

# ***Busy Bee, Tough Mom, Farmer's Daughter: The Canadian Business Press Portrayal of Annette Verschuren***

Karen Grandy  
Saint Mary's University

**ABSTRACT** *This article challenges assertions made by business magazine editors that the business press plays no role beyond reporting on women's executive advancement—or lack thereof. The study begins with the latest reported statistics on women's leadership roles in corporate Canada and a summary of the most common explanations for these numbers. The second half of the paper goes on to examine the Canadian print media coverage of Annette Verschuren, a woman who defied the executive odds. It argues that although Verschuren is prominently featured in the business press, gendered stereotyping, which has been identified as a major obstacle to women's promotion, is reinforced in that coverage by both the framing of her story and the language and imagery used to describe her and her accomplishments.*

**KEYWORDS** *Feminist/gender; Business media; Magazines; Frame analysis*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Cet article met en question les assertions avancées par les rédacteurs de magazines d'affaires selon lesquelles ceux-ci ne font rien de plus que de rapporter objectivement les avancements des femmes en affaires. Cette étude présente d'abord les statistiques les plus récentes sur la faible proportion de femmes d'affaires dans des rôles de direction au Canada ainsi qu'un condensé des explications les plus communes pour ces résultats. La seconde moitié de l'article examine la couverture dans la presse écrite canadienne d'Annette Verschuren, une femme qui a surmonté maints défis pour réussir dans le monde des affaires. L'article soutient que Verschuren, bien qu'elle figure souvent dans la presse d'affaires, fait l'objet de stéréotypes sexospécifiques, identifiés comme un obstacle important pour l'avancement des femmes. Ces stéréotypes sont évidents dans le cadrage de son histoire ainsi que dans le langage et les images employés pour décrire sa personne et ses accomplissements.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Féminisme/sexe; Médias d'affaires; Magazines; Cadres de l'expérience*

**A**NNETTE VERSCHUREN, president of The Home Depot's Canadian and Asian divisions, appeared on the cover of the *Globe and Mail's Report on Business Magazine* in March 2007. The story was titled "Orange China" and discussed Verschuren's leading role in the home improvement chain's planned expansion into

**Karen Grandy** is Assistant Professor in the Marketing/Communications Department, Sobey School of Business, Saint Mary's University, 923 Robie Street, Halifax, NS B3H 3C3. Email: karen.grandy@smu.ca.

the Asian market. The editorial column for that March 2007 issue ran under the headline “Woman of the Year,” a sheepish pun acknowledging that Verschuren was in fact the one and only woman to appear on the cover of *Report on Business Magazine* in the preceding year. The editor Gary Salewicz went on to give this regret-tinged accounting for what he described as a “dearth of women fronting the magazine”: it was “a reflection of the sad fact that few of them occupy the top echelons of Canada’s largest corporations” (Salewicz, 2007, p. 4). Salewicz’ explanation for his magazine’s rare coverage of businesswomen echoes that of Lars Turnbull, the publication’s previous editor. Turnbull, in December 2005, felt called upon to respond to reader mail on the complete absence of women in a recent piece on the “25 Most Powerful People in Business.” He stated: “The magazine’s job is to reflect the realities of big business in Canada, not to promote the advancement of women into senior executive roles—however noble a cause that may be” (2005, p. 16).

This article challenges Salewicz’ and Turnbull’s assertions that a publication like *Report on Business Magazine*, and by extension the business press, has no role beyond reporting on—“reflect[ing] the realities” of—women’s executive advancement, or lack thereof. The magazine scholar David Abrahamson voices the premise of much media communication research when he states in his book *Magazine-Made America* that “all communication media have an important societal dimension, both reflecting and shaping the social actualities of their time” (1996, p. 3, emphasis added). More specific to this project, feminist media scholarship, grounded in the same constructive premise, highlights the media’s active role in the representation and hence creation of gender (Carter, 2004; Gill, 2007; van Zoonen, 1994), and gender has been shown to have a significant impact on the composition of corporate Canada’s top echelons, as reported in the statistics and studies discussed below. Furthermore, the *Report on Business Magazine* editors’ description of their publication as a “reflector” of reality is based on the assumption that print media—in selection, framing, and language—can be neutral and uninvolved in the creation of the “realities” it purports to represent, an assumption that both feminist media criticism and, more broadly, discourse analysis theory challenge as untenable (Gill, 2007; Jaworski & Coupland, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

My study begins with the latest reported statistics on women’s leadership roles in corporate Canada and a summary of the most common explanations for these persistently low numbers. Although the statistics might seem to support the *Report on Business Magazine*’s editorial statement that its coverage of female executives is proportionally representative, it is not just the quantity of stories that demands scrutiny, but also the content. My approach rests on feminist and discourse analyses’ common proposition that “representations matter” (Gill, 2007, p. 7), and that analysis of textual content and form can elucidate underlying social values and assumptions (Fairclough, 1999). In the second half of the article, I go on to examine the print media coverage of Annette Verschuren, a woman who defied the executive odds. Although Verschuren is prominently featured in the business press, I argue that gendered stereotyping, which has been identified as a major obstacle to women’s promotion, is reinforced in that coverage by both the framing of her story and the language and imagery used to describe her and her accomplishments.

The business media has been identified as a neglected area of communications research. In 2002, Elfriede Fürsich, looking back over 25 years of media scholarship in the United States, discovers “only a few studies investigating financial reporting” (2002, p. 356). In a book review published in the Winter 2006 issue of the *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, Chris Roush confirms that business media scholarship continues to be “an untapped area for mass communication scholars” (2006, p. 945). A database search of the past 10 years of the *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, and *Canadian Journal of Communication* again finds very few analyses of the business media, even in recent years when economic news has often been the lead story. Likewise, although feminist media scholars have examined and written extensively about newspapers, magazines, television, film, and the Internet (see Byerly & Ross, 2006; Carter & Steiner, 2004; Gill, 2007), the business media has not caught the attention of many feminist critics.<sup>2</sup> In addition to contributing to the field of business media studies, I hope that this research might also be useful to groups that advocate for more and better opportunities for women in business.

### **Women at the top**

In October 1990, Annette Verschuren was one of six prominent Canadian businesswomen invited to take part in a round table discussion, organized by and published in *Report on Business Magazine*, titled “Women at the Top: A Progress Report.” The editor Margaret Wentz asked the participants to speak about their personal experience in the executive business world and to predict the changes that might come in the new decade and new century. The participants were all fairly optimistic that, despite the daunting challenges they themselves had faced, they were the vanguard of a major advancement in women’s participation in senior management (“Women at the Top,” 1990). Nearly two decades later, however, statistics show that their optimism was unfounded, or at best premature.

According to the 2008 *Catalyst Census of Women Corporate Officers and Top Earners of the FP500*, women in Canada now account for 16.9% of senior corporate officers in *Financial Post* 500 companies, which includes publicly traded and privately held companies, Crown corporations, and co-operatives (Jenner & Ferguson, 2009). While women comprise 47.1% of the Canadian labour force and hold 37.2% of management positions, they hold the chief executive position at just 30 (6%) of the *Financial Post* 500 companies (Jenner & Ferguson, 2009). A comparable study of the top 100 publicly traded Canadian companies, conducted annually by the recruitment firm Rosenzweig & Company, found women held just 7.2% of the highest paid executive positions in 2008; only six of these 100 companies had female chief executive officers, and 69% of them had no women senior executives (*Annual Rosenzweig Report*, 2009).

These statistics should be of concern not just to groups like Catalyst, a non-profit international organization that works to expand opportunities for women in business, but also to shareholders and stakeholders in corporate Canada at large. The Conference Board of Canada, in 2002, reported its findings that corporations that had “two or more women on the board in 1995 were far more likely to be industry leaders in revenues and profits six years later, in 2001” (Brown, Brown, & Anastasopoulos, 2002, p. i). A 2007 report published by the management consulting firm McKinsey &

Company likewise shows that “companies with a higher proportion of women in their top management have better financial performance” (*Women Matter*, 2007, p. 14), confirming Catalyst’s study *The Bottom Line: Connecting Corporate Performance and Gender Diversity* (Joy, Carter, Wagner, & Narayanan, 2007). Further, the World Economic Forum’s *Global Gender Gap Report 2008* points out even broader implications of the disproportionate statistics: “A nation’s competitiveness depends significantly on whether and how it educates and utilizes its female talent” (as cited in Ernst & Young, 2009, p. 2)

Common explanations for the slow advances of women into executive management range from the personal—that women simply choose not to make the individual sacrifices necessary for advancement to the most senior positions<sup>3</sup>—to the institutional, as discussed, for example, in Douglas Branson’s 2005 book *No Seat at the Table: How Corporate Governance and Law Keep Women Out of the Boardroom*. Other frequently cited challenges to women executives include a traditional corporate career path model that penalizes and sidelines anyone who takes time off (a.k.a. “the mommy track”), a self-replicating “old boys’ network” still influential in matters of advancement and board appointment, and a corresponding lack of female mentors (Hewlett, 2002; Kingston, 2005; *Women Matter*, 2007).<sup>4</sup> These barriers are reinforced by persistent gendered stereotyping that perceives men, and not women, as either genetically and/or socially primed to be leaders, because of the former’s achievement-oriented agentic traits and the latter’s service-oriented communal traits (Heilman, 2001; Schneider, 2004).

In 2005 Catalyst asked nearly 300 American executives (85% of whom were CEOs or within two reporting levels) to estimate the percentage of women and men who could effectively perform 10 leadership behaviours, such as delegating, team building, inspiring, problem solving, et cetera. Catalyst’s findings, published under the revealing title *Women “Take Care,” Men “Take Charge”: Stereotyping of U.S. Business Leaders Exposed*, suggest that gendered stereotyping is deeply ingrained in corporate culture. In addition to revealing the widespread perception of women’s superiority at consulting with colleagues and rewarding subordinates, and men’s better ability to delegate and influence upward,<sup>5</sup> the survey also highlights an important difference in men’s and women’s perception of each other’s abilities: men see men as better problem solvers, while women see women as better problem solvers (*Women “Take Care,”* 2005). The Catalyst report highlights the significance of this sex-based difference of opinion: “More than any of the other behaviors, problem-solving is probably the single best exemplar of leadership that people consider in making judgments about an individual’s leadership effectiveness” (p. 15). Biased assessment of problem solving is just one example of how gender-based perceptions and deep-seated assumptions can contribute to the self-replicating tendencies of male-dominated executives and boards (see Ridgeway, 2001).

### **Media study**

The Catalyst report concludes that “simply hiring or promoting more women leaders may not be enough” (*Women “Take Care,”* 2005, p. 25). The Conference Board of Canada, in its publication titled *Creating High Performance Organizations: Leveraging*

*Women's Leadership*, concurs: "Women executives look beyond the number of women in senior management to culture and attitudes in their assessment of the rate of change" (Orser, 2000, p. 6). To bring about the necessary change in the corporate culture, therefore, Catalyst (2005) recommends that in addition to hiring and promoting more women, organizations should also educate senior management about the often latent influence of stereotyping (p. 28) and "showcas[e] the successes of women leaders—especially in stereotypically masculine fields" (p. 26). Catalyst suggests proactive measures to be undertaken within corporations.

An external source also exists, however, that not only specializes in showcasing business leaders but addresses itself to this same target audience of senior managers and executives: the periodical business press. *Canadian Business Magazine*, for example, estimates that more than one-third of its one million monthly readers are MOPES: managers, owners, professionals, and executives (Canadian Business Online, 2009). The business press would thus appear to be well positioned for prompting the shift in corporate culture and attitude called for by the Conference Board of Canada and others. To explore this potential, my study examines the Canadian business print media's portrayal of a woman executive who has been impressively successful in a "stereotypically masculine field": Annette Verschuren. Although Verschuren receives a considerable amount of coverage in the business press—in both interviews and feature profiles—the potentially positive impact of this showcasing is undermined by language, imagery, and framing that reinforces the gendered stereotyping that perpetuates the executive status quo.

The databases ABI/INFORM, CBCA (Canadian Business and Current Affairs), and CPI.Q (Canadian Periodical Index) were used to locate newspaper and magazine stories published since 1990 about Annette Verschuren.<sup>6</sup> Many of the database hits turned out to be press releases put on the Canadian NewsWire by Home Depot Canada itself, which typically included a quotation from Annette Verschuren, as the company's Canadian president. Eliminating the press releases left 22 articles in which Annette Verschuren was the main subject, plus six published interviews.<sup>7</sup> The articles and interviews appeared in the business magazines *Strategy*, *Report on Business Magazine*, *Financial Post Magazine*, and *Canadian Business Magazine*; the trade publications *Hardware Merchandising* and *Hardware & Home Centre Magazine*; and the business section of general newspapers and magazines. The articles ranged in length from less than 400 to more than 4,500 words. With the exception of her participation in the *Report on Business Magazine's* "Women at the Top" panel in 1990, Verschuren begins to appear in the business press in February 1996, when she was recruited by Home Depot. After giving a brief summary of Verschuren's professional biography, I will discuss three major motifs that emerge from the sample. The articles in this sample, like all texts, are polysemic, containing multiple levels of meanings and open to interpretation. My own, necessarily biased, approach will highlight the texts as sites where the discourse of gender, defined by Liesbet van Zoonen as "a set of overlapping and sometimes contradictory cultural descriptions and prescriptions referring to sexual difference" (1994, p. 40), is negotiated and constructed.

### **Annette Verschuren: Biography**

The basic facts of Verschuren's professional biography are referenced repeatedly in the study sample. She earned her bachelor of business administration at Saint Frances Xavier University, in Antigonish, Nova Scotia. After graduation she went to work, in 1977, as a program administrator for DEVCO (the Cape Breton Development Corporation), including for a number of years in its coal mining sector. She worked from 1986 to 1989 at CDIC (the Canadian Development Investment Corporation), in Toronto, where she oversaw the privatization of Crown corporations such as Teleglobe and Canadair. She then joined IMASCO Ltd. and ran its "Den for Men" chain until 1993, at which time she formed her own company, Verschuren Ventures, and brokered a deal to bring the hobby and crafts store Michaels to Canada. She oversaw the creation and growth of that chain to 17 Canadian stores, in just over two years, before she was recruited by Home Depot to take over the Canadian division of its home improvement chain. She assumed responsibility for the Asian expansion of the chain in 2006. Verschuren is also the chancellor of Cape Breton University and serves on many national boards, including as chair of Habitat for Humanity's National President's Council and vice chair of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives (Laporte, 2008; Olijnyk, 2007; Theobald, 1998).

Home Depot had just 19 Canadian stores in 1996, when Verschuren took charge; by 2009, there were more than 170 Home Depot stores in Canada, with upwards of 27,000 employees (Home Depot Canada, 2009). As we would expect, then, throughout these articles there are many comments made by the journalists, sources, and Verschuren herself on her leadership qualities. Three dominant motifs emerge from the sample: her energy, her toughness, and her rural background.

### **Busy bee**

The term most commonly used by business journalists as a descriptor for Verschuren is "energetic." Frequent variations on this theme include "dynamic," "enthusiastic," "bustling," "an unstoppable force," a "dynamo." One explicitly feminized version of this term in the sample is an extended metaphor in which the writer first labels her "one busy bee" and later the "queen bee ... buzzing around her stores" (Olijnyk, 2003, p. 33). Verschuren's energy, along with her drive and determination, are also the qualities most often highlighted by the sources quoted or paraphrased in these stories: she does not "take no for an answer" ("Home Depot Backs a Winner," 1996, p. 8); "She gets things done" (Erskine, 2004); and "She's not going to stop for a minute" (Olijnyk, 2007, p. 40) are representative quotations. Verschuren's descriptions of herself likewise echo these observations. She recalls being a "real go-getter" (Bornais, 1999) in her first job after graduation and declares at the age of 48, "I feel like I'm 28" (Erskine, 2004).

While energy and determination might be seen as exemplary, and ungendered, leadership qualities, a less positive underlying assumption might also be heard in this constant refrain. In their article "Cracking the Glass Ceiling: Overcoming Isolation and Alienation" (1991), the social psychologists Virginia O'Leary and Jeanette Ickovics discuss their findings of marked differences in how male and female managers' success is perceived in the workplace. They observe: "A man's successful performance on a task

is attributed to ability, whereas a woman's successful performance on the same task is attributed to effort or luck" (p. 13). Furthermore, they conclude that women's extra effort is often perceived as necessary to make up for their presumed lack of ability.

The writers, quoted sources, and Verschuren herself continually state and/or imply that it is mainly her dynamic personality that accounts for her success. For instance, a 1996 Canadian Press story paraphrases CEO Arthur Blank, who cites "dynamism, enthusiasm, entrepreneurial spirit" as Verschuren's key qualifications for her new position with Home Depot, before mentioning her "operations and merchandising" experience ("Boss of Michaels," 1996). With the exception of one article in which she is described as "one of Canada's first pioneers" in big-box retailing ("Home Depot Backs a Winner," 1996, p. 8) and another piece in which she boasts, "I could see Wal-Mart coming" (Olijnyk, 2004, p. 102), her visionary and planning skills are rarely mentioned by the writers or sources. In the accounts of her impressive accomplishment in establishing the Michaels chain in Canada, for example, it is Verschuren's "energy and chutzpah" (Theobald, 1998) that are highlighted (Shaw, 2003), rather than her foresight and strategy. The repeated emphasis on her energetic personality, as key to her corporate success, reinforces the gendered stereotyping of leadership skills, reported in O'Leary and Ickovics' 1992 workplace study and shown to be still persistent in the 2005 Catalyst report.

### **Tough mom**

In keeping with the business media's tradition of employing war imagery (Koller, 2004b), battle terminology is frequently used to describe Verschuren. In one article she is labelled a "supremo ... defending her company" (Theobald, 1998); she is repeatedly said to be ready to "fight" in the battle for market share in the highly competitive home improvement business (Green & Koci, 2006; Williams, 2006). Verschuren says of herself: "I'm very confident with conflict" (Theobald, 1998), and she calls herself "aggressive" (Bornais, 1999). However, it is notable that neither the journalists nor the sources ever use the latter term, with its masculine connotations (Koller, 2004b). Quoted source Michael McLarney, the editor of the hardware trade publication *Hardlines*, invokes battle imagery when he calls Verschuren "a tough leader. Take no prisoners." He goes on to say, intriguingly and just after calling her a "great leader": "I wouldn't want to work for her myself" (Nuttall-Smith, 2007, p. 31).

Given Home Depot's primary inventory, the story title "Tough as nails" was of course irresistible (Laver, 1999, p. 47). "Tough" is an adjective used repeatedly in these stories, by both the journalists and Verschuren. In an article from October 2008, Verschuren stated: "You have to be tough. I'm in a tough business" (Laporte, 2008). While business writers describe her as "formidable" (Williams, 2006, p. 44) and as having a "steely resolve" (Laporte, 2008), it is hard to imagine a less threatening image than *Report on Business Magazine* journalist Chris Nuttall-Smith's likeness of Verschuren to a cashier "at the Sobey's in North Sydney, calling for a price check on a dozen eggs" (Salewicz, 2007, p. 4). Verschuren herself uses the term "tough mom" to describe her leadership style in a 2006 article (Green & Koci, p. 47). Nuttall-Smith, likewise, invokes a maternal image through his observation that Verschuren is "as apt to hug employees as shake their hands" (Salewicz, 2007, p. 4).

Feminist media critic Sherrie Inness discusses the complex notion of the “tough woman” in her examination of images of toughness in women’s magazines in the late 1980s and early 1990s. She concludes that those publications “limit the threat posed by toughness in women by suggesting that toughness should not and does not interfere with a woman’s adherence to femininity” (2004, p. 138). We can see similar reassurances of femininity in the “tough mom” motif in these business periodicals. The positive maternal connotations also concur with psychologist Linda Carli’s observations on the role gender expectations play in women leaders’ ability to influence. Carli concludes: “Although being likeable benefits men as well, since it increased ability to influence, likeableness appears to be essential for women. Likeableness, like warmth, is stereotypically linked to the female gender role and appears to be prescriptive for women” (2001, p. 735). The “tough mom” motif can be seen as another writing of this “prescription.”

At the same time, however, the conventionally feminine details and language in the articles also call attention to the media’s own role as a site of gender construction—and potential deconstruction. For example, a number of journalists make mention of Verschuren’s pink hard hat, hot-pink construction boots, and fuchsia laces (Laporte, 2008; Nuttall-Smith, 2007). This explicitly feminized workwear is a discursively loaded symbol: while it could be read as a reassurance that the tough female executive is still following the protocol for femininity, it might also be seen as a flouting challenge to a previously exclusively masculine realm and thus to a clear-cut division between genders. Through repeated references, the pink construction site gear emerges as an iconic reminder that gender is socially constructed, mutable, and “put on.”

### Farmer’s daughter

In their analyses of media coverage of prominent female politicians, feminist critics have identified what they see as an undue emphasis on the subjects’ domestic and family lives, in comparison with the coverage of male politicians (Byerly & Ross, 2006; Gill, 2007; Ross, 2002). The articles and interviews examined here reveal the basic facts about Verschuren’s personal life: parents and siblings, first marriage, divorce, and subsequent relationships with her new partner and step-grandchildren. The fact that she has no children of her own is mentioned, just in passing, three times and the medical reason for this twice, both times in Maritime regional newspapers<sup>8</sup> (Bornais, 1999; Tutton, 1998). What is most striking about the non-professional biographical content in the Verschuren stories, however, is the journalists’—and indeed the subject’s own—persistent fascination with her childhood on a Cape Breton dairy farm. In more than 50% of the stories and interviews, from as early as February 1996 to as recently as October 2008, some comment is made on about her rural upbringing. Business profiles and interviews of star executives are typically centred around questions such as How did you get where you are today? and What equipped you to perform the amazing feats you’ve accomplished? The conventional answers are a mixture of personal and professional experiences. In Verschuren’s case, we might summarize: *All I really need to know I learned on the farm.*

The first farm reference comes in a *Financial Post* story on what it calls Home Depot’s seemingly “strange” choice for its new Canadian president: Verschuren is

introduced to readers as someone with little retail experience, without an MBA, and who “spent her formative years running the family farm with her brother on Cape Breton Island” (Brent, 1996b). This initial lumping in of her farming background with her other lack of traditional credentials is soon replaced, however, by the notion that it was in fact the farm, as much as or more than her business degree and subsequent work experience, that prepared her for her extraordinary career.

Two particular events from Verschuren’s childhood are repeatedly cited: 1) her cow-milking prowess; and 2) her father’s very serious heart attack, when she was nine years old. Both of these subjects are first discussed in *Hardware & Home Centre Magazine’s* profile of Verschuren, in May 1996, just after she had taken up her new appointment with Home Depot. It is Gene Ormond, a Home Depot head office executive, who first draws attention to Verschuren’s youthful victory at milking competitions, as he explains why she was chosen to lead the Canadian division:

When we learned during her interview that she was a seven-time champion of milking cows back in Cape Breton, we asked her why seven times—why go every year for seven years? Her response was simple: “Because I was the champion!” In other words, she had to defend her title. She’s that competitive. When we heard the milking story, that was it. . . We loved it. (“Home Depot Backs a Winner,” 1996, p. 8).

Six journalists in the sample mention the milking competitions, which, like her oft-cited childhood nickname “Poopie,” provide colourful anecdotal material to the articles.

The farm anecdotes also help journalists frame her biography as a familiar archetypal story. Indeed, Verschuren’s biography as presented in these articles fits closely with the hero myth that Jack Lule discusses in his book *Daily News, Eternal Stories: The Mythological Role of Journalism* (2001). Lule observes that the Hero tale follows a “timeless pattern: the humble birth, the early mark of greatness, the quest, the triumph, and the return” (p. 23). Verschuren’s cow-milking victories, accordingly, might be interpreted as her “early mark of greatness.” Verschuren herself invokes the Hero pattern in her remarks on the occasion of the opening of The Home Depot in Cape Breton: “Who would have thought that someone who grew up shoveling manure (on the family farm) in Cape Breton would become president of The Home Depot’s 117 stores in Canada?” (Stewart, 2005). Rags-to-riches tales are ubiquitous in business journalism, commonly found in profiles of both men and women executives. The mythic features and pattern also remind us of the media’s well-established role of contributing to the creation of the culture of the community to which it speaks (Lule, 2001; van Zoonen, 1994)—in this case, a corporate culture that needs to change.

A second event from Verschuren’s childhood, her father’s heart attack, is referenced in eight different articles in the sample. As Verschuren tells it, she and her 10-year-old brother essentially had to take over when her father’s condition left him unable to physically manage the farm. She comments repeatedly on the impact of this unconventional childhood on her unconventional career path, stating that the former enabled the latter. “You find out what a team can do through family” (Shaw, 2003) is one lesson that she attributes to this early experience, as

is learning “how to work hard” (Bornais, 1999). She calls her family’s unfortunate circumstances a “great opportunity to get a lot of responsibility at a very young age” (“Home Depot Backs a Winner,” 1996, p. 8). Like the pink construction boots, Verschuren’s repeated emphasis on the significance of her unusual childhood points to the social construction and learning of gender. Indeed, she explicitly connects her success as a woman executive with the family farm, where there was “no sex discrimination” in the work distribution (Tutton, 1998, p. B1) and where she realized “that I had no limits on what I could do” (“Home Depot Backs a Winner,” 1996, p. 8).

Verschuren’s repeated references to her farming experience might also be meant to appeal to her company’s targeted customers: “dirt-under-the-fingernails contractors and the do-it-yourself renovators” (Brent, 1996a). She likewise sometimes expresses herself in “dirt-under-the-fingernails” language, as when she describes her fear that “contractors would get pissed off that we were getting too fluffy” (Strauss, 2003). Verschuren’s agricultural background, however, gives rise to some notably gendered language. Her proud declaration of being “a farmer’s daughter” (Brent, 1996b) is continually quoted and reiterated—six times in the study sample. While “a farmer’s daughter” is a literal description, with positive familial connotations, the singular possessive here is also literally patriarchal, and inaccurate: Verschuren herself remarks more than once on her mother’s essential contributions to their farm (Laporte, 2008). The journalists, including Nuttall-Smith in the expanded headline for the *Report on Business Magazine* cover story, also repeatedly refer to her as a “farm girl,” although she never calls herself that. One writer describes her as a “43-year-old Cape Breton farm girl,” even though she had not lived on a Cape Breton farm—or been a girl—for decades (Bornais, 1999). The cumulative effect of this terminology is condescending.<sup>9</sup>

### Example or exception?

My study ends where it began: with Gary Salewicz’ editorial column, “Woman of the Year” (2007). As this article has shown, business stories carry levels of meanings and are open to interpretation. Feminist media scholar Liesbet van Zoonen, however, argues that even given this polysemic nature, most texts carry “‘a preferred reading or meaning’ which, given the economic and ideological location of most media, will tend to reconstruct dominant values” (1994, p. 42). One element through which that preferred reading is conveyed, as described by Allan Bell in his structural analysis of news stories, is evaluation, which signals to readers the significance and newsworthiness of a story (1999). In determining newsworthiness, the business print media adheres to the standard criteria, listed by Mitchell Stephens in *A History of News* (2007) as “impact, emotional appeal, conflict, timeliness, proximity, prominence and the unusual” (p. 26). Like other profile subjects, Annette Verschuren has attracted Canadian business media attention because of timely prominence, her impact in her industry, and because she is Canadian (proximity). Fierce competition between big-box home improvement chains also provides an element of conflict. According to Bell, the primary location for evaluation in news stories is the lead paragraph, the function of which is “to make the contents of the story sound as X as possible, where X is big,

recent, important, unusual, new; in a word—newsworthy” (1999, p. 241 [emphasis in original]). I propose that in a magazine, the editor’s discussion of the cover story, in an up-front column, can also perform this evaluative function. By initially introducing Verschuren to readers as “an anomaly” (2007), editor Gary Salewicz implies that she is newsworthy because she is “unusual,” a term he also uses in the column to describe her. In her study of media coverage of women politicians, Karen Ross observes that presenting publicly successful women as novelties “trivialize[s] and neutralize[s]” women’s power (2002, p. 81). Furthermore, labelling a female executive “unusual” reinforces the notion that male executives are the norm, an idea underscored by a source quoted in the *Report on Business Magazine* cover story, who calls Verschuren “one of the boys” (Nuttall-Smith, 2007, p. 31).

Likewise, while we might see the framing of Verschuren’s biography as a hero myth as the affirmative showcasing that Catalyst called for and as an encouraging example of what women can do, heroes are also, by definition, extraordinary. Although Donna Laporte, writing for *The Toronto Star* in 2008, described Verschuren’s career as “an upward trajectory, shattering glass ceilings along the way,” this claim is at odds with the 2009 *Annual Rosenzweig Report*, which concludes that “women at the top echelons of corporate Canada face a glass ceiling” (2009, p. 2). The heroic framing of Verschuren’s life and career, like the adjective “unusual,” presents her as exceptional rather than exemplary.

## Conclusion

Gary Salewicz’s 2007 editorial column contains another notable instance of revealing word choice, in his explanation for the “dearth” of women cover subjects: “few of them occupy the top echelons” (2007, p. 4). What Salewicz and his fellow editor fail to mention in their discussion of the coverage of women executives is that the issue is not just the small number of stories about successful women in business, but the content, structure, and discourse of those stories. While the low volume of stories about women executives “reflects” the statistical reality, as the *Report on Business Magazine* editors claim, my examination of the coverage of Annette Verschuren reveals that the latent gendered presumptions that help perpetuate those statistics might also be reflected, and thereby reinforced, in the business press. The us/them binary in Salewicz’s “few of them” phrase also reminds us, however, that the magazine is clearly addressing itself to the very audience that, as O’Leary and Ickovics argue, “must come to see ‘managerial’ and leadership qualities as distinct from gender” (1992, p. 16).

There should be an opportunity here for the business press itself to “be the change” that advocacy groups say is necessary for women executives to begin to reach parity in the corporate world. Although that change might begin, as Catalyst suggests, with more profiles of women executives, it should also include closer attention to the language, framing, and evaluation in those profiles. The business media thus might begin to acknowledge, and perhaps eventually embrace, its own privileged, powerful position as a site of gender construction. “Leadership does not take place in a genderless vacuum,” Janice Yoder observes (2001, p. 815), and neither does business journalism about leaders.

## Notes

1. Turnbull's (2005) statement that the magazine "reflect[s] the realities" (p. 16) also rests on the assumption of objective realities, knowable outside of language, an idea that postmodern theory, since Lacan and Foucault, challenges (Jaworski, 1999; van Zoonen, 1994).
2. A notable exception is linguist Veronika Koller, whose publications in the field include the book *Metaphor and gender in business media discourse: A critical cognitive study* (2004b) and the related article "Businesswomen and war metaphors: 'Possessive, jealous and pugnacious?'" (2004a).
3. Researchers have observed that men, by the statistical evidence at least, are not under as much pressure to choose between their personal lives and their careers, as indicated in the significantly higher percentage of male professionals, compared to women at the same level, who are married and have children, especially more than one child (Hewlett, 2002; Kingston, 2005; Robinson, 2005).
4. Groups like Canadian Women in Communications and the Judy Project at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management are undertaking to address this problem by setting up women's networks and mentorships.
5. Alice Eagly and Mary Johannessen-Schmidt (2001) discuss the debate and review the empirical evidence for demonstrable versus perceived differences in their article "The Leadership Styles of Women and Men."
6. An EBSCO and SAGE search for scholarly articles on Verschuren found nothing.
7. Verschuren is also included in the Contemporary Canadian Biographies series (1999), appears as a minor subject in Gordon Pitts' (2005) book, *The Godfathers: Lessons from the Atlantic Business Elite*, and is featured as one of 70 interviewees in *Kickstart: How Successful Canadians Got Started* (2008). (See 'Annette Verschuren,' 1999; Pitts, 2005; and Herman, Matthews, & Feindel, 2008.)
8. Profiles of leading businessmen also typically include marital and offspring summaries, but I have never come across an explanation for childlessness.
9. Verschuren is called a "milk-maid" in her entry in *Contemporary Canadian Biographies* ('Annette Verschuren,' 1999).

## References

- Abrahamson, David. (1996). *Magazine-made America: The cultural transformation of the postwar periodical*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- 'Annette Verschuren: Chief executive officer of Home Depot Canada.' (1999). In *Contemporary Canadian Biographies*. Toronto, ON: Thompson Gale Canada. CPI.Q (Canadian Periodicals). Web. 3 Mar. 2010.
- The annual Rosenzweig report on women at the top levels of corporate Canada*. (2009). Toronto, ON: Rosenzweig & Company.
- Bell, Allan. (1999). News stories as narratives. In Adam Jaworski & Nikolas Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader* (pp. 236-251). London: Routledge.
- Bornais, Stephen. (1999, June 13). No place like home. *The Daily News*, p. 48.
- Boss of Michaels hobby chain jumps to Home Depot. (1996, February 24). *Canadian Press NewsWire*.
- Branson, Douglas M. (2007). *No seat at the table: How corporate governance and law keep women out of the boardroom*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Brent, Paul. (1996a, February 24). Craft store founder to head Home Depot. *Financial Post*, p. 37.
- Brent, Paul. (1996b, February 28). Home Depot head fits the bill. *Financial Post*, p. 17.
- Brown, David A. H., Brown, Debra L., & Anastasopoulos, Vanessa. (2002). *Women on boards: Not just the right thing ... but the "bright" thing*. Ottawa, ON: Conference Board of Canada.
- Byerly, Carolyn M., & Ross, Karen. (2006). *Women and media: A critical introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

- Canadian Business Online [website]. (n.d.). *For advertisers: Advertising information and opportunities for Canadian Business Magazine*. URL: [http://www.canadianbusiness.com/canadian\\_business\\_magazine/advertisers/index](http://www.canadianbusiness.com/canadian_business_magazine/advertisers/index) [July 16, 2009].
- Carli, Linda L. (2001). Gender and social influence. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 725-741.
- Carter, Cynthia, & Steiner, Linda (Eds.). (2004). *Critical readings: Media and gender*. Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Eagly, Alice H., & Johannesen-Schmidt, Mary. (2001). The leadership styles of women and men. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 781-797.
- Ernst & Young. (2009). *Groundbreakers: Using the strength of women to rebuild the world economy*. (2009). UK: Ernst & Young Global Limited.
- Erskine, Bruce. (2004, October 17). Long way from home. *The Sunday Herald*, p. A12.
- Fairclough, Norman. (1999). Linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis. In Adam Jaworski & Nikolas Coupland (Eds.), *The discourse reader*. (pp. 183-221). London: Routledge.
- Fürsich, Elfriede. (2002). Nation, capitalism, myth: Covering news of economic globalization. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 79(2), 353-373.
- Gill, Rosalind. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Cambridge, UK.: Polity.
- Green, Carolyn, & Koci, Richard. (2006, March/April). Q & A: An interview with Annette Verschuren. *Hardware Merchandising*, 118(2), 43-48.
- Heilman, Madeline E. (2001). Description and prescription: How gender stereotypes prevent women's ascent up the organizational ladder. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 657-674.
- Herman, Alexander, Matthews, Paul, & Feindel, Andrew. (2008). *Kickstart: How successful Canadians got started*. Toronto, ON: Dundurn Press.
- Hewlett, Sylvia Ann. (2002). Executive women and the myth of having it all. *Harvard Business Review*, 80(4), 66-73.
- Home Depot backs a winner. (1996, May). *Hardware & Home Centre Magazine*, 20(3), 8-10.
- Home Depot Canada: *Corporate affairs*. (2009). URL: <http://www.homedepot.ca/communityaffairs/content/en/CA/CAHomepage.html> [July 16, 2009].
- Inness, Sherrie A. (2004). Pretty tough: The cult of femininity in women's magazines. In C. Carter & L. Steiner (Eds.), *Critical readings: Media and gender* (pp. 123-142). Maidenhead, Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Jaworski, Adam, & Coupland, Nikolas. (1999). *The discourse reader*. London: Routledge.
- Jenner, Laura, & Ferguson, Rhonda. (2009). *2008 Catalyst census of women corporate officers and top earners of the FP500*. Toronto, ON: Catalyst.
- Joy, Lois, Carter, Nancy M., Wagner, Harvey M., & Narayanan, Sriram. (2007). *The bottom line: Connecting corporate performance and gender diversity*. New York, NY: Catalyst.
- Kingston, Anne. (2005, December). Why women can't get ahead. *Report on Business* 22(5), 56-71.
- Koller, Veronika. (2004a). Businesswomen and war metaphors: 'Possessive, jealous and pugnacious'? *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 8(1), 3-22.
- Koller, Veronika. (2004b). *Metaphor and gender in business media discourse: A critical cognitive study*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Laporte, Donna. (2008, October 11). Unstoppable force. *The Toronto Star*, p. H1.
- Laver, Ross. (1999). Tough as nails. *Maclean's*, 112(28), 47.
- Lule, Jack. (2001). *Daily news, eternal stories: The mythological role of journalism*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Nuttall-Smith, Chris, & York, Geoffrey. (2007, March). Orange China. *Report on Business Magazine*, 24-38.
- O'Leary, Virginia E., & Ickovics, Jeanette R. (1992). Cracking the glass ceiling: Overcoming isolation and alienation. In Uma Sekaran & Frederick T. L. Leong (Eds.), *Womanpower: Managing in times of demographic turbulence* (pp. 7-30). London: Sage.
- Olijnyk, Zena. (2003). Handy woman. *Canadian Business*, 76(21), 33-36.
- Olijnyk, Zena. (2004). Annette Verschuren. *Canadian Business*, 77(22), 102-103.
- Olijnyk, Zena. (2007). World-beater. *Canadian Business*, 80(3), 38-41.
- Orser, Barbara. (2000). *Creating high performance organizations: Leveraging women's leadership*. Ottawa, ON: Conference Board of Canada.

- Pitts, Gordon. (2005). *The codfathers: Lessons from the Atlantic business elite*. Toronto, ON: Key Porter Books.
- Ridgeway, Cecilia L. (2001). Gender, status, and leadership. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 637-55.
- Robinson, Gertrude Joch. (2005). *Gender, journalism, and equity: Canadian, U.S., and European experiences*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Ross, Karen. (2002). *Women, politics, media: Uneasy relations in comparative perspective*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Roush, Chris. (2006). The markets and the media: Business news and stock market movements. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83(4), 945.
- Salewicz, Gary. (2007, March). Woman of the year. *Report on Business Magazine*, 4.
- Schneider, David J. (2004). *The psychology of stereotyping*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Shaw, Hollie. (2003, March 8). Home Depot improvement. *National Post*, p. PW7.
- Stephens, Mitchell. (2007). *A history of news*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Stewart, Wes. (2005, January 26). Home Depot opens its first store in Cape Breton. *Cape Breton Post*, p. A3.
- Strauss, Marina. (2003, February 28). Home Depot thinking outside the box. *The Globe and Mail*, p. B9.
- Theobald, Steven. (1998, November 15). At home with Annette. *The Toronto Star*, p. A18.
- Turnbull, Lars. (2005, December). The messenger shoots back. *Report on Business Magazine*, 22(5), 16.
- Tutton, Michael. (1998, November 5). Women on the move. *The New Brunswick Telegraph Journal*, pp. B1-2.
- Van Zoonen, Liesbet. (1994). *Feminist media studies*. London: Sage.
- Williams, Natalia. (2006, November). Home is where the heart is. *Strategy*, 44.
- Women at the top: A progress report. (1990). *Report on Business Magazine*, 7(4), 56-69.
- Women matter: Gender diversity, a corporate performance driver. (2007). Paris: McKinsey & Company.
- Women "take care," men "take charge": Stereotyping of U.S. business leaders exposed. (2005). New York, NY: Catalyst.
- Yoder, Janice D. (2001). Making leadership work more effectively for women. *Journal of Social Issues*, 57(4), 815-828.