

When A Company Is Failing, Female CEOs Get Blamed More Frequently Than Men

Women leaders can't seem to catch a break, study finds.

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RUBEN SPRICH / REUTERS

It's not your imagination or a just a hunch: Female chief executives are treated differently by the media than their male counterparts, a new analysis of press coverage of CEOs confirms.

As you might expect, female CEOs' personal and family lives are much more frequently the subject of articles, according to the study, an examination of news coverage of 20 chief executives — men and women — released Wednesday by the [Rockefeller Foundation](#).

More striking than that? The study's authors could not find a single article written about a male CEO that mentioned family life.

But perhaps most significantly, female CEOs are more often blamed when things go wrong at their company. When a company led by a woman was in crisis, 80 percent of the news stories on the situation cited the CEO as a source of the problem, according to Rockefeller's analysis.

When a man was running the company in crisis, stories only blamed him 31 percent of the time.

That's a huge difference and it's no accident, Judith Rodin, president of the Rockefeller Foundation told The Huffington Post.

"There's an unconscious bias among the media around how they write about female CEOs," Rodin said, emphasizing that this is not her opinion. "The data show that."

That bias, particularly in cases where women are shouldering an extra heap of blame for problems that may or may not be a consequence of their leadership, offers a troubling look at the kinds of hurdles women leaders have to clear in order to succeed at the top. Though Rockefeller confined its study to Corporate America, it's not hard to apply its lessons to the political arena and wonder what's in store for the first U.S. female president — whoever she may be.

The Rockefeller study didn't consider why women were so often blamed for their companies' travails, but part of the reason may have to do with how unusual it is for a woman to even land a CEO job.

There are only [22 women running Fortune 500](#) companies — that's 4.2 percent — and the number will drop this year when Xerox CEO Ursula Burns steps down.

"Maybe there's a sense that [the woman] shouldn't have gotten it or they're not as qualified," said Rodin. "Then when something goes wrong, the fact of that uncertainty or the lack of analysis in the media about her strengths make it easier to blame her when things go south."



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Judith Rodin, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, which conducted the study on gender bias in the coverage of female CEOs.

There's also a body of research that shows women are more likely to land the top job during times of crisis, which would then make it more likely that a

woman would be in charge of an already troubled company.

Yahoo appointed CEO Marissa Mayer after years of struggling to adapt to the changing internet, and she's often been blamed for its failures. Mayer recently called out biased media coverage in an [interview](#) with The Financial Times.

"I've tried to be gender-blind and believe tech is a gender-neutral zone, but do think there has been gender-charged reporting," Mayer said. "We all see the things that only plague women leaders, like articles that focus on their appearance, like Hillary Clinton sporting a new pantsuit. I think all women are aware of that, but I had hoped in 2015 and 2016 that I would see fewer articles like that. It's a shame."

Contrast Mayer with Tim Armstrong, widely considered a success for navigating struggling AOL through a successful acquisition by Verizon. Yahoo is also in the process of being acquired by Verizon. (Verizon owns AOL, parent company of The Huffington Post.)

The Rockefeller study looked at more than 100 articles from 37 news outlets, written about 20 CEOs — male and female — in the Fortune 1,000 and at major tech companies. They considered stories in four categories: Those written about companies in crisis, about newly appointed CEOs, fired or resigning CEOs, and those who retired.

Articles about women brought up gender 49 percent of the time, compared with 4 percent for male chief executives. In other words, if you simply write "chief executive" in a story, you're probably writing about a man.

If the CEO is a woman, the writer will likely make that clear in the prose. That's not surprising. There's a shared unconscious bias, even in 2016, that makes people associate man with CEO. Just as you might associate woman with nurse or, say, kindergarten teacher.

Notably, women reporters were more like to write about female CEOs — but that didn't reduce bias in the coverage.



NBC VIA GETTY IMAGES

NBC's Bob Costas poses with U.S. gymnasts Simone Biles and Aly Raisman on Aug. 17 at the Summer Olympics. Media coverage of the games was frequently criticized for gender bias.

In fact, women were more likely to write about a female CEO's personal life, according to the study. Twenty percent of the stories on female CEOs, written by women, mentioned her personal life. When men were writing the articles, a female CEO's personal life was only mentioned 5 percent of the time.

That kind of "colorful" coverage may seem innocuous — after all, it's more interesting reading about how an executive juggles work and family or what kinds of shoes she might like to wear. Who doesn't want to check out the Vogue photo shoot of Mayer draped over a [chaise lounge](#). It's a rare sprinkling of color in what can often be super-dull business news.

But what winds up happening, Rodin said, is that the public gets a view of male and female leaders that differentiates them in ways that are irrelevant to their leadership skills. The colorful stories about how that female CEO "does it all," feed into our biases about who women and men really are.

"Those are unconscious biases," Rodin said, noting she experienced this herself. Rodin was the first female president of an Ivy League school, taking the helm at the University of Pennsylvania in 1994.

It's more complicated than bias, though. Covering female leaders is still somewhat novel — and often coverage is relegated, for better or worse, in special women's sections like Fortune's Most Powerful Women. In this context it becomes hard not to consider gender when looking at women leaders. Is that unconscious bias, then, or just the result of covering something that unfortunately is still new and different? Figuring out how a female president will dress is a news story because it is still novel.

There are other questions, too: Is the goal to ultimately write about women exactly how we write about men? Or instead do we want to approach

coverage of male CEOs differently? Instead of talking about a woman's family life less, should we start asking men the same questions?

Rockefeller's study is the latest addition to a growing body of research uncovering the myriad ways our biases about women and men affect how we see each other and our leaders at work.

Beliefs about what makes an ideal chief executive (strong, assertive, man) and what kinds of qualities a woman should exhibit (warmth, sociability, compassion) shape everything from job interviews, to letters of recommendation, to hiring and promotion, to performance evaluations and, of course, press coverage.

Gender bias in media coverage isn't new. The issue drew a lot of attention during the Summer Olympics, when sports writers were called out for writing about women athletes as though they were competing in a beauty contest.

Running a major public company is also not a beauty contest.

Rockefeller's report is part of the foundation's 100 by 25 campaign, which aims to increase the number of women who run Fortune 500 companies to 100 by the year 2025. It's an effort that requires buy-in and help from corporate boards, institutional investors, the companies themselves and, yes, the media, Rodin said.

Noted.