., 2020).

Several studies reinforced the hypothesis of a clear media preference for men in politics. These studies controlled for other factors that may influence the choice of journalistic sources, such as age, position in the power hierarchy, or public notoriety. The case of the 2009 European elections, for example, highlights the determining role of political parties' nomination choices in the subsequent limited media visibility of female candidates (Lühiste and Banducci, 2016). The same research demonstrates that quotas used to remedy the gender gap in elections do not result in greater media coverage for women. A study on the media coverage of Belgian members of Parliament on Flemish-language television between 2003 and 2011 also showed that the gender imbalance persists even when controlling for age and position in Parliament, political parties, or government (Hooghe et al., 2015). Another study taking into account 20,000 individuals in many occupations in the United States confirmed the existence of a net representation bias — especially in politics — after controlling for age, social position and public visibility on Wikipedia (Shor et al., 2019).

Another direction of research that has helped better measure the role of the media in the production of the gender imbalance has been to differentiate the effect of a range of characteristics of the media studied that are likely to impact these inequalities. The most used variable is the gender of the author or editor of the articles. Using it allows testing a simple hypothesis, according to which male journalists—who have long outnumbered women in political journalism and remain today in positions of responsibility for the content published, produce content that is biased in



favor of men. This stream of research has also produced contrasting results. Armstrong's study of US national and local newspapers shows that a female byline is a good predictor of the gender of the people mentioned (Armstrong, 2004). Leiva and Kimber study of Chilean press also confirmed an impact of the gender of reporters and editors on the contents (2022), as well as did Riedl et al (2022) for Austria. Other work has shown that women journalists also tend to represent a greater diversity of sources in their stories, in terms of gender and ethnicity, and they tend to write in a less stereotypical way (Rodgers and Thorson, 2003). Nevertheless, in other research, the presence of women in leading positions in newspapers and magazines does not lead to concomitant decrease in the stereotyping of women (Jolliffe and Catlett, 1994 ; Meeks, 2013).

Should the feminization of the journalistic profession contribute to a decreasing gender imbalance in media stories ? Studies based on interviews with women journalists and observations of newsroom work practices do not support this contention. On the one hand, the feminization of newsrooms is only partial: women in newsrooms generally have less responsibility and are often de facto confined to specific media and news beats. They also often experience greater forms of professional insecurity than men. The case of French political journalism is well documented in this respect (Damian-Gaillard and Saitta, 2011, 2020). It is not so different from other cases in which the gender typing of women journalists and the asymmetry of power over content are strong (Djerf-Pierre and Löfgren-Nilsson, 2004). These implicit norms and power relations are likely to counterbalance the adoption of non-gendered (or less gendered) standards of work by generations of women who are more attuned to feminist issues (Byerly, 2004) but often isolated within the extant power structures of newsrooms (Djerf-Pierre, 2005). In short, the "gendered substructures" of newsrooms mitigates the effect of their feminization on the production of less imbalanced stories (De Bruin, 2000; De Bruin and Ross, 2004; Melin-Higgins, 2004).

The research conducted since the 1970s on gender gaps in media contents is rich and diverse. When contrasted to Tuchman's prediction about the slow and linear, albeit time-lagged, adjustment of newsrooms interpretation frameworks with society's material conditions, these results lead to the following conclusions. First, Tuchman's cultural approach, as well as Goffman's take that the media reflect society and its inequalities by displaying them with only "styling" alterations (Goffman, 1979), is very consistent with the regularity of the trends highlighted by the GMMP and other surveys based on the same aggregated approach, suggesting that gender imbalance is a far-reaching cultural phenomenon linked to persistent gender inequalities in society. Yet, the very slow pace at which the media reduce the gender gap in their contents should lead any researcher using the "time-lag" hypothesis to question the implicit optimism of this approach. Second, more finer-grained approaches taking into account contextual variables likely to have an impact on the gender gap in contents (from within as well as from outside of newsrooms) prove the very powerful mitigating effect of such variables on the gender gap.

In this paper I propose that instead of conceptualizing the effect of time on gender biases in media content as a time-lag issue we should see it as a manifestation of the hysteresis of newsrooms. Bourdieu elaborates on the idea of hysteresis in his research on different social fields such as higher education (Bourdieu, 1996b) or art (Bourdieu, 1996b), as well as in lay people's judgement about culture (Bourdieu, 1984). The term, borrowed from experimental science, designates the possible mismatch between one's habits, formed under past conditions of a specific social field and the present norms in this field (Hardy 2008 ; Mesny 2002 ; Fowler, 2020). Unlike time-lag, that suggests a smooth adjustment of individuals and their environment to change, hysteresis refers to conflicting norms and maladjustment and, thus, has a strong potential to explain possible divergences in newsrooms trajectories about gender gaps in contents.

## Data and methodology

This paper draws on existing studies to explain gender imbalances between men and women politicians in the French media and the pace at which this imbalance has decreased since the 1990s. The research strategy is based on the following improvements of the global reflection and time-lag hypothesis : selecting a homogeneous group of individuals to neutralize the effect of status differences of those represented in the media; selecting a limited and comparable set of sources; and finally, studying a part of the real world in which significant changes in the respective places of men and women have been observed, to be able to measure whether and at what rate media reflection of the reality has adjusted to these changes.

To that end, a large corpus of 46,581 news stories published in seven daily newspapers in France between January 1, 1990, and August 13, 2020, has been assembled.<sup>1</sup> These newspapers include all the national general dailies available in France in 2020 and one local newspaper covering the South-West of France which was added to distinguish the levels of gender imbalance in the national and local press. Not all of these newspapers have digital archives old enough to cover the entire period under study. However, at the time of the first parity shock in France, the corpus excludes for this reason only two newspapers. **Table 1** shows the circulation of these media, the composition of their audience, the importance of parliamentary life, and the reporting of members of Parliament in their content. To encompass political reporting as a whole, as opposed to election reportage, all stories published during the studied period containing both the expression “assemblée nationale” (the most common way of describing the Parliament in France) and either “député” or “députée” (to ensure that at least one member of Parliament was mentioned

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<sup>1</sup> The data, as well as the R code used to process it, can be requested from the author by e-mail for research purposes at [gilles.bastin@iepg.fr](mailto:gilles.bastin@iepg.fr).

in the story) were collected. Some manual processing was performed to remove irrelevant documents.

**Table 1. Data collection**

Newspaper	Diffusion		Readership's characteristics (%)				Stories collected		
	N daily	Women	Elderly	Executives	High inc.	Liv. in Paris	First	N	Monthly mean
Aujourd'hui en France	84 072	45.6	28.9	11.2	15.7	51.2	Oct. 2005	1 969	11,1
La Croix	86 440	53.0	76.8	14.2	27	24.6	Sept. 1995	3 390	11,3
Le Figaro	331 927	42.8	44	22.1	30.7	32.4	Oct. 1996	7 537	26,4
Le Monde	393 109	43	35.2	25.8	28	32.4	Dec. 1944	13 400	36,5
L'Humanité	37 612	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	Nov. 1999	3 955	15,9
Libération	76 522	36.8	34.1	22.6	20	31.2	Jan. 1995	5 794	18,9
Sud-Ouest	211 197	50.0	52.0	9.0	12.0	2.0	Aug. 1944	10 536	28,7

In this article, I use a computational method to measure the level of masculinization of each article, defined as the systematic overexposure of men compared to women in the stories. To avoid any misunderstanding, I distinguish here “masculinization” — the production of media contents quantitatively biased in favor of men — from “masculinity” which, in gender studies, refers to the performance of gender roles in everyday interactions (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and in the common language to a set of qualities associated with being a man. The masculinization indices used in this paper are mere measurements of the mentioning practices of journalists in their stories. They do not entail any measurement of the masculinity of people mentioned as a set of attributes of behaviors.

I use two different indices to measure the masculinization of stories. The first one is the masculinization of the MPs mentioned (*mps\_masc*). It measures the ratio between references to women and men elected to the National Assembly based on the mention of the gendered forms of the terms “député” (male) or “députée” (female). These two terms are used 82,954 times in the

corpus, an average of 1.78 times per story. The second measures the stories' general level of masculinization (*gen\_masc*). It assigns a masculinity score to each unambiguous first name identified in the stories (this score is equal to the probability that the first name was given to a boy in France between 1900 and 2017). In the corpus, 558,857 occurrences of first names were identified, using a list of more than 11,000 first names provided by the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques and simplified to remove names that designate time units, countries, flowers, and qualities that are often used as first names. The general masculinization index equals the average scores of unambiguous first names identified in the story. It ranges from 0 (all identified first names are given to girls at the registry office) to 1 (all identified first names are given to boys). With *gen\_masc* all the persons mentioned in a given story are taken into account, not just MPs.

This method has several advantages over the hand-coding of gender used in most studies based on qualitative content analysis protocols. The most obvious is that it can be applied to large corpora of stories such as the one used in this article. Because of the large number of stories and the large number of MPs mentioned in these stories, it is difficult to read such corpora carefully and carry out a systematic and transparent manual coding of the gender of the persons mentioned.

The analysis was completed with other variables collected or constructed for each story. The gender imbalance of stories' authors (*aut\_masc*) was calculated by averaging the masculinity scores of the various unambiguous first names identified in the article author variable when this information was available. The article's length was also calculated to account for space constraints that may play a role in selecting a greater or lesser number of sources mentioned. Finally, some additional variables describe the context in which a story is written. The first one is the gender imbalance of Parliament, used as a measure of the evolution of the wider social reality

described in the stories. The second one is a measure of the intensity of the gender parity debate at the time of the story's publication, used to measure the media's sensitivity to this public issue utilizing the number of stories mentioning gender parity during the year of publication for all the stories in the corpus. For that purpose I collected all stories published in the national press in France (defined as the 6 national newspapers of the main dataset) during the studied period that contained "parité", "femmes" and "politique". Once removed the stories about the parity of currencies, this database contains 4 351 stories.

## Findings

In this section I start by describing the four parity shocks that occurred in national political representation in France between 1997 and 2017. I then compare changes in the masculinization of Parliament to that of the stories published in newspapers about its members. Finally, I measure the contribution of journalists' gender, newsroom characteristics and the state of public debate on gender parity to the masculinization of stories.

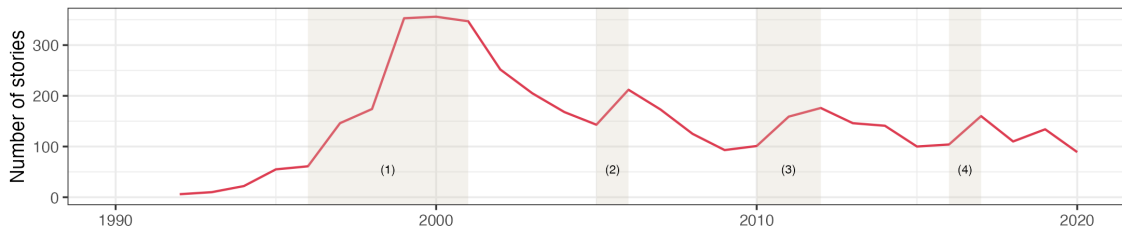
### Four gender parity shocks in French politics

Women won the right to vote and stand for election in France in 1944. Over the following decades, this major change in the gender composition of the French electorate did not lead to a significant increase in the proportion of women elected. The proportion of women in the National Assembly, for example, rose from 1.6% in 1958 to only 5.9% in 1993 (Sineau, 2002). From the 1990s onwards, gender parity in political representation became an issue in the public debate in France (Bereni and Revillard, 2007). The number of articles on this subject in the press began increasing in 1996 and reached a peak in 2000. After this date, three other phases of smaller increases in this public debate in 2005, 2010–2011, and 2016 more or less preceded the election years (**Fig. 1**).

Major legislative advances have followed deriving from this new political agenda. In 2000, a law was passed to implement gender parity by obliging political parties to present an equal number of women and men in elections. This law created a system of financial withholding for political parties that did not respect gender parity for nominations in legislative elections. As a result, the proportion of women candidates in the French Parliament (the National Assembly) rose from 19.5% to 42.4% between 1993 and 2017. The proportion of elected women increased from 5.9% to 38.8% in the same period. After four exogenous such shocks of increasing magnitude in the 1997, 2007, 2012, and 2017 elections, the gender imbalance of the National Assembly, defined as the proportion of men among its members, experienced a historical decline of almost 35 percentage points (Fig. 2).

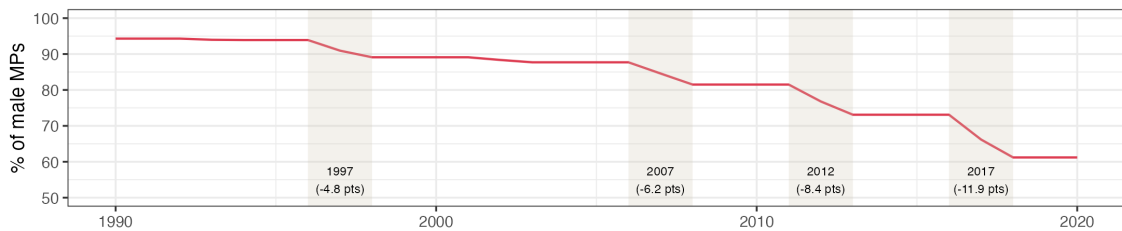
**Fig. 1.**  
**An episodic debate in the French media**

Stories containing the terms 'parité', 'politique' and 'femmes' in six national daily newspapers reached a maximum in 2000



**Fig. 2.**  
**Four gender parity shocks (1997-2017)**

The gender gap is decreasing at growing speed in Parliament



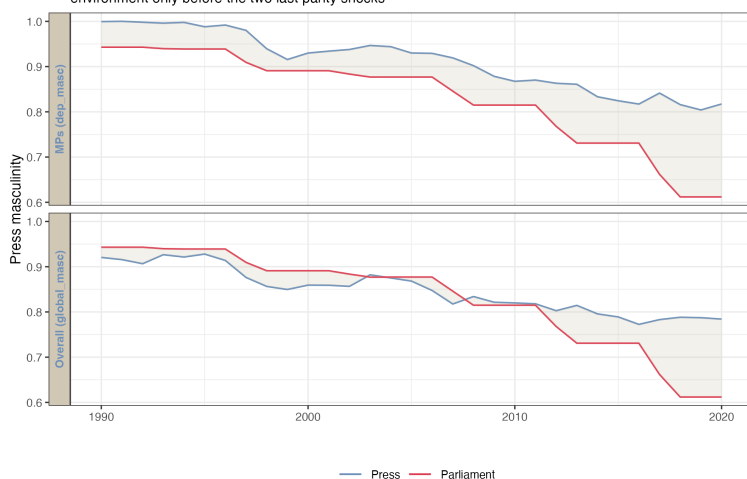
## The gender imbalance hysteresis in political reporting

Was the shift in the gender balance of Parliament from the 1997 election onwards accompanied by an attendant decrease in the masculinization of media contents ? Levels of masculinization were very high at the beginning of the period. The masculinization of MPs mentioned (*mps\_masc*) was, for instance, very close to 1 (100% male MPs mentioned) before the 1997 election and thus slightly exceeded the share of male MPs in Parliament at that time. This extremely high rate at the beginning of the period, partly related to the long-standing practice in the media and in Parliament of using the masculine form “député” for both men and women, underlines the existence of a very strong masculinization pattern in French media covering politics at the beginning of the studied period. The general imbalance of mentions (*gen\_masc*) was also very high before the 1997 election but lower than the Parliament’s actual gender imbalance (**Fig. 3**).

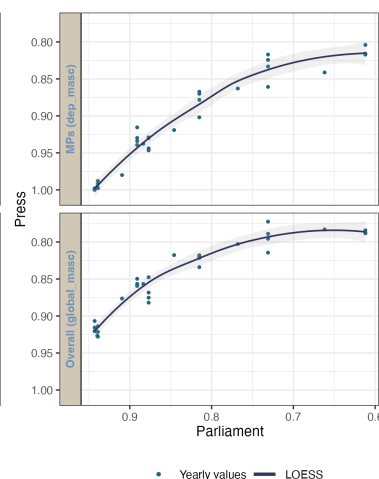
The masculinization of media contents has decreased since the 1990s regardless of the index considered. This first result should not be overlooked, as it shows that the newspapers studied have adapted to the new political environment introduced by the parity shocks since 1997. The trend is similar for both indices, although *mps\_masc* is systematically higher than *gen\_masc* and decreases more rapidly (*mps\_masc* has fallen from 99.9% in 1990 to 81.7% in 2020, while *gen\_masc* has fallen over the same period from 92.1% to 78.4%). This adjustment is reflected in a slope close to the diagonal of the regression line of the scatterplot relating yearly male MPs rates in Parliament to the masculinization of media contents in **Fig. 4**.



**Fig. 3.**  
**The gender gap hysteresis**  
 The masculinity of press stories adapted to the new political environment only before the two last parity shocks



**Fig. 4.**  
**Press and Parliament masculinity are correlated**

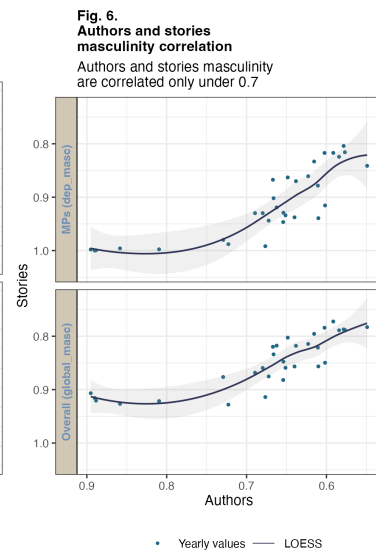
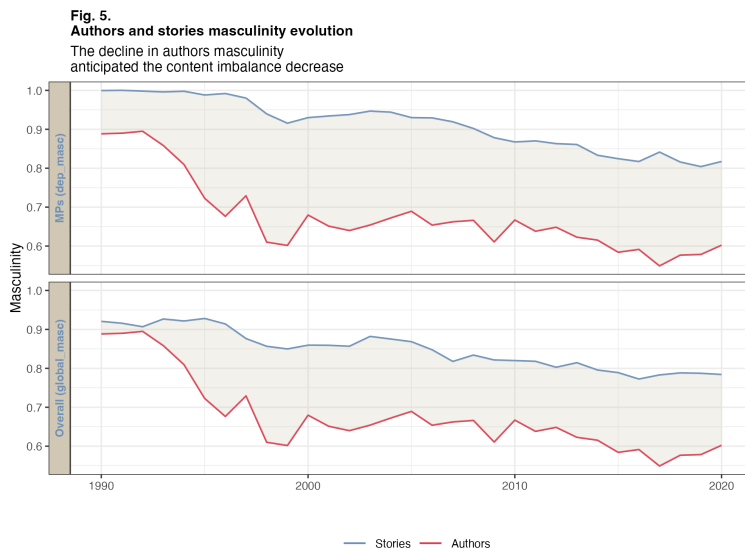


However, the adjustment of the press to the real-world gender imbalance in the National Assembly has changed over time. It can be observed during the gender parity shocks of 1997 (-4.8 percentage points of the gender imbalance of Parliament) and 2007 (-6.2%). In the first case, the adjustment of the press exceeded that of Parliament (-5.7 points for *gen\_masc* and -5.3 points for *mps\_masc*). Yet, between 1997 and 2007 the masculinization of the press started to rise again. The effect of the second parity shock in 2007 was less important inasmuch as the induced variation in the masculinization of newspapers is only equal in magnitude to that of Parliament. After 2007, the average masculinization of stories continued to decline, but at a much slower pace than Parliament and without any particular impact of the last two parity shocks (-8.4 and -11.9 percentage points of Parliament's imbalance in 2012 and 2017). This decrease in the fit between the two contents' masculinization indices and the gender imbalance of the National Assembly is shown in **Fig. 4**: as the gender imbalance of Parliament decreases over time, the regression line flattens out.

The originality of the current situation is that this reduction of the rhythm at which newspaper adapt their reporting to the demasculinization of Parliament occurs while this process has resumed at an increasing speed. This can be described as the hysteresis of the masculinization of political journalism insofar as it illustrates the primacy of reporting habits inherited from the past over the new rules of political reality in this field.

### The gender of journalists and the gender of news

A first way to explain these results is to make the hypothesis of an effect of the gender of reporters on the masculinization of their articles. The link between newsroom characteristics and the slow decline in the masculinization of stories can be approached in two different ways. One way is by observing the evolution of the relationship between the gender imbalance of the authors of the stories and the masculinization of the persons mentioned in those stories. The other is by observing the evolution of the levels of masculinization of articles written by men and by women.



A clear shift in the gender balance of journalists can be observed in the selected media at the beginning of the period (from 88.8% male journalists in 1990 to 60.2% in 1999). This shift

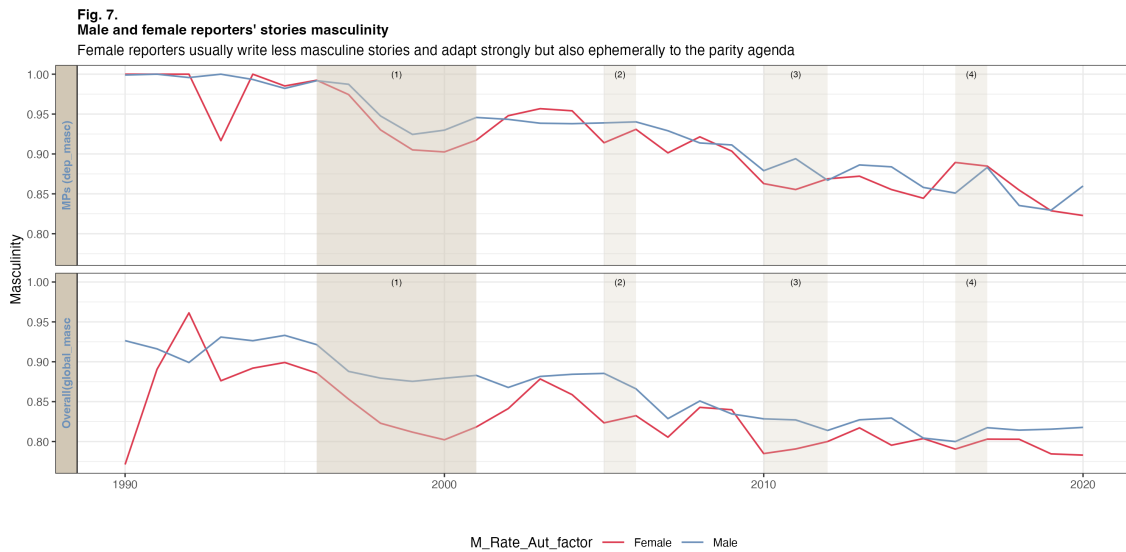
anticipates the first gender parity shock and exceeds it in scope (**Fig. 5**). It also anticipates the public debate on gender parity, which began in France in the second half of the 1990s (**Fig. 1**). However, the decrease in the gender imbalance of journalists slowed from the end of the 1990s (the proportion of male journalists stabilizes at below 60% in 2020). This decreasing pace is very close to that of the decrease in the masculinization of stories, as shown in **Fig. 5**. But it does not speed up when the four parity shocks occur and even slows down further after the 2017 shock. The relationship between the gender imbalance of journalists, the gender imbalance of Parliament, and the masculinization of stories is, thus, a complex one. In 1990, 90% of the stories were written by men and described a political world that was almost 100% male. In the following decade, before the first parity shock, political newsrooms addressed the gender gap within the journalists' cohort, without any noticeable effect on the continuing masculinization of stories, either in terms of mentioning MPs or mentioning people in general. Yet, once the first shock had passed, the relationship between the two variables became positive (**Fig. 6**).

The second way to measure the effect of the gender of the journalists on the masculinization of stories is to observe the reporting practices of men and women separately. To do this, I used a dichotomous variable assigning the female gender when the authors' first names masculinity is less than 0.2 and the male gender when it is greater than 0.8 (first names are gendered in a dichotomous way : 97.7% of all first names used in the studied newspapers have a masculinity index below 0.2 or above 0.8).

When looking at the historical evolution of female and male reporting practices, masculinization indices are lower for women than for men (**Fig. 7**). Women, on average, write stories that are less masculinized than those written by men. The curves also show that mentioning practices correlated with the evolution of the debate on parity (marked in light brown on the graph) and the elections: the drop-off is very obvious around 1996–2001, for both women and men for

*mps\_masc*, but it is more important for women for *gen\_masc*. Male journalists adjusted to the new gender balance and the debate on parity around 1996–2001 as far as mentioning MPs is concerned. Yet, they questioned the masculinization norm of their other sources far less than women did at the same time. This pattern occurred again before the next two elections.

Women, who had arrived in large numbers in political reporting in France by the 1990s, seem to have taken advantage of the intense debate on parity to reduce the masculinization of their stories. But at the end of each period of public debate on political parity, the value of the two indices rises for both women and men. Despite a decreasing trend, the masculinization standard in media stories seems to resist the challenging moments of public debate on gender parity. This phenomenon is another illustration of the hysteresis effect.



## Masculinization and newsrooms' agency

A second hypothesis to explain the gender gap in stories is that of an effect of choices made by the media. A first thing is worth noting : newspapers performed differently on workforce gender balance. Some newsrooms are, generally speaking, very male, (L'Humanité and Sud-Ouest),

others are less so (La Croix, Le Monde and Libération), and finally two newsrooms are close to gender parity (Aujourd'hui and Le Figaro) (Fig. 8). The gender imbalance of newsrooms also varies over time and is subject to considerable short-term instability. The editorial staff of Aujourd'hui is, for instance, increasingly male over the period, while Le Figaro remains stable despite very strong short-term variations. There are alternating phases of the demasculinization and remasculinization of the workforce in several newsrooms such as Le Monde and Libération and in some cases, outliers such as the surprising over-masculinization in 2009 at Sud-Ouest, which rose to 99.4%, or the under-masculinization in 2007 at Libération, which dropped to 49.4%. This last point suggests a relative inconsistency in organizational choices regarding the gendered composition of newsrooms.



The evolution of the masculinization of stories is more homogeneous in the different newspapers (Fig. 8). The only notable singularities concern three of them. Le Figaro presents an original profile at the beginning of the period because *mps\_masc* does not change until the end of the 2000s. On the other hand, the demasculinization of *gen\_masc* occurs at a rapid pace in this newspaper

at the end of the period. To the contrary, La Croix strongly demasculinized its stories at the beginning of the period and reached a low level of masculinization at the end. Finally, the most remarkable profile is that of Sud-Ouest, where the stories, which were at the same level of masculinization as those of the other newsrooms at the beginning of the period, demasculinized until 2012, bringing the level of the two indices to a value close to 0.75, the lowest in the whole corpus. However, this demasculinization process was stopped after 2012, and both indices ceased decreasing after this date.

The case of Sud-Ouest puts into perspective the hypothesis of a direct link between the gender of journalists and their reporting practices. The journalists writing for this newsroom are more male than those of the national press (except L'Humanité). Yet Sud-Ouest demasculinized its stories much faster in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Data on the gender imbalance of MPs in the constituencies covered by this newspaper suggest that this is probably a consequence of changes in their gendered composition. Indeed, the gender balance of south-west France MPs, above the national level in the 1990s, fell below that level in the 2007 election and then stabilized again above it from 2012 onwards. It is also likely that the editorial habit of the local press to mention MPs in relation to their local activity and not to national debates plays a role.

To hierarchize the different variables, a regression analysis was performed on the level of masculinization of stories in the data aggregated by year. Six regression models were tested under various assumptions (**Table 2**). The first model only considers the change in the gender balance of Parliament. It assumes that journalists adjust their reporting practices to the supply of mentionable persons in the wider world. The second model adds the effect of the author's gender. The third model considers the effects of newsrooms' cultures and organizational constraints measured using the length of the stories to control for the possible effect of the various kinds of articles journalists are assigned to. The fourth model combines organizational and individual effects. The

fifth model considers organizational and contextual effects by measuring the intensity of the public debate on gender parity in the year in which the article was published. The last model takes into account all the above variables.

The “real-world” model is already very explanatory, with an R<sup>2</sup> of 0.60 for *mps\_masc* and 0.55 for *gen\_masc*. On average, a 1 point decrease in Parliament's gender imbalance decreases *mps\_masc* by ½ point and *gen\_masc* by 1/3 point. This real-world adjustment explains 60% of the variance in stories' masculinization for *mps\_masc* and 55% for *gen\_masc*. Changes in the “real world” in which journalists report does significantly affect the masculinization of their stories in all the tested models.

Nevertheless, the introduction of the other variables helps reducing the unexplained part of the variance in this first model. The most efficient model in this perspective is model 5, which considers the organizational and contextual variables. It explains 73.7% of the variance of *mps\_masc* and 73.1% of that of *gen\_masc*. This model is superior to model 3, which only takes into account the newsroom effect in addition to the “real-world” changes. The length of the stories also plays a role in model 3, but in a way that might seem counterintuitive. While one might expect that the longest stories would be those in which journalists have the most room to diversify their sources, but the opposite is true. An increase of 100 characters in an article leads to an increase of 1/10th of a percentage point in both *mps\_masc* and *gen\_masc*. It is, thus, as if the constraints that may weigh on the shortest stories to maintain a diversity of mentions were somewhat relaxed in the longest stories.

The addition of the reporter's gender in models 2 and 4 does not reduce the unexplained element of the variance of both indices. This variable has no significant effect on the masculinization of stories, except in the case of *mps\_masc* in model 2, which does not take into account the

newsroom effect and in which the effect is paradoxically negative. This is probably because in some cases, such as with Le Figaro, very feminized newsrooms produce very masculinized stories.

**Table 2. Six regression models**

		Model 1 (Real world)		Model 2 (Individual)		Model 3 (Organizational)		Model 4 (Ind. + Org.)		Model 5 (Org + contextual)		Model 6 (Org + ind +Cont)	
		<i>mps_m</i>	<i>gen_m</i>	<i>mps_m</i> <i>asc</i>	<i>gen_m</i>	<i>mps_m</i> <i>asc</i>	<i>gen_m</i>	<i>mps_m</i> <i>asc</i>	<i>gen_m</i>	<i>mps_ma</i> <i>sc</i>	<i>gen_m</i>	<i>mps_ma</i> <i>sc</i>	<i>gen_m</i>
Constant		0,494 (0,025)	0,548 (0,020)	0,566 (0,024)	0,570 (0,022)	0,451 (0,024)	0,526 (0,019)	0,488 (0,037)	0,521 (0,031)	0,455 (0,024)	0,531 (0,018)	0,474 (0,037)	0,503 (0,029)
Parliament masculinity		0,502*** (0,031)	0,353*** (0,024)	0,475*** (0,030)	0,339*** (0,027)	0,523*** (0,027)	0,355*** (0,021)	0,466*** (0,031)	0,331*** (0,025)	0,539 (0,027)	0,374*** (0,020)	0,497*** (0,032)	0,372* ** (0,026)
Newspaper	L'Humanité					-0,034* * (0,012)	-0,007 (0,009)	-0,035* (0,014)	-0,015 (0,012)	-0,030 (0,012)	-0,002 (0,009)	-0,033* (0,014)	-0,01 2 (0,011)
	La Croix					-0,025* (0,012)	-0,023* (0,009)	-0,017 (0,012)	-0,022* (0,010)	-0,022 (0,012)	-0,020* (0,009)	-0,019 (0,012)	-0,02 4* (0,010)
	Le Figaro					0,015 (0,012)	0,023* (0,009)	0,025* (0,012)	0,029** (0,010)	0,018 (0,020)	0,027** (0,009)	0,022 (0,012)	0,025* * (0,010)
	Le Monde					-0,025* (0,012)	0,016 (0,010)	-0,016 (0,016)	0,014 (0,013)	-0,024 (0,012)	0,018 (0,009)	-0,022 0,016	0,006 (0,013)
	Libération					-0,029* (0,012)	0,003 (0,009)	-0,021 (0,014)	0,003 (0,012)	-0,025* (0,012)	0,008 (0,009)	-0,023 (0,014)	-0,00 1 (0,011)
	Sud-Ouest					-0,055* ** (0,012)	-0,022* (0,009)	-0,042* * (0,013)	-0,026* (0,011)	-0,05*** (0,011)	-0,022* (0,008)	-0,039** (0,013)	-0,02 3* (0,011)
Length	100 characters.					0,001*** (0,000)	0,001* (0,000)	0,001 (0,001)	0,000 (0,001)	0,000 (0,000)	0,000 (0,000)	0,001 (0,001)	0,001 (0,001)
Journalist masculinity				-0,071* * (0,023)	-0,015 (0,020)			0,040 (0,031)	0,048. (0,026)			0,026 (0,032)	0,029 (0,025)
Gender parity debate	100 more stories published the same year as the stories on Parliament									-0,011** * (0,002)	-0,010* ** (0,002)	-0,009** (0,003)	-0,011 *** (0,003)
R-squared		0,602	0,553	0,616	0,514	0,726	0,7	0,687	0,668	0,737	0,731	0,701	0,703
Adjusted R-squared		0,6	0,55	0,611	0,508	0,713	0,686	0,669	0,649	0,723	0,716	0,681	0,684



## Discussion and conclusion

This research highlights the hysteresis effect of the masculinization pattern in political reporting on the gender imbalance in stories dealing with the Members of Parliament in France between 1990 and 2020. Not only do stories not demasculinize during this time of change as quickly as Parliament, but the rate at which they do so tends to decrease, while the demasculinization of Parliament is growing. This first result puts into perspective one of the two central hypotheses of the “symbolic annihilation” of women’s theory in media studies, that of a “time lag” between the real and the mediated world. The data and methods used in this article show that the demasculinization of stories in the “nonmaterial world,” instead of lagging behind that of the “material world,” dealt with by journalists and newsrooms, is increasingly opposed to it.

This result, far from being limited to the case of France, is in line with the international literature discussing the slow pace at which the gender gap is being reduced in the media. The resistance of the press to the parity shocks in France particularly illustrates the relevance of the “paper ceiling” hypothesis (Shor et al., 2015). It also echoes research conducted on the limited effect of quotas to increase the share of women in national parliaments due to the association of women representation with broad cultural factors (Ruedin, 2012). By not giving women elected to parliament the media visibility they should have, the press not only reflects but also contributes to these cultural factors and, if one considers that media coverage is a necessity to be re-elected, to limiting the effectiveness of quota measures in politics.

One of the major interests of the approach chosen in this article is to provide a hierarchy of explanations for the resistance of newspapers to the demasculinization of their stories. Previous

research on the most studied variable — the gender of journalists — has produced conflicting findings. The structural approach to this issue often emphasizes the “critical mass” beyond which women in organizations may contribute in demasculinizing their outputs (Childs & Crook, 2008). The results of this research allow to question the argument. Women’s bylines increase in the 1990s contributed to the decline in the masculinization of stories in the years that followed. But thereafter, as women’s share of bylines continues to rise, no more significant effect is observed. Moreover, the multivariate analysis indicates that the journalist’s gender has no significant effect on the masculinization of stories once controlled the other variables.

Women do report MPs in a more balanced way than men. But women and men only change their reporting and mentioning habits when two conditions are met. The first one is organizational. There is a clear newsroom effect in the data but one that do not reflect political slant, a result in line with previous quantitative studies (Shor, 2015), rather the national vs local divide (Ross and Krijnen, 2011). More research should be conducted to explain why local newspapers perform better in terms of gender representation. The data state that they simply report on local MPs, thus avoiding the filtering that national newspapers perform when choosing sources for their reports.

The most surprising result of this study relates to the effect of the second condition : context, or, to be more precise, the state of public debate over gender parity quotas in the media. This variable, never tested before, proves to be very explanatory of the diminution of the masculinization of stories about MPs. The exact nature of this effect is still unclear at that stage. Journalists might have mentioned more women during the debate on parity because they were partly reporting on women MPs taking stand in this debate. Or they could have felt more pressure to be less biased in all their reports due to the ongoing debate. More research would be needed to test these hypotheses.

Some limitations of this research have already been pointed out such as the press archive availability for the 1990s or changes in mentioning habits of journalists. Its most important limitation, though, is the impossibility to differentiate the persons mentioned, other than by their gender. The the gender parity law has increased the share of women elected to Parliament. But it has not changed the overall power structures between men and women in politics. Newly elected women do not automatically have access to the most media-exposed positions, such as chairing committees, drafting reports, or holding responsibility in political groups. Therefore, one of the possible developments of this research would be to take into account the newsworthiness of the people mentioned in stories in order to not make the assumption that all MPs are equally available to journalists and have an identical value as sources worthy of mention in an article.

Yet, the computational approach developed in this paper indicates that the masculinization of political reporting is not simply a lagged consequence of the masculinization of politics. It has its own rules, rooted in broader norms in terms of the mentioning habits of journalists, newsroom cultures, newspapers editorial lines and business models, and finally the intensity of the public debate en gender parity. The hysteresis effect that results from the combination of these factors prevents gender imbalance from diminishing beyond certain limits in the media.

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