

# Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought

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Volume 7  
Issue 1 *Women and Leadership: Economic,  
Political, and Cultural Aspects*

Article 5

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7-16-2013

## Framing Saint Johanna: Media Coverage of Iceland's First Female (and the World's First Openly Gay) Prime Minister

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### Recommended Citation

Mundy, Dean E. (2013) "Framing Saint Johanna: Media Coverage of Iceland's First Female (and the World's First Openly Gay) Prime Minister," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Feminist Thought*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/jift/vol7/iss1/5>

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## Introduction

On Monday, January 26, 2009, Iceland's government collapsed following weeks of civil unrest and months of economic panic. Conservative Prime Minister Geir Haarde, along with his administration, resigned, leaving two of Iceland's major political parties, the Social Democrat Alliance and Left-Green Party, to form a new government. Less than a week later, on February 1, the country named Iceland's minister for social affairs, 66-year-old Johanna Sigurdardottir, the new Prime Minister. While Sigurdardottir's new cabinet touted the country's milestone of achieving equal representation of men and women for the first time in Iceland's government, the world's media focused on the new Prime Minister. After all, this flight attendant turned union organizer and then political leader had just become, "the first openly lesbian head of government in Europe, if not the world – at least in modern times" (BBC News, "Gay Milestone," 2009). Almost three months later, on April 25, 2009, Iceland's voters overwhelmingly elected Sigurdardottir, and her Social Democrat/Left Green Alliance, to a permanent, four-year term.

During her first year in office, Sigurdardottir navigated the country through its economic crisis, managed reaction to an erupting Icelandic volcano that stalled travel around the globe, initiated Iceland's candidacy for membership in the European Union, saw the country's civil union law upgraded to full marriage equality, married her partner, and participated in an official state dinner with her wife, which was partly boycotted because of their relationship. She spent the next three years focused on economic recovery, which required unpopular, but necessary, widespread cutbacks in spending. As a result, a day before the April 2013 national elections, knowing her party would be defeated, Sigurdardottir stepped down from her party's leadership and left politics. Regardless, who she is and what she accomplished, is important. In September 2010, *Time Magazine* ranked her second among the world's top ten female leaders, three spots ahead of German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Adams, 2010). Yet, beyond *Time's* recognition, Sigurdardottir's historic appointment and subsequent leadership went largely unnoticed by major U.S. media outlets. At the end of her tenure, it is important to re-examine how media reported "a first" event of its kind: the election of Iceland's first female leader and the world's first openly gay prime minister.

This article investigates through a qualitative framing analysis how the media reported Sigurdardottir's initial appointment. A second study will analyze media coverage of Sigurdardottir's leadership throughout her tenure as prime minister, but it is important first to

understand how media portrayed the new prime minister in the days and weeks immediately following her initial appointment. Openly gay political figures have appeared in recent years and as such have provided increasing opportunities to examine media coverage of openly gay politicians at local and regional levels. The appointment of an openly gay *national* leader, however, is a watershed moment for the world's gay community and raises interesting questions regarding international, social and political sentiment toward the gay community. Her initial appointment was even news for some U.S. outlets, albeit briefly. Media coverage of Sigurdardottir's first days in office provides cultural cues regarding attitudes toward what once was considered the impossibility of a national gay political leader. Did the media frame Sigurdardottir as a new leader trying to save a country in the midst of economic and political crisis, Iceland's first female leader, or the world's first openly gay leader?

### **Literature Review**

Understanding how the media tell the story of the world's first openly gay prime minister requires examining the framing construct of media. The idea of "framing", as proffered by Goffman (1974), argues that individuals consciously and unconsciously employ selective interpretive lenses that shape, in a very specific way, how events are understood by themselves and by others. How a topic is presented, including the specific terms used to discuss that topic, indicate certain interpretations of the topic itself. Framing occurs at both the macro and micro levels of society (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007). The macro perspective investigates how cultural systems frame events in order to suggest a particular societal interpretation. Conversely, the micro level investigates how the individual uses a personal lens to influence the interpretation. Framing, then, by its very nature emphasizes that news is culturally bound, and the way media shape an article can reinforce or diminish certain cultural ideologies. Examining how the media framed Prime Minister Sigurdardottir therefore, indicates if particular ideologies, related to gender, sexuality, and politics, exist in coverage of her rise to power. These initial findings, in turn, will provide a benchmark against which to examine continued coverage throughout Sigurdardottir's leadership. The following review of literature therefore will examine framing's premise, why this premise is appropriate for the present study, examples of how framing has been used to understand gay media representation, and how framing has been employed in the study of female politicians.

Framing analyses, in the context of media, reveal the power of language and highlight the potential of what we may interpret as a mediated cultural consciousness. As Entman (1993) defined, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation" (p. 52). Simply put, how media present an event influences how audiences interpret the event itself (Scheufele and Tewskbury 2007). Journalists (and gatekeepers), therefore, wield a certain degree of power in terms of organizing an article in a way that increases or decreases the salience of a certain interpretation (or frame) (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Reese (2001) added that framing is "concerned with the way interests, communicators, sources, and culture combine to yield coherent ways of understanding the world, which are developed using all of the available verbal and visual symbolic resources" (p.11). Frames are organized around common social principles that are "persistent over time" and denote broader symbolic meaning regarding world social structure. Frames illustrate something larger than the story itself by suggesting a specific perspective on a broader cultural dynamic. As Scheufele (1999) explained, "mass media actively set the frames of reference that readers or viewers use to interpret and discuss" (p. 105).

Media coverage of the gay community illustrates framing's normative dynamic. Cooper, Pease, and Edward (2008), for example, investigated how media reviewed the 2005 film, *Brokeback Mountain*, a tragic story of two gay men unable to be together because of heteronormative societal pressure and cultural expectations. They argued that while the movie itself tells a tragic story that highlights the prevalence of homophobic attitudes in the U.S., reviews of the film framed it as a "universal" love story between two gay cowboys; either the lack of appropriate knowledge or the lack of language to tell the true story resulted in frames that simplified a complex relationship. These frames also presented homophobia as existing primarily in the past. In a different example, Goh (2008) framed Singapore's current homophobic political climate by examining media coverage of that government's campaign to blame the gay community for the rise in Singapore's HIV/AIDS cases. She found that the frames employed by the media presented homosexuality as promiscuous and opposed to Singapore's cultural ideology. As a result, the government, through the help of specific media frames, was able to regain control over Singapore's gay community – a community that previously had begun flourishing.

The campaign for marriage equality provides another opportunity to understand how media have framed the gay community. Liebler, Schwartz, and Harper (2007), for example, qualitatively examined the text of articles discussing same-sex marriage published in states with proposed marriage bans. They found that while same-sex marriage “friendly” frames outnumbered opposing frames, frames that argue for the “traditional” notions of heterosexual marriage dictate the actual debate. Their findings are important. For many gay rights issues, heteronormative ideology establishes a “standard” to which the gay community must be compared. It reinforces the notion of difference and highlights the power of framing as the presentation of a mediated cultural consciousness. Brewer’s (2002) research regarding how frames influence individuals’ views toward gay rights echoed this premise. He found that individuals, if exposed to a morality or equality frame, use that frame to express their political views. Exposure to a morality frame, however, influences the extent to which one employs the equality frame in her/his response. In other words, reminiscent of Liebler et al. (2007), the power of a focus on morality “dampens” the effect of alternative frames.

Implicit in these studies is the reminder that language wields power; all language encodes meaning and reflects very purposive dynamics of social structure and ideology (Liebler et al. 2007, Brewer 2002, Lind and Salo 2002). In the context of cultural issues such as the women’s movement or gay movement, language can create the conflicting frames of normality and difference. Lind and Salo (2002), for example, examined how cultural standards influence the framing of feminists. They found that by feminists often are framed as “not normal women.” When compared to “normal women” they are framed as having greater agency. When compared with “normal women,” feminists also are positioned as less victimized. As they argue in the case of the feminist movement, “when the underlying ideologies of the frames collide, the [social] movement is at a disadvantage” (Lind and Salo, 213).

Female politicians and their political campaigns offer additional insight into how media proffer conflicting frames, in this case, gendered frames based on gendered ideologies. Media traditionally have focused on specific gendered aspects of female political candidates rather than qualifications specific to their candidacy (Devere and Davies 2005; Major and Coleman 2008). “Gendering” occurs when the media emphasize a person’s gender, regardless of its relevance to the news item. In this context, the media present male political candidates as the norm and female candidates as the exception. Johnston and White (1994), for example, found that as

women became a permanent political force in the 1980s, female candidates employed specific strategies that spoke directly to voters regarding their abilities and experience. Essentially, female candidates had an extra burden to prove their credentials and their knowledge regarding specific issues.

While this bias may have lessened in recent years, media still cover candidates in stereotypical ways and journalists still frame female political candidates around very gendered issues (Major and Coleman, 2008). For example, media still typically associate female candidates with issues traditionally associated with women, regardless of the specific experience and mission of the candidate herself. Those women who do not associate with certain traditionally female issues often are framed as "Other." This certainly was the case for Theresa Heinz Kerry, wife of 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry (Walsh, 2005). Even though Heinz Kerry was not a candidate, the way media framed her demonstrates the power of normative ideologies such as the expectations of "traditional" femininity. Walsh, for example, quoted a 2004 *San Francisco Chronicle* article that explained how media were covering Heinz Kerry: "They have commented on her attitude about her late husband, the Republican Sen. John Heinz (too fawning), her frank admissions (Botox treatments), and her demeanor on stage (too distant)," (Walsh, pg. 3).

While media bias favoring males may be shifting, this research suggests that outspoken women who feel free to voice opinions are still largely taboo. That said, Manning (2006) found that Hillary Rodham Clinton has employed specific linguistic strategies in her speeches, rhetorical strategies most often associated with men, in order to transform how she, as a female politician, is perceived by the public. Clinton has employed tactics such as confrontation, aggressiveness, and authority to encourage the public to view her as a qualified politician rather than as a woman running for office. Heldman, Carroll, and Olson's (2005) research addressed the need for this strategy. In comparing media's coverage of Elizabeth Dole's 1999 Republican presidential bid to that of five male Republican counterparts, the authors found that the media very heavily relied on gender to frame Dole's candidacy. The way in which the media framed Dole compromised the public's perception of Dole as a legitimate candidate.

The international context adds a layer of complexity to this analysis, and is of particular interest to the current study. Cantrell and Bachmann (2008), for example, compared media coverage of three new female government leaders in Germany, Liberia, and Chile in order to

determine cross-national trends regarding the framing of female politicians. They found that while gendering still occurs, international coverage is becoming routinized despite geographic boundaries and varied media sources. Moreover, the findings are from an analysis of these female leaders' first 200 days in office—a context that directly relates to Prime Minister Sigurdardottir's early administration.

The framing studies outlined above provide the needed context to understand how media have framed female politicians, outspoken (non “traditional”) females, and the gay community. Sigurdardottir, as a female prime minister, former union organizer, and openly gay politician, represents each dynamic and as such provides a unique opportunity to investigate potentially competing ideological frames.

Here, I must make one important distinction. Most framing scholarship specific to coverage of female politicians has been done in the context of female versus male political campaigns and the corresponding gendered ideologies, the challenges women face when competing against the “standard” “traditional” man. Johanna Sigurdardottir, however, did not become prime minister because of such a campaign; she initially was appointed to the position and then won the seat permanently in an election that, given her popularity, served more as a formality than as a grueling political race. The following framing analysis, therefore, offers interesting methodological opportunities in terms of studying the female politician without the male comparison. Accordingly, two research questions asked:

RQ1: How do certain media portray Johanna Sigurdardottir? If, how, and to what extent do media highlight her gender, sexuality, political demeanor, or some additional attribute?

RQ2: Given the absence of a male comparative element, how do the frames differ from those found in prior research, if at all?

The answers provide cues for current and future female leaders in charge of leading their countries out of the current international economic crisis, for future female leaders who happen to be gay, or simply for any leader appointed to repair their government and reestablish national and international trust.

## Methodology

The timeframe for analysis began with the disbanding of Iceland Prime Minister Geir Haarde's government. Though his government fell in the last week of January 2009, I retrieved articles beginning January 1, as media began speculating on Sigurdardottir's appointment when it became clear that regime change was inevitable. The sample for analysis began with initial content found in BBC coverage of Sigurdardottir's appointment. The BBC regularly reported on her new administration and, therefore, provided a baseline of analysis. Equipped with the preliminary themes identified in the analysis of BBC coverage, I then performed a basic LexisNexis search for articles in major U.S. and world publications that referenced Johanna Sigurdardottir between January 1 and March 25, 2009, retrieving 89 articles. Because the Sigurdardottir surname appeared to be a common Icelandic name, I specified "Johanna" to ensure that articles specific to the Prime Minister were retrieved. I reduced this total to 60 articles after eliminating duplicate articles and news briefs. A manual online search for articles not captured by Lexis Nexis, added the perspective of non-mainstream news sources. Initial analysis of these articles confirmed that the major themes identified in the BBC were consistent across the sampled articles. Four sources in particular proved most illustrative and thorough: *The Times* (London), *The Guardian* (London), *The Independent* (London), and the BBC. Few articles from major U.S. outlets were available. In fact, the majority of articles in the retrieved sample were from British news sources. The findings do include examples from U.S. and non-mainstream news outlets to demonstrate consistency across all coverage, but the analysis relied most heavily on the articles from the above-mentioned sources.

I used Edelman's (1993) qualitative framework to guide my framing analysis. He argued that understanding a particular phenomenon depends on how certain aspects of that phenomenon are displayed, repressed, and classified. "Far from being stable, the social world is... a kaleidoscope of potential realities, any of which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized" (p. 232). Moreover, value-laden labels that privilege a very narrow perspective of an event often mask these categories. These value-laden categories are not isolated. Rather, they form networks of understanding and contribute to normative ideologies.

Media therefore become a key forum through which certain categorized ideologies not only are perpetuated, but also are justified for public consumption. Bennett (1993) in his defense



of Edelman, argued that this perspective demonstrates that public opinion is a social construction. It challenges positivist claims that reality can be described and reported with absolute objectivity; society forms public opinion through the embedded, categorized messages used to tell the story. How media categorize Johanna Sigurdardottir early in her leadership, helps shape public opinion that may influence her overall tenure as prime minister. Certainly, the fact she is Iceland's first female prime minister is news. The fact she is the world's first openly gay prime minister also is news. But her administration's initial objective was to reposition Iceland on the world stage and lead a country that recently sported one of the world's highest standards of living back from the brink of economic ruin. In Edelman's terms, then, the media's categorization of Sigurdardottir reveals specific constructions of sexuality and gender in a never before seen context.

In the next section, I outline the key frames identified in the analysis. The frames presented in the findings are based on specific categorizations of Sigurdardottir as defined by the media. Equipped with these frames, I ultimately return to Entman's core guidance and suggest what these categorizations mean in terms of how the media framed the overall problem, solution, responsible party, and moral judgment regarding Iceland's financial collapse and Sigurdardottir's role in the recovery.

### **Findings**

An initial analysis of all articles retrieved from the LexisNexis, BBC, and online searches revealed three consistent frames that appeared across all media coverage of Johanna Sigurdardottir. These frames included Sigurdardottir the person, Sigurdardottir the leader, and Sigurdardottir as symbolically female. An additional frame used her appointment to discuss how sexuality is a non-issue in Iceland. This final frame does not speak explicitly for Sigurdardottir per se, but was used to contextualize Icelandic culture for the broader international audience. That said, not only did all media consistently organize their content around these four frames, they also consistently increased or decreased the salience of these frames at specific times. Certainly, increased coverage appeared during the few days spanning the end of January and beginning of February 2009 when Sigurdardottir first was appointed prime minister. As will be demonstrated, however, certain events within Iceland since that time continue to produce international media coverage and inform how media portrayed Sigurdardottir.

### ***Popular and Gay: Saint Johanna***

In the first week of Sigurdardottir's rise to power, international media repeatedly profiled the new prime minister's personal and political background. First, media consistently addressed Sigurdardottir's nickname, "Saint Johanna," a moniker resulting from her work on behalf of the country's disadvantaged citizens. The media's description of "Saint Johanna" became a familiar, regularly recited media script. For example, *The Independent* explained, "'Saint Johanna', as she has come to be known, has been propelled from the social affairs ministry - which she has presided over for a decade - to take centre stage in a choice hailed as 'unexpected but brilliant'" (Popham, 2009). *The Times* echoed, "Her nickname is Saint Johanna and she might just have the credibility to shake up Iceland's ruling class with its dynastic networks and encyclopedic feuds" (Boyes, 2009b). *The Australian* provided a bit more detail. "Sigurdardottir, dubbed Saint Johanna because of her popular initiatives as long-time social affairs minister, heads up a new coalition Government that will attempt to rescue a country in the midst of an economic disaster" ("Trailblazing New PM," 2009).

Much of this coverage therefore portrayed Sigurdardottir as an immensely popular figure. For example, the BBC explained that despite the 2008 collapse of Iceland's financial system, Sigurdardottir, "had an approval rating of 73%, according to one opinion poll" ("Profile," 2009). And, as if on cue, this statement was followed by, "She has even been nicknamed 'Saint Johanna' in praise of her work for the rights of the handicapped, elderly and disadvantaged" (BBC News, "Profile," Feb. 2009). *The Times* continued, "She ranks overwhelmingly as the country's most popular politician, the only one to have survived 2008 unscathed" (Boyes, 2009b). More importantly, as demonstrated above, the media used her popularity to demonstrate her popular mandate as began leading Iceland back from economic collapse. As *The Independent* explained, "She is a good choice, because one of the problems the government is facing is lack of trust. Getting Johanna to become Prime Minister was a way of saying trust is an issue" (Popham, 2009). The same article quoted an Icelandic journalist who explained, "She is often described as the only politician who really cares about the little guy" (Popham, 2009).

In the same breath as introducing Sigurdardottir as a popular "Saint", the media also introduced her as "gay." The bulk of these articles, however, appeared only in the first week of her administration. The only media to reference her sexuality beyond early February were specialized news outlets and blogs, or those sources (including several U.S.-based) that delayed

covering her initial appointment altogether. Certainly, the notion that she is the world's first openly gay leader is news and warrants media coverage. In fact, Sigurdardottir's sexuality was the focus of many news briefs, which were eliminated for this study. Media focus on her sexuality, however, primarily occurred in the days immediately following her appointment.

For the first week of her administration, though, Sigurdardottir's sexuality *was* news. Accordingly, articles led with statements such as, "Iceland was preparing yesterday for the appointment of Johanna Sigurdardottir as the country's first female prime minister and the world's first openly gay premier in the hope that she can lead the country out of financial meltdown" (*The Sunday Times*, Jonsdottir, 2009). *The Guardian* echoed, "Iceland was poised last night to give the world its first openly gay prime minister as Johanna Sigurdardottir prepared to be installed as an interim government leader to take the embattled country through to elections in the spring" (Gunnarsson, 2009). Media therefore seemingly used her sexuality, like her popularity, to place her in the larger picture of Iceland's recovery. One reading of this placement indicates the media wanted to present Sigurdardottir as a unique, cutting-edge figure who, in breaking the mold of *traditional* national leaders, actually may have a unique opportunity to accomplish the near impossible. For example, *The Independent*, in lamenting the international economic crisis proclaimed, "But now there is one incontrovertibly cheering piece of news. Iceland has appointed the world's first openly lesbian prime minister.... she takes charge of a country that is, to put no fine a point on it, bankrupt. But that will only make her achievement all the more impressive, if she can set Iceland on the road to recovery." ("Ice Maidens," 2009).

Indeed, international media markets, LGBT advocacy organizations (for example, the International Lesbian and Gay Association), and even campus newspapers (for example, the *Arizona State Web Devil*) capitalized on the news of the world's first openly gay prime minister.<sup>1</sup> A reporter's commentary in *The Independent*, however, summarized the double-edged sword the media must navigate in covering this "first of its kind" event:

There's something odd about the phrase 'openly lesbian', which appears in virtually every news report about the new Icelandic Prime Minister Johanna Sigurdardottir. One understands that reporters need a way to acknowledge that this might not be a first at all -

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<sup>1</sup> One article—in the *Daily News*, New York—introduced Sigurdardottir as the world's **second** openly gay prime minister, arguing, "She is the second openly gay national leader of modern times after Per-Kristian Foss, a Norwegian politician who briefly served as his country's prime minister in 2002" (February 2, 2009). Though I have been able to find where Foss was indeed Prime Minister, I have not been able to confirm if he was open with his sexuality at the time.

what, after all, do we truly know of the sexuality of Indira Gandhi or Mrs Thatcher... Add the phrase 'openly heterosexual' to any of today's newspaper reports on Gordon Brown and you get some sense of how odd these sentences will one day come to seem. Sigurdardottir's election has been described as a 'gay milestone' in some quarters. But the real milestone will come when nobody thinks it's worth mentioning at all. (Sutcliffe, 2009).

Simply put, because of Sigurdardottir's unique status, the media were tasked with carefully navigating the newsworthy nature of this event while appropriately representing Sigurdardottir as a prime minister who just happens to be gay. Moreover, the story painted a picture of Iceland as a country with advanced, inclusive social ideologies while demonstrating broader Western culture's ongoing debate with the gay identity. This introduces a second reading that places Sigurdardottir as the "Other" as opposed to other European leaders, many of whom also are faced with economic restructuring.

### ***Iceland's Non-Issue***

This distinction between Iceland's inclusive attitudes toward homosexuality and the ongoing cultural negotiation of sexuality in other western countries identifies a parallel frame of "gay" being a non-issue in Iceland. In addition to introducing Sigurdardottir as the first openly gay leader, media simultaneously positioned Icelanders as not concerned with sexuality. Media interviewed various sources within Iceland to understand that country's perspective. For example, the BBC interviewed a local Iceland public broadcaster who explained, "Ms Sigurdardottir's emergence as the world's first openly gay leader has barely rated a mention among his countrymen and women. 'It's by no means a big deal. It's been reported, but it's not something the public is focusing on' ("Profile," 2009). *The Independent* echoed, "Though she is famous across the island, having been a top politician for years, her lesbian union was no big deal in this calmly progressive nation of only 300,000 people" (Popham, 2009). Continuing, that same article quoted a local government official, "A lot of people didn't even know she was gay. When they learn about it people tend to shrug and say, 'Oh'. That's not to say they are not interested; they are interested in who she's living with - but no more so than if she was a man living with a woman" (Popham, 2009). *The Sunday Times* adds slightly more context. "Iceland's gay rights legislation is among the most progressive in the world. Civil partnerships were

introduced 13 years ago, granting the same range of protection and benefits as marriage” (Jonsdottir, 2009). Outside London, the *Weekend Australian* continued, “She is also the world’s first openly gay leader, many outlets reported. But that was neither here nor there for most in Iceland: ‘Whom the new Prime Minister crawls into bed with at night seems to be fairly far down the list of priorities for people,’ Icelandic National Broadcasting Service editor Ingo Sigfusson said.” (Trailblazing New PM,” Feb. 7, 2009).

The fact that homosexuality is not a central concern in Iceland was a central theme in the handful of articles from mainstream U.S. media outlets. For example, *the Daily News* reported, “Icelanders were far less focused on her sexual orientation than her plans to fix an economy that's been reeling since the nation's banking system and currency collapsed in October, sparking an International Monetary Fund bailout.” (Durkin, 2009). The *New York Times* provided a more detailed historic context to explain Iceland’s attitudes:

Although Ms. Sigurdardottir's rise has drawn widespread attention on Web sites for gay men and lesbians outside Iceland, her relationship is considered unremarkable at home. In 1940, while still a dependency of Denmark, Iceland decriminalized gay sex. It approved civil partnerships for gay and lesbian couples in 1996, one of the first countries to do so. ‘Iceland is a small society, and the public knows what Sigurdardottir stands for as a politician, and that's the only thing that is important,’ said Frosti Jonsson, a spokesman for Iceland's National Association of Queers. ‘Nowadays, not only does Iceland have one of the most progressive legal environments for gay people, there have also been changes in public attitudes towards gay people. It simply isn't an issue anymore.’ (Burns, 2009a)

That said, as will be discussed later, many media ultimately juxtaposed the news of Sigurdardottir’s sexuality with her gender being the more important qualifying trait for Iceland’s new leader. As Skuli Helgeson, the general secretary of Ms Sigurardottir's Social Democratic Alliance party, explained in an interview with the BBC, “What is really historic about this new cabinet, is not the fact that its leader is a lesbian, but that for the first time in Icelandic history it boasts an equal number of men and women. ‘I don't think her sexual orientation matters. Our voters are pretty liberal, they don't care about any of that’”(Buschschluter, 2009).

### *Johanna the Capable Prime Minister*

Certainly, media reported the economic and political issues facing Saint Johanna from the outset of her tenure. For example, *The Sunday Times* initially summarized that heading into her new role, Sigurdardottir, “faces unemployment that has risen from 1% before its banks collapsed in October to 10%, a crushing burden of national debt, the collapse of the Icelandic krona and a bitter debate over whether it should join the European Union” (Jonsdottir, 2009). Yet, after February 7, 2009, just one week into Sigurdardottir’s administration, media ostensibly stopped highlighting the “popular and gay Saint” and started focusing more on her role in rescuing Iceland. In fact, most coverage throughout February profiled Sigurdardottir’s top priority of ousting the leaders of Iceland’s central bank, including central bank chief David Oddsson. *The Times* explained, “An interim left-of-centre Government has been sworn in this week, and its first move has been to try to oust Mr Oddsson. The Prime Minister, Johanna Sigurdardottir, is a straight talker with populist instincts, and Icelanders hold Mr.Oddsson as a prime cause of their dire finances.” (Boyes, 2009a). Three weeks later, without mentioning her sexuality, *The Times* reported, “The removal of the crisis-stricken nation's central bankers has been the top priority of Johanna Sigurdardottir, Iceland's new Prime Minister, since the interim government came to power earlier this month. (Gilmore, 2009).

The media seemed to appreciate Sigurdardottir’s leadership style. *The Wall Street Journal*, in one of its only mentions of Sigurdardottir, explained in detail how she ultimately ousted the central bank chief:

By law, the central-bank chief can't be fired, and Mr. Oddsson publicly declined Prime Minister Johanna Sigurdardottir's entreaties to step down. So she crafted a bill that reorganizes the central bank -- and requires that its governor have a master's degree in economics. Mr. Oddsson, a lawyer, doesn't have that credential. (Forelle, 2009)

In addition to reorganizing the central bank, Sigurdardottir spent her first two months in office as interim prime minister considering talks to join the European Union, which, according to *The Daily Telegraph*, “Senior Brussels officials have signalled that Iceland could join... by the end of 2010, should it apply. Miss Sigurdardottir is a pro-European and membership could become a central issue in elections expected between April and June” (Waterfied, 2009). Finally, several financial publications including *BusinessWeek* (March 17), *MarketWatch* (March 13) and *Forbes* (Reuters wire, March 13) began reporting the stabilization of the Icelandic currency and

speculating on a potential turnaround in 2010. Of course, these publications do not comprise the core sources of my data set; I identified these articles during my purposive online search. But I included them to demonstrate a pervasive message that began in the London dailies and spread quickly to mainstream business press: the frame of Sigurdardottir as financial and political savior, or more simply, Sigurdardottir as a capable and efficient prime minister. The *Weekend Australian*, for example, quoted Women on the Web, an online forum for women, “Not only are political scientists and economists looking to see how, and if, she can save Iceland's economy, which is being propped up by a \$US10 billion (\$15.4billion) loan from the IMF. It was the first nation to tumble into the financial abyss and could become a roadmap for success” (“Iceland’s Trailblazing new PM,” 2009).

### ***It takes a woman***

The most pervasive frame categorized Sigurdardottir as emblematic of an international, gendered power shift. Beginning in the end of January and continuing through the end of March, media consistently featured women’s increasing role in leading their countries out of the economic crisis. The discussion began as soon as Sigurdardottir was announced as the new Prime Minister. *The Independent*, for example, ran an article that posited, “With all the country's major banks now headed by women, a successful post-crisis Iceland would make a compelling argument for matriarchy elsewhere in the developed world” (“Ice Maidens,” 2009). One week into Sigurdardottir’s administration, *The Times* ran an article titled, “Women take over as Age of Testosterone drags country to the verge of bankruptcy; Iceland ‘Men take risks, get drunk and don't give back the money’” (Boyes, 2009b). The article summarized, “Listening to Ms Sigurdardottir talk in her dry, schoolmistress manner, it becomes clear that the fall of the Icelandic Government was not just the first political casualty of the global downturn, but also a signal that men in suits have led the world astray” (Boyes, 2009b). In highlighting Sigurdardottir’s goal to govern with economic principles of prudence and responsibility, and with social principles based on women's rights, equality and justice, the article summarized, “No one doubts that there is a gender revolution under way, and not just because Ms Sigurdardottir, 66, is the world's first openly gay Prime Minister. ‘If you crash the economy,’ declared an irreverent Icelandic blogger, ‘the lesbians take over’” (Boyes, 2009b).

Given this article focuses on the initial days of Sigurdardottir's administration, it is not surprising that this article mentions her sexuality – but it is important to note that it is her gender that already had become the focus. For example, this same *Times* article mentioned above provided a specifically gendered history of Iceland culture. “In the old Viking model, the men got into their super-speed longboats to enrich themselves in England and Scotland: the women stayed at home, ran the household and largely forgot about their husbands. A similar pattern, of men absent at sea, persisted into the 20th century and created a special independent feminine culture” (Boyce, 2009b). That said, *The Independent* ran an article titled, “Can Women save the economy? At least give us a chance to try” (Orr, 2009). The article quoted a Sigurdardottir spokesperson who argued that men have been at the center of the crisis. As a result, “The administration has acted on its observations, and put women in charge of two of the big banks that brought the country's economy to collapse” (Orr, 2009).

The frame of female authority also appeared on the editorial and comment pages. *The Times*, for example, ran an editorial (on the same day as the article above) titled, “Older and stroprier: hire that woman now! Three matrons of a certain age have scored a victory over our society's dark distaste for post-menopausal womanhood” (Turner, 2009). Because the editorial ran during the first week of her administration, it still portrayed Sigurdardottir as “air stewardess, mother, open lesbian, party leader.” It also highlighted, however, that “Iceland brought in Johanna Sigurdardottir as PM, aged 66, to restabilise a country ravaged by reckless men” (Turner, 2009). The editorial placed her in the context of two other women who have risen to power: Hillary Clinton, for her appointment as U.S. Secretary of State, and Carol Bartz, for her appointment as Yahoo! CEO. The article argued, “All three appointments were a victory not just over a dark cross-cultural distaste for post-menopausal womanhood, but against the dreary forces of same old, same old” (Turner, 2009).<sup>2</sup> Finally, *The Guardian* ran a similar headline in its Comment and Debate section, “To chop City bonuses, start by cutting the testosterone: All sides agree banking's disastrously aggressive, risk-taking culture has to change. More women in finance might be a start” (Ashley, 2009). The comment itself effectively summarizes the role of Sigurdardottir (and that of all women in leadership) during the economic crisis:

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<sup>2</sup> Admittedly, the same article also described Secretary Clinton's demeanor in her new role, arguing, “That freeze-dried campaign smile has thawed into a luminous, I'm-here-at-last beam.” This description reinforces the negative frames discussed in the literature that have been used to unfairly characterize female politicians.



This is a debate that has ignited well beyond Britain, in other countries hit by the market meltdown. Above all, in Iceland, where its prime minister, Johanna Sigurdardottir, is to appoint a cabinet composed half of women, and where the two main disgraced banks are now run by women. The swaggering male ‘Vikings’ who ran so much of the Icelandic system are cowering. (Ashley, 2009)

### ***Applying Entman***

Together, the frames categorized Sigurdardottir as a popular, saintly, capable prime minister who happens to be gay and who, more importantly, reflects an important international shift toward female political leadership. Equipped with these categorizations, however, it now is possible to understand how media framed Sigurdardottir given Entman’s (1993) model. As Entman argued, media frame issues by promoting a certain problem, solution, responsible party, and/or moral judgment. Accordingly, how the media categorized Sigurdardottir contributes to how the media framed the overall story of economic collapse and regime change in Iceland.

In Sigurdardottir’s example, media presented the obvious problem: once the economic darling of Europe, sporting one of the highest standards of living in the world, Iceland is now bankrupt, the nation is in turmoil, and its future uncertain. Media also very clearly identified the cause of such turmoil. Men led Iceland astray. They created an economic culture governed by greed and unsustainable growth. To remedy the situation, media explained that shedding a culture of economic greed may take the perspective of female leaders such as Johanna Sigurdardottir. As one headline presented, “Can women save the economy? At least give us a chance to try” (Orr, 2009). Finally, in terms of the moral judgment, media suggested that struggling economies could take a cue from Iceland. It is okay to let women be in charge. Moreover, one’s sexuality should not be a factor in determining one’s potential or ability to lead.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The case of Saint Johanna reveals several interesting findings that inform how the media frame the world’s first openly gay, and Iceland’s first female, prime minister. First, the fact she is gay was news primarily in her first week in office, an understandable period in which to discuss this “first of a kind” event. Moreover, media often juxtaposed this identity with additional

personal and political information such as her popularity, nickname, and basic background. What is surprising, however, is that media were more interested in reporting that sexuality is a non-issue in Iceland, than reporting on sexuality itself. The fact that the country's citizens accepted Sigurdardottir's sexuality was the news. Regardless, by mid-February most media sources switched to covering Sigurdardottir as (capable) leader of an intense economic and political crisis. This frame continued and, given her success in the permanent April 2009 elections, broadened. Additional business-specific sources covered the stabilization of the country's currency and the prospect of a turnaround by the end of the year. Taken together, the coverage frames Sigurdardottir as a capable, efficient leader.

Media's portrayal of Sigurdardottir's effectiveness ultimately fueled the most pervasive frame: Sigurdardottir as symbolically female. Media continually reinforced the importance of Sigurdardottir as a woman leading Iceland's turnaround. More importantly, groups outside of Iceland indicated that her tenure may indicate broader, international trends regarding the importance of female leadership. Perhaps this frame reinforces the notion that of all personal characteristics, the international community remains challenged by the notion of a *female* being a capable leader. For example, the BBC, in one of its first articles profiling Sigurdardottir, interviewed Silvia Jaen, the secretary-general of the Spanish Federation of Gay, Lesbians, Transsexuals and Bisexuals, in order to gain the perspective of the international LGBT community. In assessing the political climate in Spain, and what that means for openly gay politicians, Jaen responded, "I think we're more likely to see a gay man governing Spain before we ever see a straight woman as prime minister" (Buschschluter, 2009). As Sigurdardottir's media coverage revealed, once the newness of her sexuality diminished, the discussion of her sex persisted.

When Johanna Sigurdardottir assumed her role as prime minister in February 2009, she insisted that she would not run for the permanent position during the April 25 national elections. It is surprising, then, that media outlets outside Iceland did not report when Sigurdardottir changed her mind to run for her party's leadership and, therefore, to run for Prime Minister. Icelandic media, of course, followed closely. They explained that in 1994, Sigurdardottir ran for her party's leadership for the first time and lost by a wide margin. Sigurdardottir commented at the loss, "My time will come," a phrase that *the Guardian* explained in early 2009, "has since become a standard aphorism in the Icelandic language" (Gunnarsson, 2009). On March 28, 2009,

fifteen years after this defeat, Sigurdardottir ran for leadership of her Social Democrats for a second time and, as *IceNews* reported, won with close to 100 percent of the vote. Less than a month later, with her leadership, Sigurdardottir and the Social Democrats/Left Green Alliance won permanent leadership of Iceland's government.

Coverage of Sigurdardottir's election indicated a continuation of the frames identified following her initial appointment. For example, the *New York Times*' article covering the April elections profiled the economic crisis facing Iceland that was left by the leadership of the "New Vikings," and explained that "voters in this country of 320,000 were imposing a further reckoning" on those in charge of the economic free fall (Burns, 2009b). Given this context, the *Times* then explained that the election, "would also confirm a remarkable turnaround in the political fortunes of Johanna Sigurdardottir, the 66-year-old caretaker prime minister, who is the first woman to lead Iceland's government" (Burns, 2009b). And, after profiling Sigurdardottir's role as Iceland's first female prime minister, and further contextualizing her as "feisty," the same *Times* article added:

Ms. Sigurdardottir is notable, too, for being the first openly declared lesbian to lead a government in the modern world, though her sexual orientation was never a significant election issue. What Icelanders say they like about her, as much as anything, is the way in which she embodies everything the New Vikings did not: a quiet, steady personality uncomfortable with the public spotlight. (Burns, 2009b)

Fifteen years after her 1994 loss for her party's leadership, as the new head of her party, permanent prime minister, and capable leader of the poster child for the international economic crisis, Sigurdardottir's time arrived just as she predicted. Her time, however, also offers rich possibilities for investigating how media frame openly gay, female, and indeed saintly politicians. Although Sigurdardottir stepped down from office in April 2013, it is important to research how media reported her term as prime minister and to see if/how this coverage compares with that of other female (and perhaps openly gay) political leaders. Moreover, media's discussion of a female political revolution presents an intriguing area for further research beyond Sigurdardottir's example.

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