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Pushy or a Princess? Women Experts and British Broadcast News

Abstract

Four times as many males as females appeared as experts on flagship television and radio news programmes in the United Kingdom as of the early 2010s. This study draws on four complementary sets of data to explore the reasons behind this disparity. The findings point to a combination of journalists' news production processes and women's perceptions of appropriate social norms and roles. A high proportion of woman experts surveyed lack confidence, saying they fear they will be perceived as self-promoting and "pushy" for wanting to appear on air. Broadcast journalists report women need to be persuaded and wooed, acting like "princesses" and therefore making male experts less trouble to recruit.

Keywords: broadcast news; gender roles; news experts; news sources; women in news

For eighteen months beginning in early 2012, researchers tracked the use of women as experts on leading British broadcast news programmes. The data showed that men consistently outnumbered female experts on the nation's flagship television and radio news programmes by a ratio of 4:1 – a ratio disproportionate to the presence in British society of female authority figures in various occupations.

This study seeks to understand why such a disparity exists. It does so by exploring journalistic definitions of worthy and desirable sources, as well as the ways in which experts' self-conceptions and broadcasters' sourcing practices combine to produce an imbalance. The issue is interrogated from the perspectives of female expert sources and journalists; findings are connected with existing scholarship related to newsroom sourcing, as well as gender perceptions and self-perceptions.

Literature: News Sources

Scholars have explored the relationship between journalists and their sources extensively (see Berkowitz 2009; Franklin and Carlson 2011; Manning 2001) and in a wide variety of contexts. This work has considered topics ranging from the use of political sources in traditional and digital media environments (de Zúñiga, Puig-I-Abril, and Rojas 2009; Strömbäck and Nord 2006); to the protection of source identity (Carlson 2011; Stenvall 2008); to sourcing practices of so-called citizen journalists (Carpenter 2008; Reich 2008a). Newer work has explored the role of computer algorithms in sourcing decisions (Anderson 2013; Lokot and Diakopoulos 2015). Other scholars, including many in the UK, have examined the contemporary role that public relations practitioners play (Franklin 2011) and the power they wield in shaping the news agenda (Cottle 2003; Lewis, Williams, and Franklin 2008; Lloyd and Toogood 2014).

However, beyond the use of experts in specific areas, such as science (Clayton, Hancock-Beaulieu, and Meadows 1993; Conrad 1999) or politics (Albæk et al. 2011; Jamieson and Waldman 2003), there has been less empirical exploration of how journalists assess source expertise more generally and go about choosing the players and pundits, in newsroom parlance, to appear in their reports (Boyce 2006).

In a study assessing how journalists assess sources, Reich (2008b) found that although credibility was valued (and was often based on the journalist's prior experience with a source), more visceral or intuitive judgements also were important. Two earlier US studies of direct relevance here examined the use of expert sources in television news programmes in the 1990s. In their structural analysis of political experts – nearly all men, although gender was not their focus – who appeared on four leading news shows, Reese and his colleagues (1994) found these sources played a crucial liaison role, anchoring guests from different political positions within a framework of “‘factuality,’ expertise and ‘insider dopesticism’”

(102). Steele (1995), who looked at television sources selected to discuss the Persian Gulf War, found a “circular” process (802) in which journalists asked previously used experts to assess the credibility of other potential sources; unsurprisingly, former public officials, think-tank analysts, and retired generals got a lot of air time. Journalists commonly used these experts to make predictions and assess motives of other political and military players; desired characteristics, journalists said, included authority, real-world experience, and well-developed contact networks (Steele 1995).

In addition to any inherent qualifications, an expert must be someone whom journalists consider interesting or engaging. A study of the ubiquity of a single bioethicist as a US media source, for instance, suggested he was called on so often because he “understands news routines, provides pithy quotes, and supports public engagement” (Kruvand 2012, 566). Earlier work in the UK examined how Andrew Wakefield became a media expert after claiming that the MMR vaccine could cause autism (Boyce 2006). Broadcast journalists, the study found, trusted Wakefield at the expense of other medical experts because he could be counted on to say something dramatic and controversial in a credible and confident way. Political interviews also have been shown to be sites of contestation (Craig 2010); experts are valued not only for their knowledge but also for their ability to serve as a journalist’s sparring partner (Albæk 2011).

More broadly, Collins and Evans (2007, 13) offer a “periodic table of expertises” describing different types of experts. The sorts of experts of primary interest to the present study, they say, draw on specialist tacit knowledge, subdivided as contributory and interactional expertise. Contributory expertise involves skilled performance, the application of an esoteric specialism that can be learned only through immersive practice in a subject (Boyce 2006). However, even though a contributory expert actually uses the skills to do significant things, he or she may not be the best person to talk about them to a lay audience.

Interactional expertise, on the other hand, is “the ability to master the language of a specialist domain in the absence of practical competence” (Collins and Evans 2007, 14). A coach or teacher may be an interactional expert, and therefore able to communicate the skill or knowledge, without being a contributory expert – a champion athlete or a surgeon, say. In practice, the interactional expert is usually the broadcasters’ “pundit.”

British broadcasters have relied on pundits for well over half a century. Although print journalists rely on expert sources to analyse, interpret, and explain newsworthy issues and events (Albæk 2011), broadcasters need experts who also are able to speak clearly and confidently, thus establishing instant credibility. Expert sources enable journalists to question authority in ways that broadcasters cannot (Albæk 2011), especially UK broadcasters whose impartiality is a condition for remaining on air. More specifically, journalists need what Weiler (1983) called compensatory legitimation – that is, experts who can be called on to confirm the conclusions that journalists themselves have already reached (Albæk 2011). Audiences perceive such people as “having neutral, factual knowledge and as not being part of the conflict” (338). Because they must be trusted by the journalist as well as the audience, it helps if the journalist recognises the expert as sharing his or her own values and attitudes.

Previous research in other national contexts has repeatedly found that men are more likely than women to be used as expert sources in newspapers (Armstrong and Nelson 2006; Zoch and VanSlyke Turk 1998) and on television, particularly for stories involving “hard news” topics such as politics (Cann and Mohr 2001; Desmond and Danilewicz 2010). When women do appear as sources on television news, it tends to be in connection with “softer” topics, such as health or lifestyle, and they often are represented in a “ritualized” way, offering a “contained and safe” representation of how actions taken in the public sphere affect those in the private sphere (Rakow and Kranich 1991, 16).

In the UK and Ireland, a longitudinal study of print and broadcast news coverage (Global Media Monitoring 2016) has consistently reported similar findings, as well as a paucity of stories that portray women; the researchers conclude that the predominance of male values in the newsroom means that “women’s voices, experiences and expertise continue to be regarded by news industries as less important than those of men” (Ross and Carter 2011, 1150). Also in a British context, Byerly and Ross (2008) showed that powerful women are trivialized and that women are more likely to be portrayed as victims than as people holding power or authority. Even when they hold clear positions of authority, for instance in government, women are more likely than men to be objectified (Ross 2010). Indeed, gender has been shown to be integral to the way news is produced and presented, with women typically in predetermined roles (Carter, Branston, and Allan 2002).

Although this study focuses on sourcing issues, it is worth quickly noting that a great many studies in various countries, including Britain, also have repeatedly shown that women are under-represented as either hard news reporters or senior newsroom managers (Byerly 2011; Cann and Mohr 2001; Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming 2004; Djerf-Pierre 2005; Franks 2013; Steiner 2009), and the passage of time is making little difference to news production and presentation practices (Armstrong 2013; Byerly and Ross 2008; Carter, Steiner, and McLaughlin 2014; Craft and Wanta 2004; Global Media Monitoring 2016; Ross 2007). To take just one relevant example, women print journalists have been found to be no more likely to source women than male colleagues (Craft and Wanta 2004).

Literature: Gendered Expertise

In a study sub-titled “the dilemma of the informed woman,” Watson and Hoffman (2004) asked 80 men and 80 women, placed into mixed-gender groups, to solve a problem. In half the groups, a woman was given a “hint” to the solution, and in the other half, a man

received the hint. The exercise found no gender differences in problem-solving success. Yet other group members rated the informed women as significantly less likable than the informed men. The women, the researchers suggested, were black sheep. They defied the prevailing norm, were seen as misfits – and felt themselves to be misfits, as well. The researchers suggested the fear of being disliked may become a barrier preventing women from putting their perspectives forward, keeping them from gaining the influence and respect accorded to those who make the greatest group contribution (Watson and Hoffman 2004).

In another study of responses to women participating in group tasks, Thomas-Hunt and Phillips (2004) affirmed previous findings that “women conform more than men, are more tentative in their speech, and are interrupted and challenged more often than are men” (p. 1587). In their study, participants were asked to rank 12 items based on their importance in surviving an Australian bushfire. The researchers found that possessing expertise can actually be a liability for women: Both men and women expected lower performance from females than from males.

These and other works in the same vein support the premise put forth by Eagly and Karau (2002) that perceived incongruity between female gender roles and leadership roles produces two kinds of prejudice. One is that women are perceived less favourably than men as potential occupants of leadership roles, and the other is that woman leaders are evaluated less favourably than men when they behave according to the prescriptions of these roles. In fact, female leaders may be praised for their management skills – yet more people still say they prefer male to female bosses. This “paradoxical phenomenon” (Eagly 2007, 2) suggests that women gain support for their ability to bolster and enable employees’ efforts, but then may generate disproportionate resentment when they have to enact other less pleasant leadership roles, such as dismissing staffers.

Coming at the issue from a different direction, Johnson (2014) looked at how princess culture, informed by Star Wars no less than Disney, functions in a post-feminist society. Little girls, he concluded, might be encouraged to become different sorts of princesses than in the past, strong and emboldened – but they are inescapably princesses nonetheless. Science fiction warriors and empowered Disney princesses such as Belle and Ariel may make it acceptable for girls to be assertive and independent, but in the end, they “nevertheless choose to marshal their agency in ultimate pursuit of a prince” (897). They choose, that is, to be wooed. While contemporary storybook princesses thus have power, the happy ending comes from exercising that power to select wisely among potential suitors: Successful princesses still end up with a prince, but only one who has proved himself worthy by courting her in accordance with her own wishes or goals (Stover 2013). “Just because a princess is no longer ‘wishing for the one she loves to find her,’” Stover writes, “she is not necessarily now wishing for anything grander than finding him herself” (4).

The literature thus suggests that women experts are more likely than men to be seen as social misfits, by themselves as well as by others, and that they also may feel encouraged to act as “princesses” in need of courting. In addition to offering the safety of declining to put herself in the spotlight, the very process of being courted confers a degree of control and power – the power to say “no” to unsuitable suitors – that a woman otherwise might not feel. Such feelings of autonomy may be especially resonant for women surrounded by contemporary media messages that simultaneously urge them to feel empowered and in control of their own lives (but, notably, not similarly in control of broader political or cultural trends) yet also to engage in continuous self-surveillance and self-discipline (Gill 2007).

To summarise: Insights from diverse strands of research – and only a small sampling can be offered here – inform the dilemma of the expert woman asked to appear on broadcast news. She knows her subject and knows, intellectually, that she deserves respect for her

expertise. But she also may sense that she will not be liked because she is stepping out of line. Having come to the fore through her own efforts, she may still suffer from the black sheep syndrome and its repercussions; she is apt to be seen as acting contrary to societal expectations by her colleagues and, importantly, may see herself in the same light. At the same time, her very strength may lead her to feel that she should be wooed or courted. Pursuit by someone – and, again, in the news business that someone is likely to be male – thus serves multiple purposes. It sanctions the female expert's strength and makes it socially acceptable, at the same time according her the power to say “no.” As a source, such women become traditional princesses with a post-modern spin.

The findings from the present study support these ideas and suggest such perceptions may lead expert women who want to appear on air to see themselves as “pushy” but at the same time to make demands that serve only to lessen their appeal to time-pressed broadcast bookers and journalists. To further explore this perceptual conflict in the context of British television and radio news, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How prevalent are female experts on prestigious UK broadcast news programmes?

RQ2: What rationales do journalists provide for their decision to interview either a male expert or a female expert on air?

RQ3: What rationales do female experts provide for their decision to agree or not to agree to appear on air?

RQ4: How do these decisions and the rationales behind them relate to gendered perceptions of social roles held by both journalists and female experts?

Methodology

This study draws on four distinct but complementary data sets, detailed below:

- * Data drawn through monitoring of broadcast newscasts to identify the gender of people appearing on air in various capacities.
- * A questionnaire distributed via email to a subset of British broadcast journalists holding junior positions in their news organisation.
- * In-person interviews with British broadcast journalists of diverse newsroom ranks.
- * A questionnaire distributed via email to a subset of women experts in the UK.

All interview participants and questionnaire respondents were guaranteed confidentiality.

Newscasts: The on-air presence of female experts was identified through monitoring of broadcast news programmes in the UK. Following a pre-test in February 2012, data for this study were collected from shows that aired between March 2012 and October 2013. Although data were gathered for a wide range of news shows during the period – from *Russia Today* to *CNN* – findings reported here are from 161 of these newscasts, a census of those within the overall sample that were aired by the four programmes considered the leading sources of broadcast news in the UK. The programmes were *BBC News at Ten* (45 newscasts analysed), *ITV News at Ten* (37 newscasts analysed), *Sky News at Ten* (38 newscasts analysed), all considered the flagship television news programmes of their respective organizations; and *Today on BBC Radio 4*, the nation's flagship radio news show (41 newscasts analysed). The data were analysed using Mann Whitney U tests, suitable because of the nonparametric nature of the sample.

Graduate students recorded the number of male and female experts appearing on each of the analysed shows, following definitions and a template provided by the lead author, who also independently reviewed a subset of the broadcasts for verification purposes. In accordance with standard newsroom conceptions of “players and pundits” outlined above,

these experts included unique achievers in a particular field; people holding important roles in business, government, or society, including elected and appointed officials; and commentators used to verify or endorse a story. Broadly, experts were people able to speak with authority on a topic based on more than personal experience.

Also recorded were the genders of non-expert interviewees and “case studies” of people who did have personal experience related a given topic (for example, people with a particular medical condition or in a particular situation, such as single mothers using a food bank); participants in “vox pops,” or brief on-the-street interviews with “ordinary people”; and on-air journalists, including reporters as well as presenters or anchors.

Broadcast journalist questionnaires: Questionnaires were sent to a total of 320 UK broadcast journalists in October 2013. The respondent pool was drawn from a list of recent alumni at the authors’ university who became employed at UK broadcast news outlets after graduation. This list was used not only because of its availability but also because of a desire to restrict the survey to junior-level newsroom staffers, as one of the items of interest was the degree to which career concerns and pressure from senior journalists or supervisors influenced the selection of on-air experts. Job titles of respondents included news editors and assistant editors, producers and assistant producers, reporters, researchers, and guest bookers. A total of forty responses were received, for a 12.5 percent response rate.

Broadcast journalists were asked their views about what characteristics an “expert” exhibited, along with questions about their process for choosing experts to appear on news shows. Of particular relevance were questions asking whether they “actively” tried to get women to appear; whether senior members of the organization actively encouraged them to book women; and the reasons that experts gave when declining an invitation to appear.

Textual analysis was used to interpret the questionnaire data, which were given multiple readings to enable key themes and commonalities to emerge.

Broadcast journalist interviews: A total of twenty-five in-person interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2013 with journalists – including producers, editors, and reporters – at the four news organisations whose content was monitored for this study: BBC News (which produces both the BBC News at Ten and the Today radio programme), ITN News (which produces the ITV News at 10), and Sky News. Participants either volunteered to be interviewed or were selected by one of the authors, with attention to a diversity of newsroom roles, experience, and gender. Interviews ranged in length from ten to fifty minutes.

Interviewees were invited to discuss their attitudes about expert guests, their approach to selecting experts for on-air appearances, awareness of any gender disparities, guidance they received from higher-level staff or managers, and other issues of relevance to the study. Textual analysis also was used to interpret the interview data.

Female expert questionnaires: An email questionnaire was sent to women who took part in training days provided by the BBC Academy, a programme established in an effort to increase the use of women as expert sources in British broadcast media. The training offered guidance for women who expressed an interest in appearing as on-air experts. Two thousand women applied for the thirty places initially offered; the BBC increased its training capacity in response to this demand, eventually hosting sessions in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and two locations in England. For this study, questionnaires were sent to 164 of these female experts in early 2014; thirty-one responses were received, a response rate of 18.9 percent.

These questionnaires asked respondents to indicate their role or area of expertise, followed by five open-ended questions. The first two of these asked for age and for information related to appearances on air after the training period. The other three asked for respondents' opinions about factors influencing women's decisions whether to agree to be interviewed on air. Textual analysis was again used to interpret these data.

Findings

Some points of comparison are needed to understand the role of women as experts on British broadcast news programmes as indicated by the present study.

The first relates to gendered expertise in British society overall, as of course one reason for the on-air disparity might be that female experts are simply not available. Spokespeople for two key organizations consulted in connection with this study, Expert Witness and the UK Register of Expert Witnesses, said about 70 percent of the experts on their books were clearly identifiable as men. But the spokesman for Expert Witness, which provides witnesses for court cases, said the number of female experts had grown over the past decade and continues to increase. The Register data are more ambiguous, listing many experts of “indeterminate” gender, including more than 57 percent of the medical experts. The Register editor said most of these experts actually were women, describing them as more likely than men to prefer initials, titles, or other gender-masking devices.

Additional insights about the presence of female experts in UK society can be obtained from publicly available information about various centres of authority. Although space limitations prevent an exhaustive list, three sets of data are suggestive:

* *Political leadership*: In 2012, 171 of the 660 life (non-hereditary) peers in the House of Lords were women – 25.9 percent, or approximately three men for each woman. The House of Commons in 2012 included 142 women among its 650 members, or approximately 21.8 percent. However, under contemporary governments, the House leadership has contained greater gender parity. Although the exact leadership composition changes frequently, the immediate pre-Brexit UK Cabinet included fifteen men and seven women, a ratio of approximately 2:1; the Shadow Cabinet (the opposition) was equally divided between men and women.

* *Academia*: Figures from the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency show there were 86,595 female and 107,655 male academics in Britain in 2013-2014, indicating just under 45 percent of academic staff are women. Women are significantly less well-represented in the professoriate, where they make up just 22 percent of the total; however, they occupy nearly half of the 4,100 additional senior academic positions in the nation's universities.

* *Legal profession*: Data from the Bar Standards Board indicate roughly equal numbers of men and women are called to the bar in the UK. In 2012/2013, 691 women and 655 men were called to the bar; in 2013/2014, the numbers were 726 women and 730 men. Later in their legal career, barristers may secure tenancy, which means being accepted as a permanent member of chambers; men and women are again represented in roughly equivalent numbers at this level. Figures from the Judicial Appointments Commission show that women made up just under 23 percent of court judges in 2010 but 40 percent of tribunals judges; taken together, these data indicate that around 29 percent of Britain's judges are women.

The second point about women in British society can be made more briefly. It concerns the gender breakdown of the UK broadcast news audience, in light of findings below related to journalists' perceptions about this audience and their use as a rationale for booking on-air experts. Figures from Coldham Consultancy, which collects data about UK broadcast audiences, show that around the time of this study, two of the three flagship television news programmes in this study had a majority of female viewers: BBC News at Ten (53 percent female) and ITV News at Ten (60 percent female). The audience for Sky News at Ten is 53 percent male. The gender breakdown of Today listeners on BBC Radio 4 was not available.

Findings: Programme monitoring

On average, four male experts appeared on these broadcast news programmes for every one female expert, with little variation across the study period. ITV News at Ten had

the greatest disproportion, with five men for every woman. Other ratios were 3.9:1 for Today, and 3.7:1 for both BBC News at Ten and Sky News at Ten. Further details about the gender breakdown, addressing RQ1, are provided in Table 1.

[Table 1 about here]

The serious matters of business and politics were especially likely to be explained through the views of male experts on the programmes analysed. Six male experts were used in business coverage for every one woman, while the ratio in politics was 10:1. Women experts were far more likely to appear on softer news stories; for instance, ITV News bulletins in 2013 featured only twice as many male as female experts on the topic of health.

The use of men and women in other roles revealed greater gender parity. The ratio of male to female non-expert interviewees in stories drawing on “ordinary people” was about 2.8:1. Men and women were equally likely to appear in case studies, in which a source is used to illustrate a situation or circumstance, and “vox pops,” which are spot interviews about the views of people on the street or in other public spaces.

Although not the focus of this study, the gender of on-air journalists is worth quickly noting. With the exception of the BBC Radio 4 programme, which had a 3.5:1 ratio of men to women presenters or anchors, there was broad parity across the televised newscasts. On Sky News, women presenters outnumbered men; there was rough equivalence on the other two television newscasts at the time of this study. Among reporters or correspondents, however, the ratio of men to women was 3.5:1, with the Today radio programme again providing the greatest imbalance – nearly six male reporters for every woman.

Findings: Questionnaires and interviews

As described above, three complementary methods were used to obtain data about the use of sources on flagship British broadcast news programmes. Forty broadcast journalists completed an open-ended questionnaire, while twenty-five – nine at Sky News, and eight

apiece at ITN and the BBC – participated in in-depth interviews. Thirty-one female experts completed a different open-ended questionnaire. This section draws first on the questionnaire and interview data from journalists, then on the questionnaire data from experts, to consider three related topics: Journalists' rationales for selecting experts (RQ2), experts' explanations of their own decisions about whether to appear on air (RQ3), and perceptions about women experts held by journalists and by the experts themselves (RQ4).

Broadcast journalists: Findings supported earlier research indicating that broadcasters especially value experts who are able to speak clearly and confidently, thus establishing instant credibility with a lay audience. "Being a good speaker is vital," a female producer said, a point made by several interviewees. "They need to speak clearly and get their message across," agreed a female radio journalist. "Otherwise why wouldn't the presenter or reporter just paraphrase what they have to say? They have to shed some light, provide some analysis, their own comment." A male television journalist said: "Ultimately, we're in the job of trying to communicate to the audience a story, and if we're choosing an expert, we need to choose someone who will aid us in that task. So they need to be able to speak with clarity and succinctly to the point, and be able to add a bit of value, illuminate the point."

Moreover, journalists say they are proud of their own ability to identify experts who will exude this vital confidence and credibility on air – who will, in other words, be able to perform appropriately for the camera or microphone. "We speak to all of our guests before we put them on air and get a detailed briefing from them and run them through what they'll have to do," one female producer explained. "[We] make sure that we judge that they are able to perform at the level they need to on air."

However, asked why more men than women are judged to meet these criteria, interviewees rarely cited women's speaking or self-presentation styles. Instead, many drew on their own perceptions – which were not necessarily accurate – about the number of experts

in British society. “Our guests reflect male-dominated public life,” a male producer explained. “It’s our job to hold authority figures to account, and they are usually men,” said a female producer. “I don’t think the quest for a female voice should override the quest for the person who can make the best contribution to the programme,” a third journalist said. “Journalism needs to reflect society, not manufacture a false view of society.”

Some journalists in the current study admitted that at least in the past, they devoted little thought or effort to the gender of the on-air experts they selected. “We were a bit lazy before, we never really thought about it,” one senior editor confessed. However, thirty-three of the forty journalists who completed the questionnaire said they did actively try to get women to appear as expert interviewees, and another two said they sought an overall balance across various aspects of diversity. Only five admitted they did not.

All forty questionnaire respondents mentioned multiple information sources for finding experts, with Google getting the most mentions, from twenty-nine journalists. But “personal contacts and prior knowledge” came right behind, cited by twenty-eight journalists. Supporting these questionnaire data, half the interviewees said they regularly or often rebooked guests whom they already knew. “When I started, the go-to people were all in your head, and you learnt from the people that had been doing it for years,” a producer who had been in her job for two years explained. “That’s just what you did.”

In addition, fifteen questionnaire respondents said they booked guests suggested by their (typically male) seniors or supervisors. A small majority said they were encouraged by these older journalists to get women to appear, including seventeen who said encouragement was significant or explicit. Fifteen said they received no such encouragement, and the rest indicated that senior people commented on gender balance but did not actively encourage it.

However, 12 questionnaire respondents voluntarily referenced a need to get the right person or a “top” person, and in response to a direct question, seventeen of the interviewees

also said securing the “right” or “best” person was the priority – a need that would seem to eclipse the concern for gender balance. “I just want the best person, regardless of gender,” one television producer explained. Questionnaire respondents used such phrases as “a typical man-in-tie sort of guest” and “generally white, over 40, male, in suits or uniforms” to describe the standard broadcast news expert – the “usual suspects,” in newsroom terms.

Some interviewees did recognise the inherent problems. “On Syria, all we were getting was middle-aged white blokes,” said one male producer. A female producer on a different programme said it would be “nice to have change and not have a programme full of men in suits.” She added that the white male presenter on the business programme for which she worked – who generally suggested the experts who should appear, typically CEOs or finance directors with whom he could spar on air – expressed regret but a sense of inevitability in relation to the gender imbalance: “There is a serious dearth of women, and so what can happen to the show is that you can have five sections and five interviewees, all men. It’s just soul-destroying, but there’s nothing you can do.”

As the literature suggests, journalists also like experts who can be counted on to promote controversy in an authoritative way that will make news exciting. To be controversial, the expert has to be supremely confident in the ability to perform on air, on demand. But research indicates that women’s fear of being disliked and/or of standing out makes them more reluctant to court controversy, a sentiment discussed further below in relation to questionnaire responses from female experts. This in turn makes them less appealing guests for many journalists. “I would say that women don’t seem to relish the prospect of debate as much as some of the men (with many exceptions),” a male producer wrote on his questionnaire. “I would go so far as to say some are reluctant to engage in really antagonistic debate.” Another producer who had worked across a variety of programmes said women would debate with each other but were less likely to want to debate with men.

However, the preference for male experts did not automatically extend to all broadcast news programming. Three interviewees said they believed that morning and lunchtime shows – seen by journalists as less prestigious than the nightly newscasts – were more likely to book female experts because a greater percentage of viewers in those time slots were presumed to be women. (Again, this is a misperception for two of the three 10 pm newscasts analysed in this study.) In other words, news that interests men is seen by some broadcast journalists as different from – and, given their accord of prestige to the night-time newscast, more important than – news that interests women.

The shows airing earlier in the day also have traditionally foregrounded health, education, and lifestyle stories, compared with the harder news focus at night. “We have lots of women experts,” one interviewee explained. “I’m thinking of our lunchtime news, where we get a lot of live guests who are women.” Another agreed that the lunchtime report has “more female topics” and “plenty of women interviewed.” Similarly, an experienced radio producer said it was easier to get women to appear on a show specifically for women: “I think they feel they’ll get a better understanding, a better hearing.”

Although thirty-three of the forty journalists who responded to the questionnaire said they wanted to try to recruit more female experts on the harder news programmes, half also said they believed women experts require time-consuming reassurance – and frequently still decline to appear even after receiving such assurance. In addition, as highlighted above, four of every five respondents argued against inviting a woman to appear on a programme unless she was demonstrably the most qualified person or most impressive performer.

Yet many agreed that women were unlikely to make their own case for meeting these criteria, and several explicitly said in either their questionnaire responses or their interviews that women were more likely than men to protest that they were not the best or the right person. Often, the journalists reported, these experts suggested a male instead. “I can

persuade most people to participate, but women often tell me they're not the best person," an experienced female producer said. Another confirmed that "women are harder to book. There are fewer of them, and you have to seek them out and build up a relationship." A senior producer put it this way:

You get "I'm not really sure I'm the right person." And you say "Why not? Because the sort of things you'll be asked on air are the sort of things we've just been talking about." Then you get "Oh, I'm very nervous." ... You often get "Oh well, I should probably clear that with my boss," and the boss is invariably a man. ... They don't quite say "I don't really want to put myself forward" but that's the message they're kind of giving.

This quote highlights another crucial issue for journalists: How fast a potential interviewee says "yes." Broadcasters often need to quickly secure someone who can provide credible analysis of rapidly moving news, and personal contacts matter. "Especially with the time constraints, you will stick to (who) you know will perform and will give you what you want, and that's totally natural," one male producer explained. More than a third of the journalists responding to the questionnaire – fifteen of the forty – said women take longer to agree to appear than men do and exhibit much more insecurity about their performance even when they are sure of their subject. "I have spent twenty minutes trying to persuade a woman to come on the programme, and then she goes and says 'no'," one frustrated producer said during an interview. Like any disappointed suitor, the journalist typically will then turn to someone more likely to say "yes" without a fuss – such as a known man.

Women experts: The questionnaires – completed by thirty-one women experts, academics, and other highly qualified professionals who applied to be trained as broadcast contributors by the BBC Academy – indicated that despite a general willingness to appear on air, many were indeed hesitant to put themselves or their qualifications forward. Nearly four in five reported a lack of confidence, and thirteen indicated they were concerned about being harshly judged, disliked, and/or seen as self-promoting. "It requires a certain level of narcissism to want to be on TV/radio, and an even greater amount of it to put yourself

forward,” one academic wrote in response to a request for insights into what inhibits women. “Women generally have a greater capacity for self-doubt concerning their abilities and often shy away from the politics of proclaiming themselves to be experts to avoid ruffling feathers within their workplace or field of expertise.”

Four of the expert respondents used, unprompted, the words “pushy,” “uppity,” or “arrogant” to describe how they feared being viewed. A legal expert described “the fear of appearing too ‘pushy’ or overconfident by thinking you can do it. To me it often looked like the realm of a few ‘famous’ people (mainly men) and I had ‘no right’ to be there, even though I knew I had a lot to say on issues of my expertise.” An academic agreed that “I didn’t want to be seen as uppity,” adding she had taken “a lot of criticism” from senior colleagues, a concern echoed by another academic worried she would gain a reputation for being pushy. A fourth expert similarly said she “thought it would be seen as pushy or arrogant by mainly male colleagues.” Indeed, this concern seemed especially prominent among university women – who constituted more than half of our expert respondents, much in line with the data cited above that suggested relatively high numbers of women in the academy.

“Academia often frowns on those who appear in the media,” one of these women said. “There is a danger that people who appear in the media can be taken less seriously by their academic colleagues.”

Despite the status these professional women had earned precisely because of their expertise, many said they were afraid about appearing unprepared or unqualified – a concern one respondent described as “imposter syndrome,” the feeling that “there is always someone who is better ‘qualified.’” Questionnaire responses revealed exactly this sentiment. “I think we assume that we’re not qualified enough to represent our area of expertise,” said a scientist. “Of course we are, but I think women tend to consider this a lot more than men.” “I was really scared that I’d look stupid and not be able to answer the questions even though I know

I understand my subject well,” an academic said, adding she worried that she was not actually an expert and her boss would be “a much better person for the job.” An older academic said that when she has “suggested to colleagues to have a go, they have mostly said that they do not want to make a fool of themselves.” Yet another academic added that the nature of broadcast media adds to the insecurity, saying she wanted to “avoid being drawn into territory I am not qualified to comment on – but doing it anyway because I’m on the spot!”

A dozen of the experts also expressed concern about appearance. “I was, and remain, very aware of my body language and appearance,” said a museum curator. “Consequently, I have, and will continue, to avoid TV work if possible.” A respondent who worked at a university explained that “women know that they will be judged not on what they say but on what they wore and how they looked”; she said inhibiting factors for her included concern about her appearance and “lack of confidence in my knowledge,” adding she recognised this was “silly given my professional status.”

Experts also confirmed the journalists’ view that men were more comfortable in the role of confrontational or controversial sparring partners for broadcast presenters. “Men often have more confidence, whether rightly or not! They’re less concerned about getting it right first time, being shouted down, or arguing over a point,” said an expert who also had broadcast experience. “I do not flourish in an adversarial environment,” an older academic said, and several others directly or indirectly referenced a fear of being challenged on air.

One more finding is worth mention: Although ten of the journalists responding to the questionnaire said female experts offered childcare issues in declining to appear, only one of the thirty-one experts cited childcare as a reason in their own survey – far fewer than the number citing fear of being disliked, disapproved of, or somehow exposed. The marked discrepancy in perceptions between journalists and female experts on this potential rationale deserves further study, as at least two explanations are possible. Journalists may be projecting

stereotypical gender roles onto women even if the women themselves are not referencing those roles at all. Or women experts may be falling back on the ready excuse of domestic responsibilities when they speak with journalists, when their real reasons for declining to appear on air, as articulated through this study, are more psychologically complex.

Discussion and Conclusions

In addition to supporting the premise that women are dramatically under-represented as experts on flagship broadcast news programmes in Britain relative to their prevalence in UK society, this study has sought to understand – from the perspectives of both journalists and experts – why they are so disproportionately outnumbered by men.

Findings show one reason is that the perceived need for a good “performer” militates against the use of new female experts over the reuse of known, reliable, and overtly confident men. Journalists also contend there are too few women in top roles, though our background research – along with the large numbers of women experts applying to go through the BBC Academy training programme – suggests this is a misperception. And journalists seem to feel that the presence of female experts on non-flagship programmes, such as breakfast and lunchtime news, somehow justifies their exclusion from the flagship shows analysed here. This, however, gives men disproportionate influence in shaping “important” news.

Our study also revealed more subtle explanations for the identified disparity and the impact of gendered social role perceptions. One is that experts are expected not only to be authoritative and confident but also to serve as sparring partners for the journalists interviewing them on air, a role with which women feel less comfortable. But of greater significance, we believe, is the crucial finding that women are seen as difficult not only to locate but, once located, to negotiate with – a finding directly articulated by journalists through both the interview and the questionnaire data, and indirectly confirmed by women experts themselves. Even though respondents were women who in fact had expressed a desire

to appear on air (by requesting the BBC Academy training), a great many still admitted to considerable reticence about actually appearing.

Our data suggest this reticence comes from two directions. One is the fear of being disliked, of flying in the face of social norms precisely by putting oneself forward to be seen and heard, thus appearing “uppity” or “pushy,” in respondents’ own words. This fear, which was particularly prevalent among female academics, is in line with other research exploring the “dilemma of the informed woman” (Watson and Hoffman 2004) and other studies of women in leadership roles (Eagly 2007; Thomas-Hunt and Phillips 2004). The other, associated influence seems to be what other scholars (Johnson 2014; Stover 2013) have identified as a princess-like need to be wooed, persuaded, and reassured – a type of behaviour reported by fully half of the journalists responsible for booking guests onto news shows. Johnson (2014) offers this conclusion: “the culture industries offer princesses; and when faced with alternative desires and pleasures we frame these in the language of the princess anyway, insisting that rebellious girls and women must themselves be princesses” (908). Substitute the words “broadcast” for “culture,” and “newsworthy” for “rebellious,” and we have a description of the women experts whom journalists describe as hard to get.

In addition to the guidance it can offer to broadcasters wishing to address their on-air gender imbalance, for instance by incorporating awareness of women experts’ perspectives into employee education and training programmes, this study offers several benefits for researchers. It bolsters the extensive literature on women and the media, as well as the current understanding of news sourcing decisions, by offering nuanced insights into why closing the expert gender gap remains a challenge even when all concerned believe that, in theory, it is a desirable goal. Our findings indicate the role of numerous diverse factors, from the logistical (such as news production time constraints and the seductive simplicity of calling on people who have come through in the past) to the psychological (encompassing lack of confidence

and fear of being disliked) to the cultural forces at play both inside the newsroom and in society at large.

The study reported here drew data from a relatively small number of non-random respondents, all within a single country and thus a particular cultural context, and just four news programmes; there is a great deal more to be done using broader, more diverse samples that can enable more sophisticated statistical analysis and facilitate generalisation. More finely grained information about the gender of experts in various segments of society also would be useful, as would similarly detailed data that connects experts to specific segments of news programmes. Approaches drawing on richly nuanced concepts from such fields as social psychology, newsroom sociology, and feminist theory all offer promising avenues for follow-up, building on the insight offered here that achieving greater gender parity across broadcast news requires a conscious and concerted effort informed by a deeper understanding of the nature of the problem and why it persists.

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Table 1: Men and Women as Broadcast News Sources

This table indicates, for each of the 161 broadcast news shows analysed, the mean number of males and females who appeared on air in each of three interviewee roles. Means are shown for the four shows combined, as well as for each individual show across the study period.

	Expert interviewees		Non-expert interviewees		“Vox pop” interviewees	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Combined	8.66	2.16	9.89	3.57	0.77	0.78
BBC News at Ten	10.13	2.77	12.67	4.90	1.17	1.40
ITV News at Ten	8.90	1.77	8.10	2.63	0.93	0.90
Sky News at Ten	6.13	1.67	9.70	3.83	0.36	0.30
Today (BBC radio)	9.47	2.43	9.10	2.90	0.60	0.50

All differences in the columns for expert and non-expert interviewees are significant at the level of $p < .001$ except for non-expert interviewees on ITV News at Ten ($p = .001$).