

EXTRACT

WOMEN AND JOURNALISM

SUZANNE FRANKS



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About the Book

In many countries, the majority of high-profile journalists and editors remain male. Although there have been considerable changes in the prospects for women working in the media in the past few decades, women are still noticeably in the minority in the top journalistic roles, despite making up the majority of journalism students. In this book, Suzanne Franks looks at the key issues surrounding female journalists – from on-screen sexism and ageism to the dangers facing female foreign correspondents reporting from war zones. She also analyses the way that the changing digital media have presented both challenges and opportunities for women working in journalism and considers this in an international perspective. In doing so, this book provides an overview of the ongoing imbalances faced by women in the media and looks at the key issues hindering gender equality in journalism.

‘There is a lot of chatter about the under-representation of women in British newsrooms, but Suzanne Franks gives us the facts and figures. It makes for alarming reading.’

Lindsey Hilsum, International Editor, Channel 4 News

About the Author

Suzanne Franks is Professor of Journalism at City University London. She was formerly Director of Research at the Centre for Journalism, University of Kent, and a news and current affairs producer for the BBC, working on *Newsnight*, the *Money Programme* and *Panorama*. Her publications include *Reporting Disasters – Famine, Aid, Politics and the Media* and *Having None of It: Women, Men and the Future of Work*.

What follows is a short extract from this book.

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Executive Summary

Journalism is changing, as is the role of women in the workplace, but the two are not always evolving in harmony. Women are better educated and encouraged to achieve at work – just as journalism intensifies, jobs become tougher, and the economic pressures become greater. The digital revolution means journalists can work from anywhere, but what is sometimes viewed as the ‘electronic cottage’ may also become the ‘electronic cage’. As news cycles shorten and demands increase for a 24/7 multi-media presence, so the nature of the work has become more challenging. Meanwhile women still continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden in the home (either because society expects it or they want to) which makes things harder to manage if the workplace becomes more demanding.

Women substantially outnumber men in journalism training and enter the profession in (slightly) greater numbers, but still today relatively few are rising to senior jobs and the pay gap between male and female journalists remains a stubbornly wide one. The same is true across many Western countries. And older women, especially if they have taken a break, find it difficult to retain a place in journalism. The exception to this is in some former Eastern bloc countries where women continue to be well represented amongst the higher echelons of journalism and the media.

The fault line in most Western societies remains the same and this applies across many occupations. What now so often determines whether women are reaching senior posts is whether they have family responsibilities. These exacting roles – such as news reporting or senior editor – which are dependent upon a news or output agenda are difficult for anyone with other responsibilities. The relatively few women who do get these jobs at a higher level have few outside responsibilities; for example, they are far more likely than men to be childless.

Since the late 1980s the drive for female audiences to fulfil advertising targets benefited women journalists who were hired to provide a diet of softer, lifestyle, and feature journalism. And many of the women who

did reach the highest levels came from this genre. This has prompted an ongoing debate about the 'feminisation of journalism'.

There are still enduring stereotypes; women predominate on the lifestyle pages, but do not feature much in crime or sport. They are also far less likely to be seen on the front page, which leads to the tendency that 'Men's news is to write on the front page that a fire happened, women's news is to write inside why the guy lit a fire for the third time' (Johnston, 2003). A critical mass of women in journalism at all levels is important in ensuring a greater multiplicity of voices. At the moment, there is a disproportionate lack of female sources, female experts, and even women considered as newsworthy subjects (except when they are victims or royal).

But the digital whirlwind has also created new opportunities and new forms of journalism and this is where women have flourished. They used to leave full-time journalism and write from home as freelancers. Now they can also keep abreast of the news agenda to edit remotely and indeed create whole brands through using social media. And these new ways of consuming media have also enabled women journalists to benefit. Where they can find new ways of doing things and when they carve a new niche, branding themselves in new forms – through a blog or even as a war reporter – this is where women have successfully reinvented themselves. When they enter existing structures they tend to be less successful. There is still evidence of a boys' club and usually where there is a less transparent process, within a corporate hierarchy, then women lose out.

In the traditional structures of journalism there are many junior women but still no clear path of advancement – the same issues recur that have been discussed for over a generation, ever since equal employment rights became a political reality. A number of exceptional individuals have achieved but this has not transformed the culture. There is a tendency to think that the argument has been won, but the concrete evidence shows a stubborn resistance to change across many Western countries – though in the public-service media and in the Nordic countries things are more equal. It may be that in some ways the circle of intense demands and a wish to be involved in family life cannot be squared. Nevertheless, especially because at least a fifth of women today will not have a family, these arguments urgently need to be restated and recast for a new generation and a new digital environment – hence this challenge.

1

Introduction

1.1 Backwards and forwards – onwards and upwards

‘Is there any sexual reason why a woman should be a less accomplished journalist than a man? I can find none.’ This was the question posed in 1898 by that stalwart feminist writer Arnold Bennett in his publication *Journalism for Women: A Practical Guide*. He had observed the considerable hurdles facing women who wanted to succeed as journalists, as in almost every other workplace at that time. ‘A few determined, pioneers . . . found their way into newsrooms but they faced multiple obstacles, notably a lack of educational opportunities, the prevailing view that the woman’s place was in the home, and fierce resistance from a largely male workforce’ (Lonsdale, 2013). There was a small band of female journalists in the early days of mass media who managed to negotiate a way through, like the remarkable Nellie Bly in the US (Fahs, 2011) or women such as Frances Power Cobbe or Alice Meynell writing in the English press at the turn of the twentieth century (Grey, 2012), the Prussian-born Hulda Friedrichs and the pioneering Swedish journalists Wendela Hebbe and Ester Blenda Nordström. Nevertheless, the participation of women in the journalistic workforce – and certainly in areas beyond strictly feminine topics – was a painfully slow process.

The route of women’s entry into the modern workplace altogether has not been a steady and gradual path towards emancipation. There are surprising advances and early examples of success, which were subsequently reversed. The history of women’s employment during both world wars demonstrates plenty of cases where what was previously seen as unthinkable suddenly became commonplace – and then once the landscape changed those same opportunities were just as swiftly withdrawn (Summerfield, 1984). Sometimes it is a case of two steps forward followed by one or more steps back. The history of women’s entry into journalism is full of such examples.

In the entire twentieth century there were hardly any female editors of UK broadsheet papers. Yet already in 1891 Rachel Beer was editing the *Observer*, one of the most distinguished and venerable newspapers on Fleet Street, and two years later she became editor of the *Sunday Times* (Coren & Negev, 2011). Neither paper has ever employed any female editor since then. Similarly there was a female editor of one of the Northcliffe regional titles in 1939, when Margery Kirk Gatey took over the *Exeter Express and Echo*, but that was the last time until 1990 that any woman rose to such heights in a local paper. The first BBC News service was overseen by Hilda Matheson in 1927. It was not until the next century that a woman would again be running news at the BBC. Similarly the first ever political series launched on the BBC in November 1929, *The Week in Westminster*, was produced by Margery Wace (Franks, 2011).

Here as in later years it was sometimes easier for women to forge a way when things were still novel and in a state of flux, but before established rules and practices had become embedded. In this case it was three years later in 1932 that the BBC, in common with many other employers, moved to introduce an official Marriage Bar (Murphy, 2011) which would inevitably impede women's progress, as they were obliged to resign from the Corporation after their wedding.

According to census figures in 1901, the number of women working as journalists was 1,249, around 9% of the total, and by 1931 that figure had risen further to 3,213, around 17%. Yet thirty years and a world war later in 1961, the proportion of female journalists was barely 20%. The reasons for this lengthy period of stagnation in women's participation in journalism at a time of rising news consumption and expansion of the BBC include the aforementioned introduction of the Marriage Bar and, in other news organisations without a formal Marriage Bar, the convention that a woman journalist would leave work after marriage because the antisocial hours were contrary to the demands of a wife and mother. Moreover, during this period the National Union of Journalists itself pursued discriminatory policies, including suppressing female wages and imposing limits on the number of females accepted onto training schemes.

Even so the profession offered wider access than others. While in the inter-war years women made up over 50% of teachers, and nursing was an exclusively female profession, in 1931 they made up less than 1% of architects and lawyers, 2% of dentists, and about 7% of doctors. In effect then, journalism presented opportunities for educated women, albeit

much of it confined to writing about narrow and traditional areas of women's interest (Lonsdale, 2013).

In the second half of the twentieth century there were still multiple examples of outright prejudice hampering women's ambitions in journalism. When the aspiring writer Nora Ephron graduated in the US in 1962, she applied to work on *Newsweek* magazine but was told that women were not allowed to be writers there, so she had to settle for being a mail girl, confined to the post room (Collins, 2012). Some years later there was a famous fightback by the women who worked on *Newsweek*, objecting to the limitations placed upon them (Povich, 2012). But these limitations were hardly an exception. The same attitudes of discrimination against women in journalism could be found across the profession, in print and broadcasting.

Three years after the passing of the first UK gender equality legislation and two years before its final implementation, a confidential BBC report in 1973 revealed a wide range of hostility towards women in the corporation.¹ On the prospect of female newsreaders it quoted a senior manager observing how 'women have class bound voices unsuitable for news reading . . . [and] may introduce emotion'.

On the possibility of hiring women reporters it noted that women would be 'unable to work in the cold and wet . . . and (are) not able to make overnight stays on location with a man as wives would not like it'. Another senior male editor, commenting on the prospect of employing female reporters, said that 'although he had interviewed many women for reporter jobs he had "never found any woman with the remotest chance of working in that capacity" . . . he believes that women are simply not able to do hard news stories . . . [but] "see themselves as experts on women's features"'.

The same editor agreed that he would have liked to recruit women as that would give a spread of knowledge in the newsroom, noting that:

A huge percentage of the audience is female and journalists of their sex are qualified to identify interesting stories on their behalf. When a woman is married her knowledge of the subjects that interest women is thereby increased but of course marriage makes it more difficult for women to work on shift.

In 1964 the first woman news duty editor had been appointed and she subsequently went on to become a duty editor in the Parliamentary Unit

in 1970. But the same 1973 report quoted a senior manager in the radio newsroom who explained that ‘Young male journalists do not like working in the Parliamentary Unit, where there is a female Duty Editor in charge.’ And Jenny Abramsky, who later in the 1970s was the first woman to edit a mainstream news programme when she took over Radio 4’s *PM*, encountered directly this same resistance from a male journalist who requested redeployment in reaction to the prospect of a female boss.²

Yet there are also ongoing examples where established practices and attitudes can change relatively quickly; one moment they are accepted wisdom, yet within a brief time they appear antediluvian. Views on news reading are a good example of this. A year after the hostility voiced in the 1973 report, the TV producer Angela Holdsworth recalls joining a deputation to the heads of news and current affairs, requesting that women be allowed to read the news:

We were told very firmly it was out of the question, how could a woman possibly break news of wars, genocide or rail disasters? She wouldn’t be taken seriously; people would be looking at her ear-rings or hair-do.³

Then a few months later in April 1975 Angela Rippon made her ground-breaking debut on the BBC 1 flagship *Evening News* programme. The Director of Television commented later upon Rippon’s debut that: ‘Barriers crashed, taboos lay shattered and Lord Reith probably stirred and muttered in his private Valhalla.’ And Rippon herself remarked in an interview that ‘I knew if I made a hash of it no woman would be allowed another chance for at least 5 years.’⁴ Broadcast news, in this respect, has never looked back, which shows that change, when it does come, can be fast and transforming.

However, it is often easier to make such a high-profile symbolic change than to engage with detailed structural problems that are linked with embedded prejudice. Even today, the landscape of women working as journalists in the early twenty-first century remains an uneven one. Whilst some of the ideas still being expressed in the years following the swinging and liberated 1960s now seem outdated, even in a transformed digital environment there remain patterns of gendered employment and attitudes which have proved intractable and immune to change. Take the following snapshots of journalism in the UK over the recent past:

- In 2013 there is only one national daily newspaper in the UK edited by a woman; Dawn Neesom at the *Daily Star*. And in 90 years there

has never been a female editor-in-chief (director general) of the BBC or at the head of any other major news broadcasting institutions.

- There has only ever been one instance of a woman editing a daily broadsheet newspaper in the UK, which was fifteen years ago when Rosie Boycott was editor of the *Independent* for three months from January to April 1998.
- Even in an age where papers appear online, authorship of the splash or top stories is significant. A study analysing UK newspaper front pages in 2012 (WIJ, 2012) revealed that the great majority (over three-quarters) of stories featured, and in some papers up to 90%, are written by men.
- Research of by-lines across a range of UK national newspapers in 2011 (Cochrane, 2011) and again in 2012 (Appendix 1) revealed that the overwhelming number of stories in most areas are written by men, so that the average ratio is 78:22, though there were large variations according to subject. In some cases the figures were fairly balanced, but in other areas there were days on end where female by-lines were almost non-existent.
- The newly inaugurated British Press Awards in late 2012 chose nine judges to decide upon the winners. Eight of them were men and the ninth was billed not by any mention of her achievements in the industry, like her fellow judges such as Philip Knightley or Kevin Marsh, but only by her gender as ‘Fleet Street’s First Female Editor’ (*Press Gazette*, 2012a).
- At the well-established UK Press Awards in 2013 the ratio of female to male winners was 4:17 – the lowest it had been in five years.
- When the Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press by Lord Justice Leveson in 2012 heard evidence from the great and the good in the world of UK journalism, there were around 200 witnesses who were in some way connected to journalism, but less than one in six of these were women⁵ – excluding those witnesses who attended because they were celebrities or other phone-hacking victims, in both of which categories women were well represented.
- A week after the Leveson report appeared and the leading editors were summoned by the Prime Minister in December 2012 to discuss proposals for change, a young journalist Josephine McDermott tweeted: ‘BBC News channel shows parade of white, middle-aged male editors arriving at Downing St, bar Sarah Sands. Cd that be problem with press?’

Although these observations are taken from the picture of contemporary UK journalism, most of them also apply to the composition of the media internationally, with a few limited exceptions. Successive surveys of the journalism workforce across most Western nations over the past 15 years show repeatedly that, whilst at entry levels there is a reasonable balance between the genders, at the senior levels there is a preponderance of men. And the higher the age, the wider is the gender pay gap. The ongoing evidence, analysed later in more detail, indicates that there remain today both vertical gender segregation and also horizontal segregation in the way that journalists are employed in the UK, as in many other Western countries. Despite enormous changes there are still places where women have yet to achieve anything like a critical mass and where there is an ongoing cultural bias against them. However, the nature of journalism in a digital 24/7 multimedia environment has also changed and in some cases intensified. There is a much discussed revolution under way in the news industry, which further begs the question of what are the relevant underlying trends for the prospects of female journalists in a more fragmented, globalised, and diverse media landscape?

The roles played by women outside of the home have continued to evolve in the period following the first equality legislation of the 1970s. Issues such as the pay gap or sexual harassment in the workplace are much debated, if not resolved. Yet despite this awareness there are still prevailing expectations about the responsibilities of women within the family and fierce public 'having it all' style arguments which intermittently rage about this topic.⁶ It is therefore difficult to disentangle the extent to which better prospects for women in journalism are invariably contingent upon wider societal adjustments, well beyond the scope of this analysis.

Nevertheless, there is an argument that, as journalism and the media play a role in moulding public consciousness, there is a duty upon them to include a wider range of voices at all levels. Sue Matthias, editor of the *Financial Times Weekend Magazine* and former chair of the pressure group Women in Journalism, is clear about this: 'A good and successful newspaper should reflect the society it's reporting on. If women are not in the fabric of the organisation, you've got a worse product' (Janes, 2011). It is this which makes the consideration of women and journalism something which is significant beyond issues of straightforward equity in employment matters. If there is not a wide diversity at all levels producing the output, this may affect the nature of the product; in particular whose voices are being heard and how stories are being told.

1.2 Where does it all begin? The feminisation of journalism education

There has always been ambivalence about the extent to which journalism may be viewed as a profession (Ornebring, 2009) and much debate about the whole construct of professionalism in this context (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003). These considerations have been mirrored by the variety of routes into journalism, which have evolved since the early twentieth century. Historically, the pattern of apprenticeship and indentures, usually through the local or regional press, was the commonest way to embark upon the career ladder. For the lucky few this would develop into shifts and eventually maybe a staff posting on a national paper. There was an attitude of 'school of real life' as a necessary training for successful journalists and a disdain of higher education as a useful preparation for the workplace. There are still routes into journalism that bypass much formal training and depend upon a serendipity of connections and networks whereby a bright youngster may end up working for the national media. But increasingly these individuals would also have experienced at least some form of higher education.

However, the dominant change in recruitment practice has been the growth in academic journalism training, following the US model, where universities offer specific undergraduate and postgraduate courses as a preparation for the industry. And it is this 'academisation' of the route into journalism which has presented an interesting perspective for women. This is because, ever since these courses originated and started to multiply, they have been increasingly dominated by female participants, though not by female faculty where women remained in the minority: 'being a journalism academic was seen as the prerogative of older men' (Bromley, 2013). This pattern of gradually increasing numbers of female journalism students occurred in the US where academic journalism training first emerged, but it was then replicated in many other countries, including the UK.

Academic journalism training in the US began at the University of Missouri in 1908, when female students made up 15% of the first class. In 1958 one-third of the 2,500 graduates from American journalism courses were women, by 1971 they had become the majority, and in 1984 they already represented 60% (Delano, 2003). Concerns and queries about the implications of this imbalance were already being raised in the 1980s. A study by Maurine Beasley and Kathryn Theus set out to explore

'the ramification of the change from a male majority to a female majority among journalism students nationally', asking whether journalism education was becoming a 'pink collar ghetto' (Beasley & Theus, 1988). Women were plentiful in the student body but the question was raised – what happened next? The evidence revealed that, even though women were taking courses and graduating in significant numbers, they were not as likely to get entry jobs in journalism as male graduates and, even when they did so, this progress was not sustained to take them into the higher ranks. Both an industry-wide study in the US by Dow Jones and a detailed study of successive graduating classes at the University of Maryland confirmed these patterns (Beasley & Theus, 1988: 45). Men with a journalism degree were more likely to find a job in the industry. This was particularly true in the areas of newspapers and broadcasting. Women's chances were somewhat better in local weekly papers and in magazines.

The 1988 research by Beasley and Theus interviewed graduates from previous years and found the same pattern that recurs in much analysis of gender patterns of journalism employment. The women journalism alumni were on average younger and less likely to have children. There was a noticeable pay gap that increased with the age of the cohort, where the men were earning larger salaries and in higher status jobs. Not for the first time the question was being asked why women were graduating in such high numbers but then unable to capitalise upon this training once they reached the workplace? One answer came from an alumna in the study from the 1978 cohort who observed that 'journalism school did a good job with skill-preparation mechanics but it taught no workplace-setting skills. It has the "ivory tower" syndrome' (Beasley & Theus, 1988: 127).

When this same phenomenon was examined more recently, there was a further twist. In a 2005 survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors the proportion overall of women in newsrooms remained pretty much unchanged at 37%. This was contrasted with the roughly 2:1 proportion in favour of women taking journalism courses at undergraduate and master's levels – so that the numbers were almost exactly reversed between student cohort and those in the professional newsrooms. However, when the figures for women in the early years of a career were disaggregated, it appeared that they outnumbered men at 54% of the total. This was the first time that there had been an imbalance in favour of women, but given the overall figures it was clear that something was subsequently 'driving women from the newsrooms'. And this posed

the question: 'Why do some women who study journalism in college, later decide to leave full time newsroom jobs?' (Everbach & Flournoy, 2007).

It is not just in the US that the gradual preponderance of female journalism students has become apparent. A number of studies across the world all demonstrate the same pattern in places as far apart as Australia (Grenby, 2009), Romania (Avadani, 2002), Lebanon (Melki, 2009), and South Africa (Nyondo, 2011). In Germany too there are plenty of female journalism students but far fewer women working in the industry. One analysis attributed this to the 'friendliness trap', where women studying journalism demonstrate good communication skills but are not assertive enough to compete successfully for good jobs (Frohlich & Holtz-Bacha, 2008: 98).

University journalism training had already made a brief appearance in the UK early in the twentieth century. For twenty years from 1919 to 1939 London University ran a small newspaper diploma and in the latter years women began to outnumber men as students on the course. But whereas nearly all the men found jobs, only about half of the women were successful in entering the industry, according to the Newspaper Society representative on the course committee. By the end, the women students outnumbered men in the ratio 33:27, 'suggesting an awareness that, as in America, pre-entry training might compensate for the apprenticeships that were unlikely to be available to women' (Delano, 2003: 275).

Meanwhile there was evidence that, when the Second World War started and 'prejudices were shelved for the duration' across the workforce, quite a number of these graduates were successful in finding work as general reporters, albeit for a limited time (Hunter, 1996).

In the modern period journalism education in the UK began with Cardiff University's postgraduate newspaper course in the 1970s and today there are hundreds of university courses at a range of higher education institutions which include journalism in all varieties – from broadcasting to sport to digital multimedia. As journalism education started to grow, the trends towards an increasingly female student body were the same (Bromley, 2009). By 2012 female students were outnumbering men by at least 2:1 in many of the most well-established journalism programmes. City University, one of the oldest and largest journalism departments in the UK, admitted 369 female students compared to 170 men in 2012. Twenty-five years earlier, in 1987, the recruitment had been slightly in favour of men (57), compared with women (55). Similarly, at Cardiff the total journalism student body in 2012 (undergraduate and postgraduate)

was 405 women and 197 men. And in Bournemouth the aggregate enrolments over the past five years showed a 64:36 split towards women.

Women have been studying journalism and graduating from UK journalism departments in substantial numbers for decades, but they are still not well represented at the higher levels of the industry. Commenting on the findings in a 2011 survey which showed how few women were reaching the higher echelons in journalism, Roy Greenslade, the former *Daily Mirror* editor and now a Professor of Journalism, puzzled over this 'disappearance' of female journalism graduates, wondering how the profession could remain so male-dominated when the classes he was teaching were increasingly full of young women (Greenslade, 2011).

In the contemporary workplace an increasing proportion of journalists have come through this route of academic training in a university – up to and including editors of national newspapers and distinguished network broadcasters. Historically though, the evidence has been that women were more likely to follow the route of formal journalism education as a way of becoming journalists because they have fared less well through informal networks. In a fragmented and diverse workplace, journalists still do enter the workplace by other means, but where almost half the population go to university there are now very few who become journalists without some kind of higher education or university experience (Milburn, 2012).

Another way of capturing this trajectory of women as early starters in journalism but failing to win the later prizes is to look at university media in the wider sense. This would argue that, even though a student does not pursue a specific *course* in journalism, if they aspire to a *career* in journalism they might well seek to publish or contribute to university media or publications, no matter what subject they are taking for a degree. Some of the most distinguished journalists have made their entry into the field through this route, in particular as editors of or contributors to university newspapers.

However, here too there is a similar pattern. When the same Women in Journalism survey about the comparatively small numbers of female by-lines appeared in 2011 (barely 22% over a month of counting), which prompted Roy Greenslade's observations cited above, a parallel survey examined prize-winning student publications by gender by-lines, to find the participation of women in the best student output. The research, titled 'Where do All the Female Journalists Go?' (Cox, 2012), analysed six of the prize-winners of the main student journalism competitions in 2011 and 2012. Once again there was an imbalance between the numbers of women

who had succeeded in the world of student journalism and the proportions who were making it in the post-university paid workplace. The by-line count for women writing in the student papers was proportionately over twice as many as that in the survey of national papers. Similarly another survey, by City University, of the editors of the leading student newspapers since 2005⁷ also found that a slightly higher proportion were women – a ratio which did not translate into the working world of journalism.

There is the obvious caveat that not everyone who participates in student media or writes for their university newspaper would necessarily want to enter journalism. However, there is no reason why this is more likely to be the case for one gender than the other. So this still begs the question:

All the women who are interested in journalism enough that they write for their university newspaper and all the women who apparently take journalism courses, what happens to them? . . . if fairly equal numbers of women and men are actively trying to break into journalism and for some reason the women aren't succeeding, then this needs to be looked at more closely. (Cox, 2012)

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