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WOMEN AND THE NEWS AGENDA:  
MEDIA-TED REALITY AND JANE PUBLIC

By

Karen Ross

June 1995

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FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

*Centre for Mass Communication Research*

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**NOTE:** with effect from 16th April 1995 the telephone number for the Centre for Mass Communication Research will change from that shown on the cover. The new number will be 0116-2523863. The fax number will be 0116-2523874.

The media, and television in particular, are arguably the primary definers of public discourse and play a crucial cultural function in their gendered framing of public issues and the discourses they present. If the flow of opinion among and between citizens is hindered by the use of 'old-fashioned prerogative powers and new forms of image management', (Keane, 1991: 94) precisely how are the media implicated in this compromised democracy? What function do they perform in the perpetuation of ideas and ideologies which protect the status quo and which at the same time, exclude women? Analyses which define and examine the media as specific agencies of public knowledge and definitional power and which comprehend the viewer as citizen (see for example Corner, 1991) have generally failed to distinguish the salience of gender in these media-ated relations. Much of the critical work undertaken on news media has looked at issues of accountability and bias but the gender dimension has often been ignored. Where gender has been foregrounded, work has tended to focus on the media more generally (rather than just news media), looking at the status and existence of women as professionals in the industry (Gallagher, 1981; Creedon (ed), 1993; Dougary, 1994) or else examining sex role stereotyping in portrayal and presentation (van Zoonen, 1991). While a growing body of woman-centred theory looks critically at the way in which political and media institutions function to exclude or limit women from their operational orbits (cf Fraser, 1989; Benhabib, 1992; van Zoonen, 1994), rather less work has been undertaken on the intersection of women and news media. Claims that the media confine women to a narrow duo of possibilities - domesticity or promiscuity - have been exacerbated by the plethora of studies which have located women only in these personal/private realms.

This article explores issues around women and representation and in particular, how women are routinely portrayed in news media. I want to argue that the kinds of stories, perspectives and interests we see and read in the media are inextricably bound up with the kind of relations which take place in news industries themselves, as sites of news production. In an industry which is dominated by men at the top who take key decisions while doing up their flies in the urinals or trading shots across the golf course, is it little

wonder that the key decision that women who *present* the news have to make is whether to wear the pink or the blue today? 'We know from our own observations [that] the news the country is given is largely what is considered newsworthy by men - produced, directed, edited and shot overwhelmingly by men.' (WBC, 1993) The media, and television in particular, have a significant function in helping to establish the parameters and limits which structure our thinking about the world. They are capable of triggering hopes and aspirations and are inseparable from our daily lives, implicated in a continuous process of information, education, entertainment and socialisation.

In late 1993, the Broadcasting Standards Council commissioned a study of women's attitudes to television (BSC, 1994). As part of this larger research programme, the Centre for Mass Communication Research at Leicester University were invited to undertake a small-scale study to identify women's views on images of women in news and current affairs programming, looking both at the content and structure of programmes in this genre but also focusing on how women appear as news professionals. A total of 62 women took part in the study and were interviewed in 5 discussion groups. Women for the sample were derived in a variety of ways including advertising for participants on University notice boards (Aston and Warwick), using existing and ex-student groups (mature nursing students and ex-open studies attenders - University of Birmingham) and through personal contacts. Members of the sample showed a wide variation in levels of educational achievement, socio-economic background, domestic and family arrangements and employment status. None of them were particularly interested in television other than as a recreational activity and seemed to us to be as typical or untypical of 'women' as a whole as any other group of women we might have pulled together.

We believed that the study would enable us to test the strength of encoding/decoding theory and to identify the factors involved in active and passive viewing behaviours. Specifically, we wanted the research to explore the ways in which women viewers sometimes accept the images of themselves which are routinely portrayed in news media and at other times take a

more active role in the viewing context, negotiating and challenging traditional orthodoxies in the way suggested by Hall (1980) and Morley (1980). Do women viewers, either consciously or unconsciously, recognise the ways in which television texts are expressly encoded and adopt a deliberate decoding strategy of acceptance, negotiation or opposition, or do they simply couch it? In short, how do women (differently) comprehend news media and what factors are important in determining active or passive viewing regimes? We sought to explore the manner in which television mediates and 'engenders' domestic and international political realities which are already unequal in terms of gender access, and to ascertain the level of fit between news agendas and women's lives.

The relation between gender and communication is primarily - although not only - a cultural one, concerning a negotiation of meanings and values that informs whole ways of life and which is vice versa informed by existing ways of life, with configurations of power and economic inequities being a key element within them. (van Zoonen, 1994: 148)

#### **Women as News Media Professionals**

Over the past few years, the slogan of "we are an equal opportunities employer" has been emblazoned across the masthead of countless media organisations, but while women's claims for equality are now taken seriously, I would argue that it is mostly lip service when a hard look is taken at precisely who occupies positions of responsibility. The power to shape media policy and to determine the nature and direction of media content remains in the hands of men. Even when women do manage to drag themselves out of the kitchen and into the media boardroom, they struggle every step of the way and when they get there, must endure a continual sexist assault from male colleagues desperate to hold on to power. When Eve Pollard moved from the *Sunday Mirror* to become the first woman editor of a mid-market newspaper - the *Sunday Express* - she was described as a 'killer bimbo' who knew how to use her bosom as a cosh (Dougary, 1994). The small number of studies which have analyzed the position of women in media organizations across Europe demonstrate depressingly similar findings. Women consistently feature less than men in news and current affairs programming, as news presenters, reporters and journalists, but also as expert commentators (see for example, WBC, 1993). They make up a small

percentage of technical and production staff and are rarely seen in decision-making positions (see for example, Michielsens, 1991; Neves, 1994).

Traditional feminist analyses have argued that mainstream news reporting has always tended to speak to men's concerns rather than to those of women and that the invisibility of women, as anchors, news readers and reporters on television has often been seen as symptomatic of the lower status of women in the real world. News themes and stories reflect a male view of reality, crudely duplicating current social divisions between the public 'male' world and the private 'female' one. Orthodox 'effects' theory would suggest that the impact on the audience of exposure to such a specifically (en)gendered view, outside of the straightforward lack of alternative perspectives, would be to reinforce the orthodoxy of women's insignificance and to confirm their proper place (Pingree & Hawkins, 1978). But changes in newsroom personnel strategies have forced a reconsideration of the relationship of news to gender, for example, what is signified by the recruitment of attractive young women to newscasting and presentation? In recent years, contemporary television journalism has become a much softer medium in its focus on human and personal interest stories, taking on a more intimate tone and style of audience address (van Zoonen, 1991). But more women in the newsroom cannot be regarded as a significant step forward on the road to equality. Rather than seeing women news professionals as exemplifying the new (higher) status of women in public domains, it is possible to detect an altogether more cynical rationale underlying their employment, that is, that women make news more human, more watchable and improve ratings.

Whilst women in our study professed to 'not notice' if a newsreader was a woman or a man, many also reported that women newsreaders had a more sympathetic style, were softer than their male colleagues, and that in some way they made horrific stories seem less brutal. But they also recognised that there were few women newsreaders when compared to men, so their apparent refusal to accept gender differences was confounded by their recognition of precisely such difference in terms of number. The increasing trend towards

'intimization' appears to be running in tandem with specific editorial policies to engage more with the viewer and women newsreaders are simply modern-day versions of traditional and reactionary forms of femininity. Commenting specifically on BBC news programmes, Holland suggests that newsreading might become a 'woman's job' because the task now requires a significant element of performance and the performer should be reasonably decorative (Holland, 1987).

### **The f-factor**

The issue of personal appearance for newsreaders and other front-of-house media personnel now forms the focus of much public debate: the size and refractory qualities of earrings, the colour and cut of suits and the length of hemlines are all deemed appropriate subjects for discussion. An interest in the ability of individual women to do their job has become subordinated to questions about their sartorial judgment. The decorative qualities of women newsreaders have now become an integral part of their perceived 'rightness' for the job and women are in danger of being pushed back into occupying traditional female territory as simply objects for the male gaze. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the pairing of the young attractive woman newscaster with the older, more sophisticated male presenter - an obvious male fantasy.

As news programmes draw closer to entertainment genres, so their highly formalised presentation strategies have relaxed. When Angela Rippon and Anna Ford were selected to read the news on BBC and ITN respectively, in the late 1970s, it was at a time when the social status of women was being questioned. 'Rippon and Ford became a focus for male uncertainty about the 'problem' of powerful, attractive women.' (Root, 1986: 89) Decades later, women news professionals remain at the periphery of the action, attractive satellites orbiting around the male star. Newswomen are caught in a double-bind: they are viewed as sexual objects even while engaged in the serious business of news reporting and at the same time criticised for trivialising the news because they are too decorative and distract from the content of their words. Each may not speak as a woman or for women,

but has a voice which is denied authority because of her sex. Each must seek a dress style which is feminine and yet neutral. But the constraints on women in this man's world may mean that the question is less about whether women **can** speak from this position, but rather, do they **want** to? 'If the cost of being offered a public voice involves giving up the right to speak specifically as a woman, is it a price worth paying?' (Holland, 1987: 149) Although media commentators have long noted the way in which women presenters on television appear to be chosen for their age and their looks rather than their ability to do the job, the take-up of a new breakfast television franchise by GMTV (Good Morning Television) and the attendant publicity around its new host made the crude link between sexiness and ratings entirely transparent. Fiona Armstrong was recruited to co-host the new programme with Michael Wilson, following the current breakfast TV convention to always have a woman-man line-up to give the show a comfortable, family feel to it. Armstrong had previously worked as a mainstream news presenter and was told by GMTV programme director, Lis Howell, to wear sexier, shorter skirts and to smile more. Howell said of her new employee:

Like all the main presenters, she was chosen for her good looks and manners. I do want the viewers to fancy the presenters in the nicest possible way and we have enhanced Fiona's image. In her final days at ITN she was not looking good. The lighting was hard and they did not pay attention to jewellery and to things like that. The flirtatious side had died. Since being here, she has developed a million per cent. She has great legs. (Howell quoted in *The Daily Express*, 5.1.93)

The way in which women look, their general physical attractiveness and their potential 'sexiness' were all seen as crucial factors which would determine their success in pursuing a television career by women in our study. *I think that they appoint women they think will appeal on a sexy or comfy sofa basis.* More specifically, one respondent remarked that: *They set up a female who is thinking and intelligent..before you know it, the tabloids are having a go at her, saying she should shorten her skirts, she should lower her neckline. TV producers read that and they have her in the make-up room as fast as they can.* The casual commodification of women as sexual objects was alluded to on several occasions and it was felt that few women escape the media's fascination with sex. While some of our



respondents thought that Margaret Thatcher had at least provided a role model for women, others felt she had done more harm than good. Whatever their views on her politics, though, most respondents appreciated that even she was subject to precisely the same sexual curiosity which burdens other women in public life. *Watching her memoirs on TV, they had to ask Cecil Parkinson if he found her sexy. Why ask the question? Nobody asked if anyone found Jim Callaghan sexy.* Most respondents argued that women's appearance seemed to be a much more significant factor than their ability to do a good job and was a much more salient criterion for women than men: women presenters: *either start off as bimbos or they're made into bimbos.* The importance of desirable physical characteristics had clear consequences for older media practitioners, with respondents arguing that television did not allow women presenters to age, although experienced older male presenters such as Trevor McDonald or Peter Snow were still greatly valued. While it was acknowledged that the structure of media institutions often encouraged sexist practices, television's preoccupation with appearance was recognised as also affecting men and that image management for politicians was now an established procedure. The power of the media to 'make or break' someone, through allowing or denying access was widely recognised.

Many women in our study felt that women politicians and media practitioners are more constrained than their male counterparts by what the public/the media believes to be acceptable behaviour. If women campaign actively or interview assertively they are dismissed as raving feminists. Men are allowed to be strident and aggressive and are rewarded with adjectives describing them as serious, determined and committed.

*Edwina Currie didn't really say anything more ridiculous than any of her colleagues, yet she was really slammed for it and ridiculed, because she said what she believed to be right. But if a man did that, he would be considered as outspoken, assertive and even brave, for putting across his point.*

#### **Telly for breakfast**

Some of the strongest criticisms were reserved for programmes which were included under the general description of breakfast television. The main complaint was that because

programme-makers imagined a mainly female audience for their output, they organised the style and content to reflect their own (male) ideas about what might be appropriate for women viewers. The preoccupation with family/women-oriented items, fast and repetitive soundbites and patronising tone were characteristics which respondents identified with breakfast television which explicitly talked down to the imagined (female) audience. *It's definitely aimed at women because you get nappy-changing at 10'o'clock.* Programme-makers and producers seem to think about women viewers as both comprising an homogenous group and, more importantly, being unambiguously and always located in a traditional family setting. The family is often regarded as the sole definer of women's roles and women's culture and will often stand in or signify women's culture itself. Many women in our study believed that it was the imagined gender of the intended audience which determined the low production values of breakfast television, that women could be given lower quality programmes because they did not have the wit to want something more serious or sophisticated.

*I listen a lot to Women's Hour on Radio 4 for the way in which they can approach women's issues, it's just a big difference to what they do on TV. I think that tells the way they [programme-makers] detect people's mentality - a woman who's going to be watching breakfast TV is going to be dumb, got a baby by accident type of woman.*

*It's audience is women with children because if you look at the advertising, there's always at least one Pampers advert and at least one Tampax advert - there's very little to do with men.*

The fact that viewers are encouraged to have a stake in most breakfast TV programmes through various kinds of letter-line or postbag items, encourages the view that programmes are genuinely interactive but of course viewers' responses are entirely determined by a pre-existing agenda into which they must fit. Interestingly, although women were almost unanimous in their criticism of breakfast television's patronising, women audience=low production values formula, they nonetheless reported watching and enjoying such programmes. The ability to reconcile two conflicting readings of a programme has been well documented elsewhere in the literature, and seems to turn on the fact that the viewer can derive certain satisfactions from criticising a low-demand programme whilst at the same

time using such a programme to unwind and relax (see for example, Hobson, 1982; Ang, 1985; Geraghty, 1991).

### **Women as political agents**

Most women in our study believed that men and women politicians were treated the same by media professionals and that they were accorded the same respect and status. These views are interesting in the light of the media's coverage of the Labour leadership campaigns during the summer of 1994, whereby Margaret Beckett very definitely did not attract the same volume or depth of media coverage as her co-contestants, Tony Blair and John Prescott. It was clear from the very beginning of the campaign that Blair was the (media's) favourite. Even by the end of the campaign, when Blair's victory was assured, it was still not clear why he was the favourite, other than the fact that he made extremely attractive television. Despite apparent parity, women in our study made distinctions between the media's treatment of men and women politicians and experts in terms of their differential access to the media. For example, one perception was that given the paucity of women politicians and experts in the community generally, when such women appear on television, they are often burdened with having to speak for all women. *When there are so few women to choose from, you tend to superimpose all women's views on what those few say.* The shortage of women 'experts' who are invited to speak on television also means that the public can easily become bored with the seeing the same few faces. *You tend to get the same women MPs being recycled because there are so few. Emma Nicholson, Glenda Jackson and you tend to think, "Oh no, not her again." It would be better if there were more to choose from. You get a wider variety of men.*

Respondents thought that women politicians are often asked to speak on what are considered to be 'women's issues' - see below for a fuller discussion on this - such as childcare, abortion and single parents: *I associate Clare Short with women's issues but I also associate her with low pay, with general social issues: for some reason social issues are softer issues.* That women MPs/experts are often invited to speak on topics which are

almost exclusively seen as women's issues was seen by many as a deliberate marginalising of women's contributions to the wider social agenda. *If they [the media] are talking about single mothers, suddenly all the female politicians appear out of nowhere, or on abortion, there they all are.* Some respondents also thought the dynamics and the structure of television worked against women. On panel discussion programmes such as *Question Time*, the facilitator is always a man and the panel will be exclusively male with the occasional exception of a token woman. This means that the audience will only get one female perspective, as opposed to three different male views, so even at the most superficial of levels, there is an immediate problem of balance. But lobbying for more women experts is likely to fail unless more women are recruited to work behind the camera. *On Question Time there's usually a panel of four and you occasionally get one woman and three men, but more often than not, it's four men. Now I don't know the structure of the programme, but the odds are that the producer and director are men and women being more assertive is not going to get more women on to the programme.* Many participants believed that whilst women who appear on programmes such as *Question Time* are treated with the same respect as male participants, their appearance is token and that in general, women who appear on television at all are token as there is such a small pool to choose from. *They tend to try and have a token one [woman]. They're given equal weight, but you know that they're only there in the first place because the BBC thought we'd better have a woman on tonight.*

That the appearance of more than one woman on a serious current affairs programme is still the exception rather than the rule is clear from the way in which an all-women panel on *Question Time* recently made headline news. *There was a QT recently when there were all women and they made a big issue of it.* A number of women suggested that women performed less well on television because they are less used to public speaking and sometimes, this made for embarrassing viewing. There was a strong belief that while it was important that women did have access to television and space to air their views, tokenism or positive action strategies which gave women a platform, regardless of whether

or not they had anything of value to add, could be counter-productive. When *they have a good one (woman) it's great, but when they have one for the sake of having a woman, it's such a high-profile thing and women are not used to public speaking. When they have a woman, she's always the one with the bright orange jacket - all the men are in grey suits but stick the woman in the orange jacket.* This latter was one of many comments suggesting an almost overly-cynical view of media manipulation, and a very negative assessment of what might otherwise be viewed as colourful individualism and something to be welcomed. Most participants on programmes such as *Question Time* do in fact wear their own clothes and it is ironic that the positive statements that women speakers on such programme make about themselves, by wearing bold colours, are so badly misunderstood.

#### **Wimmin's Issues**

Sometimes, women politicians come to be associated with promoting single issues, even if they actually speak on a range of subjects. For example, Theresa Gorman is portrayed by the media as only speaking about HRT or Clare Short as only campaigning against pornography. Some women felt that there was a danger in women MPs only being associated with women's issues and of being labelled as a single-(women's)issue politician. However, others argued that if women MPs are not fighting to improve the lot of women, then who will? On the question of 'women's' issues, the majority of women in our sample agreed that there were such issues, yet when group discussions turned to this topic, there was little consensus. There was a strong view that players in the political arena can undermine the salience and importance of an issue by calling it a 'women's' issue. The following comment typifies the views expressed by a number of women about the usefulness of using a notion such as 'women's issues' and the contradictions that arise around labelling issues in that way. *There are no issues which are totally to do with women, even abortion, but they're seen as women's issues. They're all about problems, like abortion, like childcare, like single parent families. Because they're problems it's better to give them over to the women and they can have them as their issues.*

The difficulty with the concept is that once an issue becomes labelled as being of exclusive concern to women, then it can become sidelined. *Issues are automatically marginalised by claiming them as women's issues; you shouldn't call them anything.* On the other hand, it is precisely by claiming certain issues as being appropriate sites for female struggle, for example, abortion, that women's efforts can be mobilised. There was thus a certain ambivalence around the notion of women's issues, with respondents wanting both to own certain issues as being 'for women' whilst acknowledging the dangers of marginalization. *There are issues which are viewed as women's issues [which] can therefore be put in the last 10 minutes of the news",* and again, *"Women's issues don't always get enough airtime on the so-called serious programmes. They don't have the same weight as world politics which they should do because they are about changing society in fundamental ways.* The way in which the media (en)gender the news debate means that once an issue is perceived as a 'women's' issue in the mind of the public, then it loses its potency as a significant social topic.

*There are no issues which are seen as men's issues, so all the issues which interest men are seen as joint issues, so that's fine and they get an airing whereas some issues which should be seen as joint issues are seen as women's issues and therefore only appealing to half the population and therefore not as important, which is just farcical because that's not the case, but people perceive it that way, so there's never a chance for people to understand that they are issues for everyone to get involved in.*

#### **A gendered news agenda**

The existence of specific slants and foci in news reporting was seen as a frequent occurrence in news programming. Sometimes the issue was political, for example, *Programmes are too politically biased,* sometimes the concern was expressed as *too male-oriented,* another respondent suggested that news stories simply *don't talk about women enough.* Some viewers suggested that the news reflected *different opinions and priorities,* from their own, and that *too much is to do with things that do not reflect my life.* Some opinions directly contradicted others: the opinion that there was *not enough local news,* was matched by another opinion that suggested that the news was *too wrapped up in parochial issues,* and a number of women suggested that the news was *not international enough,* and *biased in favour of the White West.* Elsewhere, the style of news coverage

was criticised for being *too oppositional* or involving *too many word battles between politicians*. Indeed one response could have been culled directly from a media textbook: *Television quickly loses interest in subjects and 'drops' them with no follow-up. News coverage is concentrated on certain aspects of society and certain countries.*

### **A different hunger**

Our study shows that, contrary to popular opinion, women **do** watch news and current affairs programmes and when asked specifically about their consumption of this genre, the great majority of respondents reported that they always watched or listened to at least one news programme every day and most read a newspaper regularly. Most women believed themselves to be relatively well-informed and considered that their knowledge levels compared favourably with men they knew. Women were not (too) apologetic about watching 'low-brow' entertainment such as soaps or breakfast television but recognised that they obtained different satisfactions from consuming different genres. As with other studies of women and viewing behaviour, many women in our study carried out a variety of activities at the same time as watching television, concentrating more carefully on items of particular interest. While most women said that they did watch current affairs and documentary programmes, their viewing patterns for these type of programmes tended to be irregular, with most women reporting watching when they featured issues and topics of particular concern. The majority of our sample said that they would like to see more women on television, both as speakers and as presenters/journalists, not necessarily because women were better than male colleagues, but simply to provide alternative perspectives and practices. Most women were able to identify a woman newsreader or journalist (usually the same ones) but generally believed that women were under-represented as media professionals. The role-model function for younger women was also seen as an important part of encouraging more women into television.

Although a number of women in our study were able to identify where programme content is failing them in terms of reflecting their own interests and perceived a certain

condescension (towards women viewers) in some types of news programme, they did not regard the largely male-oriented agenda as the result of a deliberate conspiracy. While viewers saw the involvement of women panelists on programmes such as *Question Time* as broadly tokenistic, the lack of women in news media was seen as unfair, lazy or short-sighted rather than the result of a concerted patriarchal strategy. If women didn't use television *only* as a means of relaxation and entertainment, nor did they seriously question the images which the screen provided. While viewers were able to appreciate the existence of a dominant reading expected of them from programmes, that is, whether they were 'supposed' to feel sympathy or hostility towards the subject of, say, a documentary, 'straight' news programmes were seen as entirely neutral. It is worrying that news programmes are particularly privileged in this way, endowed with such truthful authority that the genre's claims to impartiality are accepted unquestioningly. Although the deliberate selection of particular stories for inclusion in news reporting was acknowledged, such editing decisions were not viewed as sinister, merely cynical and many women were well aware of the push towards info-tainment:

*I'm quite cynical..because the news is part of the entertainment schedule for the evening so it's got to grab people's attention, it's got to be interesting and people want something happy at the end, like a dog who sings!*

The newscaster Martyn Lewis may have been right to suggest that 'people' want happy news as well as the usual diet of woe and misery, but as our study demonstrates we also want a news media which responds to all our interests, that reflects all our lives. That's the media we deserve: when are we going to get it?

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