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## Seeking Women's Expertise in the UK Broadcast News Media

Suzanne Franks and Lis Howell

The status of women in UK broadcasting, as well as in many other countries, raises many important questions about gender-based discrimination in the news. (Ross and Carter, 2011) This ~~paper chapter~~ looks at the disproportionate use of male over female experts in flagship news programmes. Surveys done by postgraduate students from the journalism department at City, University of London show that in 2013 male experts used as interviewees on flagship news programmes outnumbered women experts by 4.4 to 1. By 2016 that ratio had narrowed to 3 to 1. Figures show, however, that the ratio of women experts at that time in UK society overall ran at a ratio of 2.5 men to women, at senior levels in law, academia, politics and as expert court witnesses. (Howell and Singer, 2016) So why do broadcast journalists discriminate against women in this way when seeking expert contributors?

Feminist news research shows that one of the ways in which such discrimination is manifest is related to the limited presence and visibility of women in senior positions, both on and off air. In the early years of broadcasting in the UK, women were barely visible in any prominent role. They were neither seen nor heard in senior roles on and off screen, and were largely limited to cosmetic and supporting roles to men. Notably, also, not until the 1970s 'women's voices' were deemed 'acceptable' to read and present mainstream television news bulletins (Franks, 2011, Beard, 2017). A global process of gradual change occurred in subsequent years, whereby more women were able to rise into editorial and management positions in news organisations (IWMF, 2015).

A similar and contentious debate concerns onscreen ageism. Why are male presenters able to age gracefully, whereas women after a certain age disappear completely? (Moran, 2012) In 2007, Women in Journalism, a networking and campaigning organisation for women journalists in the UK, published a report 'The Lady Vanishes at 45' (Campbell, 2007) which addresses this question and calls for an end to such age discrimination. Additionally, a number of high profile women over the years have used their experience to challenge this stereotype and argued for the need for women on screen to represent the wider age profile of the population. (Craft, 1988, Revoir, 2012, Plunkett, 2011, BBC, 2011). The preference for

younger women on screen particularly affects women experts, as expertise, authority and seniority are usually associated with age.

A related field of feminist journalism research has focused on both women's presence as reporters in relation to the representation of women in the news and use of women as expert sources. For instance, the most comprehensive, longitudinal analysis of the gender balance of news reporting is the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), which originated with the 1995 UN Conference on Women held in Beijing (WACC. ). This survey is hosted by the portal 'Who Makes the News,' an education and campaigning resource that focuses upon the gender composition of the news media from across the world. Every five years the GMMP analyses select indicators of gender in the news media, including the gender of those involved in the content and production of the news stories, including newsreaders, presenters and journalists ; the most recent survey in 2015 offered comparisons from 114 countries on who featured in radio, television, newspaper and online news. What is striking is the slow rate of change over the years of the project. In 2000 the GMMP found that only 21% of news subjects – those who are interviewed and whom the news is about – were women. ' (*Global Media Monitoring Project 2000.* ) The GMMP 2015 report noted that that women make up only 24% of the persons heard, read about or seen in newspaper, television and radio news, exactly the same percentage as in 2010. (*GMMP <br>. 2015*) Women are about twice as likely, however, to be featured as victims in news stories and they are more likely to be shown in a newspaper photograph. When they do feature in the news they are more likely to be identified by their family status.

The gender gap also varies depending on the topic of the news: "The gender gap is narrowest in stories on science and health, the major topic of lowest importance on the news agenda occupying only 8% of the overall news space; women make up 35% of the people in news under this topic, in contrast to only 16% in political news stories. The gap is widest in news about politics and government in which women are only 16% of the people in the stories." The report noted that women were three percentage points less visible in political news than they had been five years earlier in 2010.

Additionally, the 2015 report confirms not only that more men than women feature in the news, but also that they are featured in different ways (Blumell, 2017): women are more likely to be present in news stories as victims, celebrities or silent fashion icons. Men are

more likely to feature as ‘actors’ and ‘agents’ in new stories. The significance of this disparity is that women are frequently shown as case studies or victims rather than experts. To some extent this is a function of wider matters of societal roles, which is well beyond the scope of individual reporters who produce news stories. Given current definitions of ‘newsworthiness’, if men are doing more newsworthy things and occupying a greater proportion of newsworthy roles then they are likely to feature more prominently in news reports. However, the role of expertise and punditry in news stories is far more dependent, we argue, upon the often deliberate choices exercised by production teams, where producers make conscious choices about whom to invite as experts. So, whilst the Pope or President or prominent CEO might be a man – and the news story will have to acknowledge this – reporters make choices about which individuals to interview for comments on what is going on. This disparity in who features in the news is the key issue behind these studies about the use of female expertise. The crucial point is that the choice of who should comment on the news and offer background expertise to the viewers is very much within the control and remit of news producers.

The particular focus of this paper chapter is the extent to which women are being selected and invited to speak and to contribute expertise on air within broadcast news items. This issue is important because, as this research demonstrates, more women are available and able to be used as experts on flagship news programmes, than journalists choose to use. To support this claim, we draw data from a series of quantitative analysis we carried out with student monitors in the Department of Journalism, City, University London over several years that examined gender balance in UK broadcast news, focusing on who is commenting and contributing expertise in news and current affairs.

### **Hearing the Disparities.**

A key moment in the trajectory of concern about gender balance regarding the use of news experts in the UK was on the high-profile BBC Radio 4 morning radio show *The Today Programme*. Scholars typically see this as **the** agenda setting national news programme of

record (Donovan, 2013); it is required listening of the political elites in the UK. In October 2012, for an item on breast cancer, the presenter John Humphreys interviewed *no* women but two male scientists. Humphreys even asked one of them what he would do, were he a woman offered breast screening. At that time, all but one of the programme's presenters were men. In the same week a male presenter had discussed teenage pregnancy with exclusively male interviewees. (Franks, 2013)

Two years previously, Professor Lis Howell had publicly criticised the lack of women interviewed on *The Today Programme* during the 2010 general election. Her remarks were published in *Broadcast Magazine*, a UK trade magazine aimed at industry workers. (The Airwaves are not Fair Waves 2010) The particular radio item that she was criticising featured a lengthy profile of a marginal electoral constituency, where every representative person interviewed was male. This article piqued the attention of *Broadcast Magazine's* editor, Lisa Campbell, who asked Howell to continue to look at the ratio of men to women interviewed on *The Today Programme* and also other news programmes, on the basis of some surveys already done by postgraduate journalism students.

This grew into a monthly opinion piece by Howell in *Broadcast Magazine*, backed up by more survey material collected by students in the Department of Journalism, City, University of London. They counted the numbers of women experts used on a variety of UK news programmes. This formed the basis of the 'Expert Women' campaign initiated by Campbell in *Broadcast Magazine*. (Campbell, 2012) The students surveyed five editions of a variety of given news programme in one week in a month – the same week in the same month for all the monitored programmes. They counted the number of "experts" interviewed on these programmes and logged them by gender. For the survey, the classification of experts included unique achievers in a particular field; people holding important roles in business, government, or society; and commentators used to verify or endorse a story. Broadly, experts were defined as all the people able to speak with authority on a topic, based on more than simply their personal experience. The student monitors also recorded case studies (for example, people used as an example of a particular medical condition or in a particular situation, but not authority figures); they logged the gender of participants in "vox pops"; people who were witnesses; and ordinary people caught up in news events. In addition, the gender of reporters, presenters and correspondent was also noted.

The study showed, from the frequency with which some experts were used, that as well as having expertise and knowledge, an expert also needed to be someone whom journalists considered interesting or engaging. A study of the use of one bioethicist as a US media source suggested he was called on so often because he “understands news routines, provides pithy quotes, and supports public engagement”. (Kruvand, 2012) This tallied with Howell’s ‘Expert Women’ survey results, where some experts (predominantly but not exclusively male) were called on repeatedly by broadcasters.

At the time of the 2012 controversial male-only interviews on *The Today Programme* about teenage pregnancy and breast cancer, many listeners, including feminist campaigner Caroline Criado Perez, complained to BBC Radio Four’s “Feedback” programme about the absence of expert women’s voices. The City University data provided empirical evidence that women were under-represented as experts in on *The Today Programme* and other programmes in the UK.

The period from March 2012 to October 2013, across the wide variety of programmes surveyed by the students, had enough data from four flagship news programmes to provide a viable sample. The figures for this period expressed as a ratio of male to female experts used were :-

<i>Programme</i>	<i>No. of Male Experts compared to Female</i>
BBC News at 10	3.7 – 1
ITV News	5 – 1
Today	3.9 – 1
Sky News	5 – 1

**Fig 1. Male and Female Experts on Air 2012/13**

This was an average of 4.4 to 1 of men to women appearing as experts in these four mainstream broadcast programmes. However the ratio of female expertise in society as demonstrated by the number of senior women in academia, law, politics or on the lists of expert witnesses used in courts, averages at a rate of 2.75 men to every woman (Howell

and Singer, 2016) not 4.4 to 1. So by comparison it appeared that broadcasters were under-representing the number of womern experts in society.

As a subsidiary study, students who were monitoring news output took a measurement of expert sources for three weeks in July 2013 on ITV News only, which was divided not only by gender but also by subject. The total numbers were small but did reveal some interesting disparities on the presence of women in broadcast output. The most significant gender gap was in the area of domestic UK politics. When the survey was done in 2013, ten times as many British men were interviewed about politics as women. At this time, the British cabinet had a ratio of 2.5 men to women and the shadow cabinet had a ratio of 1-1 men to women. So the disparity between women actually involved at a high level in politics, and the women shown on the news as authority figures in politics, was striking. The extent to which politics is a male dominated subject is something that has been explored elsewhere. (Ross and Carter, 2011, RW.ERROR - Unable to find reference:doc:5a539900e4b0e3e5a636618c, Ross *et al.*, 2016)

<i>Subject</i>	<i>No. of Male Experts compared to female</i>
British Politics	10 – 1
Sport	6 – 1
International politics	6 – 1
Foreign news	5 - 1
Home news	5 – 1
Entertainment	4 – 1
Health	2 – 1

Fig 2 Gender of experts on ITV by Subject Categories during first 3 weeks July 2013

### **Widening the Questions**

Alongside this survey, in autumn 2013 Howell conducted 25 in-depth interviews with male and female journalists not taking gender into account – including producers, editors, and reporters – on site at the four news organisations whose content was monitored for this study going forward from 2013: 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. Rather than being asked set questions, interviewees were invited to discuss their attitudes about expert interviewees, their approach to selecting experts for on-air appearances, their awareness of any gender disparities, the guidance they received from higher-level staff or managers, and other issues. The aim of these interviews was to try and ascertain why journalists invited a disproportionate number of men to be authoritative commentators on these programmes. The journalists were aware of the disparity. These are examples of some of their responses:

Sky News female journalist: “Our guests reflect male-dominated public life“

BBC “News at Ten” journalist: “It’s our job to hold authority figures to account, and they are usually men.”

ITN journalist: “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.”

BBC News journalist: “Journalism needs to reflect society, not manufacture a false view of society.”

These journalists did not recognise that the view of society which their news programmes presented was an inaccurate reflection of the level of female expertise available in society. They believed that the true ratio of male expertise to female expertise was exactly as presented on their programmes and that there was no way in which they could increase the number of women experts on air.

In addition 32 women responded to a questionnaire sent to participants in the BBC ‘Expert Women’ training days – a BBC initiative which was a direct result of the *Broadcast Magazine* articles in 2013 (see below). The questionnaire included three open-ended questions asking respondents’ opinions about factors influencing women’s decisions whether or not to agree to be interviewed on air. Interestingly the most quoted reason for declining to appear (other

than logistical reasons) was the fear of seeming “pushy” or self-important. (Howell and Singer, 2016)

“(There’s) 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,” said one academic.

“I didn’t want to be seen as uppity..... having taken a lot of criticism,” said a female scientist

“I thought it would be seen as pushy or arrogant by mainly male colleagues,” said another academic

In October 2013, the editorship of *Broadcast Magazine* changed, and the campaign ceased. But Howell and her students continued to survey five “flagship” news programmes: Sky News; BBC News at Ten, ITV News at Ten; BBC Radio Four “Today; and Channel Four News. The student monitors surveyed five editions of each programme every month. The surveys took place across a working week. All five editions of each programme were surveyed in the same week in order to make comparisons.

The first tranche of new figures, covering October 2013 to March 2014 were announced at the first City, University of London “Women on Air” conference in April 2014. (*Women on Air*. 2014a) Statistical analysis of the data showed that, despite the ‘Expert Women’ campaign that had been promoted widely in *Broadcast Magazine*, the ratio of male to female experts was still 4 men to every woman.

<i>Programme</i>	<i>No. of Male Experts compared to Female</i>
Sky News	4.7 – 1

ITV News at Ten	4 – 1
BBC News at Ten	4 – 1
BBC Radio 4 “Today”	3.6 – 1 (a slight improvement on 2013)
Channel 4 News	4 – 1

Fig 3 Expert Men and Women on Air Averaging 4.1 to one overall, compared with 4.4 to one the previous year. (*Women on Air*. 2014b).

### **Missing Opinions**

The study – embracing quantitative surveys of experts on air; interviews with production teams; and the questionnaires sent to women who considered themselves as experts who might make themselves available to journalists – raised two issues. Firstly far fewer women were being invited to appear as expert commentators than were able and available. Second, women appeared more hesitant to contribute even when they were asked. Journalists who were interviewed said that producers did identify women experts but found them reluctant to appear on air. “I can persuade most people to participate, but women often tell me they’re not the best person,” an experienced female producer said (Howell and Singer 2016).

Many journalists agreed that women are more likely than men to protest that they are not the best or the right person. Often, the journalists reported, these experts suggested a man instead. Another journalist agreed: “Women are harder to book. There are fewer of them, and you have to seek them out and build up a relationship.” A senior female producer remarked:

“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” (Howell and Singer, 2016)

Journalists expressed frustration that in a busy news schedule a producer would spend a long time trying to persuade a woman to appear on air, only to be told that she did not feel sufficiently qualified to appear and they should approach someone else. One male producer explained:

“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,”

Howell also sent an online questionnaire which was answered by 40 junior broadcast journalists. Fifteen said that women took longer to agree to appear than men and exhibited more insecurity about their performance even when they were sure of their subject. One frustrated male BBC local radio producer commented:-

“I have spent twenty minutes trying to persuade a woman to come on the programme, and then she goes and says ‘no’.”

The junior broadcast journalists who approached women to appear on news programmes were usually tasked with “guest booking” for demanding senior producers or presenters. They had to deliver experts in a limited time frame. No leeway was given to take account of the fact that women experts would take more time to persuade, because women experts had fewer role models; or were constrained by fear of seeming “pushy”; or were conscious that they were likely to be criticised (Watson and Hoffman 2004). Interestingly, few women experts or journalists who contributed to either the questionnaires or face to face interviews mentioned pressures of childcare or domestic commitments as usual reasons given for not being able to appear on air. The women experts who responded to the questionnaire were largely working women with successful careers who had already organised their domestic responsibilities, and who had put themselves forward for the BBC ‘Expert Women’ confidence building programme (see below).

This research demonstrating the paucity of female experts on broadcast news was consistent with other evidence about the role of women as commentators in the media. In her 2013 study Franks noted the dearth of female opinion writing: just a quarter of comment pieces were by women, surveyed in the Guardian Datablog; commissioning editors described difficulties in persuading women to contribute (Franks, 2013). Similarly, in

the US, women were seen as reluctant to pontificate because they feared they were not sufficiently expert (Zofia Smardz, 2005). In 2012, the *Columbia Journalism Review* published an analysis entitled 'It's 2012 Already: Why is Opinion Writing Still Mostly Male?' (Fry, 2012). In the US, this problem led to the formation of website known as the Op-Ed project, which was predicated on research showing that women wrote only 20% of comment pieces in the US media. The Op-Ed project campaigned for a greater range of voices; it tries to support and encourage women to pursue comment and opinion writing. (*The OpEd project*. 2012).

Once again, as with the female broadcast experts, it appeared both that women were not being asked. When they were asked, women often seemed reluctant to participate or put themselves forward, which sometimes caused frustration on the part of the journalist. A further study by the European Journalism Observatory in 2017 substantiated these findings, that women were not well represented in opinion and commentary writing (Lees and Anson, 2017).

Both anecdotal and scholarly evidence link this disinclination to voice opinion, in part, to the hostility to female commentators expressed in social media. There are many examples which have highlighted the scale of abuse that women face when they put forward opinions on controversial matters. This is an international problem (Pew Centre, 2017). The UK has seen many high profile examples ('Yvette Cooper 'sick to death of vitriol' directed at Laura Kuenssberg', 2017). Online abuse has been targeted at broadcasters (eg Professor Mary Beard, the eminent classics scholar), feminist campaigners (eg Caroline Criado Perez, who argued for women to be represented on UK banknotes) and politicians on a wide range of matters (Moore, 2017). Some female journalists have felt so discouraged by the abuse they get when they voice opinions on matters of controversy that they feel disinclined to enter the fray and question whether they should 'retreat' to safe and uncontroversial subject areas where women are 'allowed' to voice views (Franks, 2013).

In their illuminating study Watson and Hoffman (Watson and Hoffman, 2004) asked mixed-gender groups of US management students to solve a fictitious workplace problem. In half of the 40 groups, a woman received a "hint" to the answer, and in the other half, a man got 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 study's participants, the researchers suggested, regarded women who seemed well informed to be misfits or even 'black sheep' in the way they defied the prevailing norm. This supports the notion that trolling and other forms of abuse would indicate; women are much more likely to be disliked than men, when they appear as authority figures.

### **Changing Voices**

Another initiative involved the setting up in 2013 of an expert women database, The Women's Room <http://thewomensroom.org.uk/index.php>, an initiative established by Caroline Criado Perez (*The Women's Room - Find An Expert.*). The database rapidly attracted hundreds and then thousands of women experts to submit their details and thereby make themselves available to broadcast requests. The site also encouraged women to break down the notion of 'expert' to get away from the idea that an expert needed formal education in a particular area. This redefinition of 'expert' would, it was hoped, broaden the notion of expertise to include many more women with expertise gained from everyday experiences such as parenting; gardening; crafts; etc. (Steiner, 2009) The breadth of expertise was very varied – from physical sciences, engineering, medicine, economics, local government, arts, media and many more areas.

A second major impact was the establishment of 'Expert Women' days, focussing on confidence building, by the BBC Academy in order to support and encourage female experts and to allay their fears of being seen as "pushy". The 'Expert Women' days also aimed to clarify for the participants the process by which experts were booked and used. Expert Women days began at the BBC in 2013. 30 places were offered to women who considered themselves experts and who wanted to appear on TV and radio, but had never had the chance. Some 2000 women applied, a response that staggered the organisers. (Barnett, 2013) In response to the demand the BBC academy eventually rolled out the scheme to four regional centres and ultimately coached 164 women in a year. The BBC monitored the outcome of its training days and by December 2013, of the 164 women it trained, 66 had made 244 appearances. This meant that a fifth of the women who participated in the scheme appeared on air for the first time within six months of attending the sessions. (The BBC rested the scheme from 2013 to 2016 when leadership changed at the BBC Academy, but the programme was resumed in 2017.) Although the 'Expert Women' training days

might be seen as patronising to women and unnecessary in an ideal world, they at least showed that the BBC acknowledged the paucity of women experts on the news and was applying some pressure to producers to use more women

In 2014 the House of Lords launched an enquiry into women in news and current affairs broadcasting, reporting in January 2015. With Howell as special advisor, and witnesses from the regulators, the broadcasting industry and academia, the House of Lords Communications Select Committee addressing this issue recalled two long-standing concerns about women's involvement:

The first [issue] is the representation of women who work within the broadcasting industry on news and current affairs—either on air (as presenters or reporters) or behind the scenes (in newsgathering production or corporate affairs). The second issue is the representation of women as experts on news and current affairs programmes. (House of Lords, 2015)

Nevertheless, the House of Lords argued against mandatory quotas:

Given the dangers quotas could pose to editorial content, we do not recommend the use of mandatory quotas for female experts in broadcast news and current affairs at this time. If no progress is made in this regard the issue of quotas should be revisited. Broadcasters should create internal databases to ensure they have enough female experts represented in news and current affairs programmes. Where internal databases prove inadequate, they should be supplemented by external databases. (House of Lords, 2015)

In November 2015, more encouraging figures were presented by City, University of London, derived from the surveying by students done between May 2014 and September 2015.

<i>Programme</i>	<i>No. of Male Experts compared to Female</i>
Sky News	3 - 1
Channel Four News	2.6 - 1

BBC Radio 4's Today	2.9 - 1
BBC News at Ten	3.9 - 1
ITV News	4.9 - 1

Fig 4 Expert men and women on air May 2014 to September 2015

BBC News at Ten was in the same place as in 2012 with at 3.9 male experts to each woman. ITV News at Ten had gone backwards a ratio of 4.9 male experts to each female expert. This meant that Sky News improved by 34%; Channel Four News improved by 37%; the Today programme improved by 19%; but BBC News at Ten remained much on par – a 2% improvement. ITV News was 22% worse.

The change in the use of women experts was further confirmed when in 2016 at the second City, University of London “Women on Air” conference further data was announced from monitoring news programmes (City, University of London). The results of the monitoring survey from October 2015 to March 2016 showed that in this period the ratio of expert women to expert men had improved. Channel 4's figures were 2.2 men- 1 woman, a 15% improvement since the previous period.

<i>Programme</i>	<i>Increase Ratio of Women Experts</i>
Sky News	2.8 men - 1 woman - a 10% improvement since May 2014/Sept 2015
ITV News at Ten	3.6 men – 1 woman – a 3% improvement since May 2014/Sept 2015
BBC Radio “Today”	2.8 men – 1 woman – a 3% improvement since May 2014/Sept 2015
BBC News at Ten	3.8 men – 1 woman – a 3% improvement since May 2014/Sept 2015

Fig 5 Change in proportions of female to male experts appearing on TV – by programme

## Conclusion

The House of Lords report was explicit in calling for better representation of women throughout news and current affairs broadcasting. However, it left the implementation to the broadcasters. This ‘soft touch’ approach means that independent surveys and evidence

that can be used to apply pressure to broadcasters are more needed than ever.

Broadcasters also need to address the constraints which affect women experts if they are to give an accurate and fair view of our society. Some evidence suggests that attitudes toward female authority might change if more women are seen in positions of authority (Gartzia, Eagly and Carli, 2014). In any case, public service broadcasters have an obligation to represent women more fairly, even if it takes time and effort on the part of journalists.

The level of publicity which the House of Lords report attracted has gradually led to shifts in practices. The inauguration of the database for expert women was a demonstrable innovation, as were the 'Expert Women' days established by the BBC Academy to assist and give confidence to potential female expert interviewees. Nevertheless, the expert women monitoring project at City, University of London is ongoing and remains limited to a simple proposition – that more women experts are able and available to participate in news programmes on TV and radio in the UK, than are used at present. In the period that it has been running so far there has been an observable shift in the ratio of male to female experts on mainstream broadcast news output. There are now at least 25% more women experts on air on flagship news programmes than there were in 2013. This is the result of many factors but the publicising of the survey study at City, University of London, has played a part in this change.

However this project will not have achieved its aims until the ratio of men to women experts is at least under 2.5 to one across all flagship programmes – reflecting the ratio of male to female expertise in society generally (Howell, Singer 2016). The challenge remains to increase the broadcasters' awareness that much is still to be done, even in this straightforward, limited and focussed area, and to keep the pressure on them to do it.

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