

THE CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS

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Women journalists now appear well-established in a profession that, until two decades ago, was a male enclave. They played a significant role in redefining news to incorporate issues associated with the quotidian concerns of women as a whole. Yet at the very top rungs of the journalism hierarchy, the percentage of women remains small. They continue to be concentrated in areas considered to be low-status or 'soft news' sectors such as small-town or regional news organizations and community weeklies, and human interest stories and features. Prestige areas of news production remain largely dominated by men, particularly the high-status category of politics, as well as business, and sport.

Women's high visibility in television – through regular and often sexualised scrutiny of their bodies, hairstyles, fashion, and voices – is matched by their invisibility in top management and boardrooms. Despite demands to be treated as professional equals alongside their male counterparts, women's promotion to key decision-making positions in journalism is frequently blocked by a 'glass ceiling'. Some women still experience outright sexism in newsrooms. Working mothers are disadvantaged by a 'long hours' culture, coupled with insufficient childcare.

An impressive number of platforms are now offered to citizens to air their views in public, including blogging and twittering in the context of citizen journalism; this provides opportunities for democratising relations between men and women. However, while women dominate as both entertainers and consumers of *popular* media, they are less valued as professional producers of news (Thornham, 2007).

This chapter reviews key themes pertaining to women journalists, examining how women have contributed to changing news agendas, news values and definitions of 'news'.¹ We review the status, practices and views of women journalists, focusing on the United States and Britain. The chapter summarises women's entrance into the profession and their principal roles in generating new styles of journalism. How women experienced and changed newsroom cultures and values, and the establishment of women's alternative journalism are then examined. Women's participation

in traditionally male-dominated fields is addressed, focusing on their experiences as war correspondents. A discussion of 'post-feminist journalism' deals with women's involvement in a market-led journalism characterised by human interest stories, celebrity journalism, confessional and therapy news. The chapter ends by speculating about the ongoing role of women in Internet news.

Early women journalists

In the United States and Britain, women began participating in journalism during the colonial period. Their entry into the profession was typically through husbands or fathers. The numbers of women journalists began to rise during the mid-nineteenth century. By the end of the century, their increasing presence began to alarm male editors and reporters. None the less, no one questioned the treatment of women as consumers rather than producers of 'news'. Male editors assumed that women could only write *as women for and about women*. Women entered a gendered public sphere, defined largely on men's terms. Despite claims to objectivity, 'news' conformed to a masculine discourse: the concerns and experiences of men were privileged over those of women. Journalists' attention to competition, war, and conflict essentially marginalised issues pertaining to the home, family and children's welfare.

A sub-category labelled 'women's news' evolved out of the need, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, to attract women readers. This prompted the creation of 'women's columns' and 'women's pages'. 'Women's news' was characterised by a restricted understanding of women's interests: domestic and family life, including society news, child-rearing and household duties. Women wishing to enter journalism therefore faced many challenges to overcome the ghettoisation of their work in 'women's news' and human interest stories. Yet in nineteenth and early twentieth-century America, journalism was viewed as a meaningful and even glamorous vocation for educated, middle-class women. It offered an exit from the confines of domesticity and was particularly attractive to unmarried women and middle-class women.

Access to a university degree in journalism, made available first in the US in the early twentieth century, provided women with opportunities to train as reporters alongside men. Ironically, since journalism schools never anticipated that women would apply, they had not thought to exclude them. Universities offered women more egalitarian contexts in which to develop journalistic skills than did sexist on-the-job training. Women faced the problem of journalism textbooks that either addressed men as the norm, or relegated 'women's writing' to a subcategory. Even the materials written by women generally discouraged women from regarding journalism as a serious career. Arguably, journalism curricula and textbooks continue to ignore gender issues. By contrast, in Britain, journalists trained on-the-job, within an apprenticeship system into the 1980s. The main challenge for British women was being recruited as an apprentice in the first place.

The late nineteenth-century establishment of women's pages and features in print media targeting women readers corresponded with the growth of advertising for department stores, products aimed at women, and 'new' newspapers produced for a

wider and working-class readership. This trend required additional women journalists. Male writers were not perceived as capable of attracting the newly targeted women readers as consumers, especially young working women. Male reporters had little interest in writing for female readers. Issues that addressed the status and experiences of women such as fertility, childcare, and sexual violence were often ignored or rendered sensational. This form of 'women's journalism' addressed neither what we now call 'feminist politics' nor women's welfare. Women's concerns were understood as specifically 'women's interests' and treated as secondary. An additional way to attract women readers was to hire gossip columnists. Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst hired women such as Nellie Bly and Winifred Black, whose pseudonym was 'Annie Laurie', to produce sensationalised ('yellow') and stunt journalism. Credited with inventing the first advice to the lovelorn column under the name Beatrice Fairfax, Marie Manning wrote the popular advice column for the *New York Evening Journal* from 1889 until 1945. Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer began 'Dorothy Dix Talks' in 1895. At its height, it was read by almost 30 million people.

The First and Second World Wars gave women journalists opportunities to advance their careers by moving into 'serious' news. Military officials refused to accredit women war reporters. None the less, with men conscripted into the war effort, women took their newsroom jobs, at least until peace was restored, when women were usually evicted from newsrooms. Thus women's advances within journalism were largely temporary and unstable. Advantages in being a female reporter were rare. As a First Lady with her own press credentials (she wrote a syndicated column) Eleanor Roosevelt held over 300 press conferences specifically restricted to women journalists. She knew that news organisations all over the country would need to hire a woman in order to have access to the First Lady and the scoops she provided.

Notwithstanding the social constraints of gender difference at the time, some women carved out spectacularly successful careers. Despite being systematically barred from decision-making in newsrooms until the mid-twentieth century, there were exceptional women who found imaginative ways of evading obstacles and entering news 'beats'. *New York Herald Tribune* front page reporter Ishbel Ross compiled *Ladies of the Press* in 1936 to trace the history of women in the newspaper business from colonial times. Ross records that the famous editor Stanley Walker praised her for coming closer than any other female reporters to the man's idea of what a newspaper-woman should be (Ross, 1936). This back-handed compliment evokes men as the gold standard against which women's performance was to be measured.

Radio was launched in the 1920s, first in the United States, and soon after in Britain. In both countries, radio programming for women focused on their role as housewives, with a stress on fashion, beauty, and household tips. Male voices were preferred across programming formats, signifying the authority of male communicators. Women's voices were frequently assumed to be irritating to listeners. Women did, however, play critical administrative roles backstage. A small number of women reached senior positions, not as journalists but in a variety of other significant roles, exemplified by Hilda Matheson, who became BBC Head of Talks by 1927. In the United States, where commercial radio dominated, women enjoyed more opportunities to take

on principal roles in an innovative environment. For example, Judith Cary Waller became manager of a radio station as early as 1922. The Second World War provided the chance for women to be radio anchors, reporters, and even war correspondents. Women headed educational and public services in all four US radio networks by the 1940s. Nevertheless, the notion that women's voices lacked conviction and were too high pitched for radio persisted for decades in both the USA and Britain. Women entering radio were largely confined to programmes targeting housewives.

British radio was restricted to public service broadcasting until 1973, when commercial radio was launched. This restricted the careers of women journalists, who were initially excluded from the BBC under the strict moral code of its director. The BBC did not hire women as regular newsreaders until the 1970s, when competition from commercial radio forced the BBC to reassess its attitude to women as newsreaders. Until then, men typically claimed radio's more varied, interesting and serious journalistic tasks such as foreign reporting and conflicts. Women were mainly consigned to human interest stories and light news.

Similarly, in television the United States was ahead of Britain in employing women in leading roles. Frieda Hennock was the first woman commissioner for the Federal Communications Commission as early as 1948. Women appeared as reporters and NBC boasted six women news anchors by 1971. In Britain, women were barred as television newsreaders until 1960, when Nan Winton was appointed. Even then, women were only sporadically used as newsreaders. News 'objectivity' and 'authority' were qualities associated with masculinity, with women confined mainly to lifestyle radio and TV programmes on cookery, fashion, and childcare. While older, greying men were – and continue to be – regularly employed for their journalistic skills, physical attractiveness remains a job requirement for women in television journalism. The demand for youthful and attractive but professional femininity of female newscasters has corresponded with shifts in news agendas, styles and topics.

Fierce competition between newspapers, radio and television from the 1970s prompted news organisations to increase the employment of women journalists for attracting larger audiences. By the 1970s, in the United States, every newscast had a woman co-anchor – expected to be blonde, beautiful and feminine but also able to read serious news. In some cases, women were pushed into the spotlight before they were ready, exemplified by the meteoric rise of Jessica Savitch. Savitch worked at various broadcast stations before being spotted in the early 1970s by a television talent scout. Savitch was recommended to a station searching for a pretty face to keep ahead of rival news stations. She negotiated an enhanced contract and gained access to influential friends. Less than a year after moving to Philadelphia, NBC hired Savitch to report on the US Senate (Savitch, 1982). As one of the most popular news anchors, Savitch was promoted to anchor NBC Nightly News. Critics claimed that she lacked qualifications for national network news, and the pressure apparently proved her personal and professional undoing.

The history of women's entrance into journalism is characterised, then, by confinement to a particular genre of 'women's news' from the late nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century, many women had stormed the gates of news genres

once restricted to men. Some women escaped the women's 'news ghetto' early on; and some were never part of it. Some women continued to be restricted to writing women's news and thought this was appropriate, perceiving women to have distinct and separate interests. Others hated writing 'women's news'. Nevertheless, the broad journalistic constraints imposed on most early women journalists allowed them to spearhead a new kind of news: an innovative style addressing the personal lives of readers. Although the 'women's pages' of early newspapers were framed by a feminine discourse of domesticity, they opened a door for the feminist debates of the 1960s. Topics such as equal opportunities in employment, equal pay, divorce and abortion became regular features in women's sections. The personalised technique of human interest stories written by women proved to be flexible enough, in a new political era, to trigger new styles of reporting and writing news, ones that have become standard.

Women's contemporary status in journalism

Large-scale surveys of journalists reveal some differences between men's and women's career trajectories and work tasks but the statistics do not explain the reasons for these disparities (see Gallagher, 1995; Weaver and Wilhoit, 1996; Delano and Henningham, 1995; Henningham and Delano, 1998). Women have gradually gained critical mass in certain segments of the profession in the last two decades. More accommodating working arrangements have been introduced that benefit women, including flexible hours and job shares. None the less, the invisible barriers to promotion known as a 'glass ceiling' have yet to be shattered; men continue to dominate senior management positions. A 2002 study confirmed that women comprise one-third of all full-time journalists in US mainstream media (Weaver *et al.*, 2003). Although more women are graduating from journalism schools and entering the profession, this figure remains constant, since 1982. The highest numbers of women work in news magazines (43.5 percent); the lowest for major wire services (20.3 percent) and radio (21.9 percent). Women comprise 37.4 percent of television journalists, 36.9 percent of weekly newspaper journalists, and 33 percent of daily newspaper journalists. Among journalists with less than five years of work experience, women outnumber men for the first time at 54.2 percent.

Perhaps the reason women journalists are generally younger than their male counterparts is that women leave the profession early – deterred by barriers to advancement, lack of childcare facilities, long hours, or masculine values within newsroom culture. Sexism in the newsroom persists: two-thirds of women report having experienced sexism (Henningham and Delano, 1998: 148; Ross, 2001). Through trade unions, guilds and press associations, gender discrimination and sexism have been challenged in recruitment and assignment decisions, salary differentials and promotion procedures. Women have also created their own associations and organisations, particularly in the United States, to advance their interests, since in recent years conventional unions have often been ineffective. However, job satisfaction in the profession as a whole is strong among both male and female journalists, at least among those who have chosen to remain (Weaver *et al.*, 2003). Women tended to be

less satisfied in 2002 than were men, with 71.7 percent of women journalists saying 'fairly' or 'very' satisfied compared to 86.6 percent of male journalists. According to 1990s data, women were concentrated in areas where they reported on women's lives and they tended to focus on personalities and personal views (Mills, 1997; Skidmore, 1998; Christmas, 1997).

Gendered newsroom cultures and values

While changes in news agendas and writing styles have been associated with women's growing presence in the newsroom, the impact of gender on newsroom culture and news agendas is not clear-cut. All journalists are subjected to the professional norms, daily routines and structures of news organisations. Nevertheless, newsrooms continue to be dominated by male editors and newsrooms may operate as male-ordered through macro structures and everyday routines (Ross, 2001). Yet more stories now address women's issues. Women journalists are more likely to draw on women as sources; insisting that 'ordinary citizens', not just those in positions of power, are newsworthy. Women journalists also focus more on social problems, sex crimes and protests than male counterparts. Over the decades, women have drawn attention to the political significance of issues associated with women such as reproductive rights, education, divorce, management of childcare and homes. This tendency may have triggered a more general shift from conventional government and crime news to human interest news with an accent on personalising issues. More controversial are claims that women have changed news agendas by introducing new postmodern, feature-oriented styles of writing that focus on confessional narratives and on the personal, including the writers' own feelings (Christmas, 1997; Mayes, 2000).

However, despite no conclusive evidence that women and men write differently, it is apparent that in the past, women were encouraged and pressured into reporting differently, for example, by writing with greater sentiment for women readers. Rather than women demonstrating distinct writing styles, recent changes in news values and practices are more likely to have been driven by commercial needs that confine women journalists to assignments on 'feminine' topics such as fashion and lifestyle. This implies that women audiences are uninterested in 'hard' news. Although constrained by commercial imperatives, women's rising visibility in journalism has allowed them to contest traditional masculine news genres.

Women's alternative journalism

The nineteenth-century feminist or radical press enabled women to take on ownership, decision-making and editorial roles, and to participate in the public sphere on their own terms. Most women who worked for alternative newspapers did so voluntarily, focusing on suffrage, abolition, professional rights, and celebration of lesbian sexuality. Suffrage newspapers were crucial channels for advocating women's right to vote and new ways of being women. Hundreds of women-run newspapers and magazines proposed new ideas about womanhood and provided a platform for women's activism

in the public sphere (Steiner, 1983, 1991; DiCenzo, 2000; Tusan, 2005). Meanwhile, these women also experimented with distinctive ways of working through cooperative and collective management styles.

Alternative periodicals of the 1970s and 1980s contested the mainstream media's images of the 'superwoman': a bold, congratulatory discourse that promoted the myth of a highly aspirational, self-assertive woman who 'can have it all', with 'all' defined as family, career, and stylish clothes. The 1980s was also the era of popular feminist magazines such as *off our backs* and *Ms. Magazine* in the USA, and *Spare Rib* in the UK – independently produced magazines that contributed to the redefinition of women's news and politics. A distinctive feature of women's alternative news media is to treat the public as *citizens* rather than *consumers*, and 'the personal as political'.

The first two waves of the women's movement, and the news organisations that supported and sustained them, were mainly focused on the interests of white, middle-class, heterosexual, and educated Western women. More recently, and especially inspired by transnational work that the Internet encourages, feminists have launched experiments in activist journalism that critique how gender, race and ethnicity, sexuality are interrelated. These newer forms highlight Third World poverty, sex slavery, and female genocide. Alternative press, radio, cable, television and Internet newsgroups have empowered women, providing them with the confidence to change their lives and train women to exploit media technologies. They have advanced women's status in mainstream news by demanding changes in recruitment, new ways of working and reporting radical movements.

Some women's information networks challenge distinctions between professional and non-professional journalism, providing a crucial space for ordinary women citizens to speak directly for themselves and report on their concerns. Examples include *WomensNet*, *Women's International Network News* and *Aviva* (see Chambers *et al.*, 2004). Run by an international group of feminists, *Aviva* is a monthly webzine covering global news (www.aviva.org). *Aviva* also trains women in Internet design and publishing, and hosts other women's services. These independent news networks and 'webzines' allow women to produce information and foster networks, echoing the objectives of the women's suffrage press. They raise fundamental questions about the democratisation and feminisation of the public sphere. However, while women can now communicate speedily and globally on an equal footing, access remains a problem. The digital divide across First and Third World has a profound gender dimension. In developing nations, men have greater access to digital media than women.

Women in 'male bastions' of journalism

The Vietnam War of 1965–75 signalled a significant change for women war correspondents. In fighting a guerrilla war, the military imposed fewer, less rigid restrictions. Women could buy their own plane tickets to Vietnam. Once there, some military officials and soldiers enjoyed talking to women journalists such that some women even claimed to have an advantage over male competitors. Women certainly had much wider access than in previous military conflicts. Their ability to improvise was vital

in dealing with unforeseen events. This was unlike the First and Second World Wars, when the military formally refused to grant women permission to cover the front, with the lame excuse that it lacked toilets for women. Nevertheless, some women covering the Vietnam War experienced anti-woman prejudices of bureau chiefs, fellow reporters and military officials.

By the 1980s, women war correspondents such as BBC reporter Kate Adie were achieving prominence and notoriety. Political and press critics accused Adie of being sympathetic to Colonel Gaddafi's regime in Libya after she reported on the 1986 US bombing of Tripoli in which she referred briefly to the death of Gaddafi's adopted daughter. She was plagued with insults about her hair, forcing her to take curling tongs, and was accused of enlisting soldiers to search for jewellery lost in the desert during the first Iraq war. Women journalists continue to provoke controversy as objects of the public gaze. Their lives are recurrently scrutinised and criticised: for their single status, for risking their lives as mothers in conflict zones, and for their peculiarities in a male-dominated part of the profession. When Yvonne Ridley was captured by the Taliban at the Pakistani border after reporting on Afghanistan in 2000, she was accused of being reckless in taking on such a dangerous job and failing in her parental responsibilities to her daughter (Ridley, 2001). Ridley felt demonised by reporters who exposed in detail her three marriages, implying a dysfunctional femininity. This example demonstrates a classic double-bind that women face: they are often devalued either as 'proper professionals' or as negligent towards their families – or both.

Many scholars and women journalists claim women and men report on wars and regional conflicts in the same way. Yet others praise women for highlighting the human, non-military dimensions of war, including rape as an instrument of war (Rouvalis and Schackner, 2000; Sebba, 1994), and claim women have challenged the 'bullets and bombs' discourse dominating war reporting by personalising stories, even while providing an appropriate political and historical context. Orla Guerin, a BBC foreign correspondent who covered the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2001, says men and women journalists work differently; she says it is not merely 'women writing about refugees and men about tanks' but that women have different emphases in their coverage. (Guerin, interviewed on *Woman's Hour*, BBC Radio 4, October 4, 2001).

Women have participated in the emergence of a new style of war reporting highlighting issues such as civilian suffering, the systematic rape of women and the contribution of women as nurses to the war effort. But again, others insist that, since the Vietnam War, women and men do not write differently and that all good reporters provide full context. Importantly, some women journalists reject invitations to cover the 'women's angle' on various wars, fearing that this will deprive them of access to the top of the news hour or front page. In either case, newspapers have typically assigned fewer women correspondents to conflict zones than broadcasting media. Whether this is because broadcast journalism is more egalitarian than newspaper journalism or market forces are exploiting femininity is unclear (see Van Zoonen, 1998).

'Post-feminist' journalism

In the late nineteenth century, male reporters denigrated women as 'Sob Sisters' or 'agony aunts' for allegedly bringing readers to tears with their dramatic, personal, and emotional stories. Arguably, in addressing demands for good, relevant, story-telling, these women sparked a controversy that continues to resonate with the emergence of market-led, post-feminist efforts to attract female audiences (Whelehan, 2000). The construction of news as a commodity has promoted a post-feminist journalism claiming to advance women's issues. But, in its exploration of feminine identity, this commodified news often undermines women's claims to professionalism. Forged by the pressures of the market, this set of genres is configured by confessional and therapy news as well as celebrity reporting, gossip, and human interest stories aimed at women. 'Confessional journalism' and 'therapy news' emerged in the 1990s when female newspaper columnists started borrowing styles and themes from women's magazine and feature genres. The focus is on feelings, intimate thoughts, family and sex lives of victims and the rich and famous (Heller, 1999). Post-feminist journalism signifies human interest stories, consumer items and fashion tidbits, framed in a playful, clever, and amusing discourse (Mayes, 2000: 30).

One analysis of 'women's media' by a self-defined conservative woman who spent ten years as editor-in-chief of the *Ladies Home Journal*, alleges a collusion between public relations firms, celebrities, and women journalists to manufacture and sell news targeted at women. Myrna Blyth claims an institutionalised peddling of a misplaced liberal message characterising women as victims (Blyth, 2004). Despite this, the intimate link between PR, celebrity journalism and advertising may be said to undermine the concept of 'news' as impartial and, where necessary, as probing. Celebrity news has become conspicuous in the last decade, pressurising journalists to form cosy relations with public figures in the entertainment industry. The trend in post-feminist journalism echoes the representations of feminine individualism typical of earlier years. Under a liberal façade of choice, freedom and feminine autonomy, this tendency all too often represents a depoliticisation of women's issues. Led by an assertive consumer culture, post-feminist journalism arguably celebrates popular culture at the expense of hard-hitting investigative journalism on gendered issues.

Women and the Internet future

The Internet has influenced women's role and status in journalism in two key ways. First, within alternative news media, the Internet is a vital tool for promoting global networks between women and challenging mainstream news definitions. Second, the emergence of on-line reporting by more mainstream organisations has created an important niche for women. Yet how the rise of online journalism influences gender relations in mainstream news organisations is not yet known. In the late 1990s, online journalism copied conventional news formats. While some observers originally argued that the unique multimedia, hypertextual and interactive qualities of the Internet could lead to a unique on-line medium (Deuze, 1999), evidence suggests that on-line

journalism has suffered from deskilling of the profession. Rather than leading to a male-dominated 'labour aristocracy' as once surmised, on-line journalism may trigger deskilling (Deuze, 2001) and a feminisation of the profession.

Thus, while the Internet opens up significant possibilities for women to participate in a more democratised public sphere, unequal access to information communication technology at a global level and the deskilling of the journalism profession may indicate continuing challenges for women. The potential for global communication is developing at the very moment that the journalism profession is undergoing serious difficulties. Transformations in an increasingly competitive media industry are characterised by instability, reduced profits, a shrinking workforce and deskilling. In this climate, the last-in and first-out principle may mean the firing of women. Nevertheless, citizens' deliberation in the public sphere has the potential to expose social inequalities. In the context of alternative Internet media, the possibilities are enormous.

Note

- 1 This chapter is based on a summary of the key debates addressed in the book *Women and Journalism* by Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner and Carole Fleming (Routledge, 2004).

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