DOI: 10.1080/17512786.2019.1643252

Please cite as:
Howell, L., and J. B. Singer. (2019). "Pushy or a Princess? Women Experts and UK Broadcast News." *Journalism Practice* 13 (8):
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17512786.2019.1643252.

Pushy or a Princess?
Women Experts and UK Broadcast News

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One day during the run-up to the 2010 UK General Election, Lis Howell was listening to a BBC radio news analysis of a marginal constituency. She heard one male voice after another for nearly ten minutes.

Back at her desk, Howell wrote a comment piece for *Broadcast* magazine – and a campaign to increase the number of female authority figures appearing on air in Britain was born.

Howell and her colleagues began tracking the use of women as experts on leading British broadcast news programmes. The data showed that men consistently outnumbered female experts on the nation's flagship television and radio news shows by a ratio of about 4.4:1 – a ratio disproportionate to the actual presence in British society of female authority figures in various occupations. This study, which also incorporates interview and questionnaire data from journalists and expert women, suggests two key reasons for the disparity: journalists applying preconceived attitudes about "the best person," and women experts fearing being seen as "pushy" – or alternatively, seeking to be wooed.

Expertise and gender

In addition to any inherent qualifications, an expert must be someone whom journalists consider interesting or engaging as well as reliable. Research in the UK, for example, examined how Andrew Wakefield became a media expert after a claim (later discredited) that the MMR vaccine could cause autism. Boyce (2006) found that broadcast journalists trusted Wakefield at the expense of other medical experts because he could be counted on to say something dramatic and controversial in a credible and confident way. In short, he looked and sounded the part.

The self-confidence of male experts, their comfort engaging in banter with other men, and their solidarity with educated, middle-aged males like themselves all count against women experts. In the UK and Ireland, a study focused on a single day of print and broadcast news coverage reported a paucity of stories that portrayed women. The researchers concluded that the dominance of male values in the newsroom means "women's voices, experiences and expertise continue to be regarded by news industries as less important than those of men" (Ross and Carter 2011, p.1150).

Research also shows that when women assume the role of leader or purveyor of information, they are not liked. In a study sub-titled "the dilemma of the informed woman," Watson and Hoffman (2004) asked 80 men and 80 women, allocated to mixed-gender groups, to solve a problem. In half the groups, a woman was given a "hint" to the solution, and in the other half, a man received the hint. The exercise found no gender differences in terms of problem-solving success. Yet other group members rated the informed women as significantly less likable than the informed men. The women, the researchers suggested, defied the prevailing norm, were seen as misfits – and felt themselves to be misfits, as well.

Coming at the issue from a different direction, Johnson (2014) looked at how princess culture – informed by Star Wars no less than Disney – functions in a post-feminist society. Little girls, he concluded, might be encouraged to become different sorts of princesses than in the past, strong and emboldened … but they are inescapably princesses nonetheless. Science fiction warriors and empowered Disney characters such as Belle and Ariel may make it acceptable for girls to be assertive and independent, he suggested, but in the end, they "nevertheless choose to marshal their agency in ultimate pursuit of a prince" (p. 897). They choose, that is, to be wooed.

The literature thus suggests that women experts are more likely than men to be seen as social misfits, by themselves as well as by others, and that they also may feel a greater need than men to be pursued and persuaded.

Methodology

To explore how these perceptions translate into on-air presence of women experts on British news programmes, we drew on four distinct but complementary data sets.

Newscast monitoring: For 18 months beginning in early 2012, researchers logged the number of male and female experts appearing on a total of 161 newscasts aired by four programmes considered the leading sources of broadcast news in the UK: BBC News at Ten (45 newscasts analysed), ITV News at Ten (37 newscasts), Sky News at Ten (38 newscasts), and Today on BBC Radio 4, the nation's flagship radio news show (41 newscasts). These experts included unique achievers in a particular field; people holding important roles in business, government, or society; and commentators used to verify or endorse a story.

Broadcast journalist questionnaires: Questionnaires were sent to 320 UK broadcast journalists in October 2013. Forty responses were received, for a 12.5% response rate. Questions focused on the process for choosing experts to appear on news shows.

Broadcast journalist interviews: Two dozen in-person interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2013 with journalists – including producers, editors, and reporters – at the four news organisations whose content was monitored for this study. Interviewees were invited to discuss their attitudes about on-air experts.

Female expert questionnaires: An email questionnaire was sent to women who took part in training days provided by the BBC Academy, a programme established as a result of the *Broadcast* campaign to try to increase use of women as expert sources in British broadcast media. The training offered guidance for women who expressed an interest in appearing as experts. Two thousand women applied for the 30 places initially offered; the BBC increased its training capacity in response. For this study, questionnaires were sent to 164 of these female experts in early 2014; 31 responses were received, a response rate of 18.9 percent. These questionnaires asked respondents' opinions about factors influencing women's decisions whether to agree to be interviewed on air.

All interview participants and questionnaire respondents were guaranteed confidentiality.

Findings

Data maintained by Expert Witness and the UK Register of Expert Witnesses provide context about the level of female expertise in British society. Spokespeople for both organizations, consulted in connection with this study, said about 70 percent of the experts on their books were clearly identifiable as men. Publicly available information from various centres of authority confirms a similar ratio of male to female expertise in politics, academia, and the law. The ratio of male to women experts in British society can be estimated at just over 2:1.

Our first research question, then, asked about the prevalence of female experts on flagship UK broadcast news programmes. Our monitoring indicated the ratio of male to female experts on air across these shows was approximately 4.4:1.

Table 1: Men and Women as Broadcast News Sources (2012-2013)

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

Broadcast journalists: We next asked what rationales journalists use in deciding whether to interview a male or a female expert on air. Our interviews supported others' research indicating that broadcasters need experts who are able to speak clearly and confidently, as well as to convey gravitas and significance, in order to establish instant credibility with a lay audience. "Being a good speaker is vital," a female producer said, a point made by several interviewees.

However, asked why more men than women are judged appropriate, interviewees did not cite such criteria. Instead, they tended to fall back on their own (not necessarily correct) preconceptions about the prevalence of male expertise in society: "Our guests reflect male-dominated public life," a male producer said. They used such phrases as "a typical man-in-tie sort of guest" and "generally white, over 40, male, in suits or uniforms" to describe the standard broadcast news expert – the "usual suspects," in newsroom parlance.

That said, some interviewees did recognise the problems. "On Syria, all we were getting was middle-aged white blokes," said one male producer. A female producer on a different programme said it would be "nice to have change and not have a programme full of men in suits."

In addition, half of the questionnaire respondents said they believed women experts require time-consuming reassurance – and frequently still decline to appear even after receiving it. Several respondents as well as interviewees explicitly said women were more likely than men to protest that they were not the best person or the right person, and often

suggested a male expert instead. “Women are harder to book,” an experienced female producer explained. “You have to seek them out and build up a relationship.”

More than a third of the journalists responding to the questionnaire – 15 of the 40 – also said women exhibit much more insecurity about their performance even when they are sure of their subject. Interviewees agreed. As one senior producer said, “They don’t quite say ‘I don’t really want to put myself forward.’ But that’s the message they’re kind of giving,” adding:

> “You get ‘I’m not really sure I’m the right person.’ And you say “Why not? Because the sort of things you’ll be asked on air are the sort of things we’ve just been talking about.” Then you get ‘Oh, I’m very nervous’…You often get ‘Oh well, I should probably clear that with my boss,’ and the boss is invariably a man.”

Women experts: How about the experts themselves? We next turned to the rationales they offered for agreeing or not agreeing to appear on air.

The questionnaires – completed by 31 women experts, the academics and other highly qualified professionals who applied to be trained as broadcast contributors by the BBC Academy – indicated that although they had expressed a general willingness to appear on air, many were indeed hesitant to actually put themselves or their qualifications forward. Despite the status these professional women had earned precisely because of their expertise, many said they were afraid about appearing unprepared or unqualified – a concern one respondent described as “imposter syndrome,” the feeling that “there is always someone who is better ‘qualified.’”

Four of the expert respondents used, unprompted, the words “pushy,” “uppity,” or “arrogant” to describe how they feared being viewed. A legal expert described “the fear of appearing too ‘pushy’ or overconfident by thinking you can do it.” An academic agreed that “I didn’t want to be seen as uppity” while a third expert similarly said she “thought it would it be seen as pushy or arrogant by mainly male colleagues.”

Discussion and Conclusions

This study sought to understand – from the perspectives of both journalists and female experts– why women are so disproportionately outnumbered by men in British broadcast news. We found that gendered perceptions of social roles affected decisions by each group.

Findings show one reason is that the perceived need for a good “performer” militates against the use of new female experts over the reuse of known, reliable, and overtly confident men. Journalists also contend there are too few women in top roles, though our background research – along with the large numbers of women experts applying to go through the BBC Academy training programme – indicates this is a misperception.

Of great significance, we believe, is the finding that women are seen as difficult to negotiate with – a finding directly articulated by journalists through both the interviews and the questionnaire data, and indirectly confirmed by women experts. Even though respondents were women who in fact had expressed a desire to appear on air (by requesting the BBC Academy training), a great many still articulated considerable reticence about actually appearing.

Our data suggest this reticence comes from two directions. One is the fear of being disliked, flying in the face of social norms by putting oneself forward to be seen and heard, thus appearing “uppity” or “pushy,” in respondents’ own words. This fear is much in line with other research exploring the “dilemma of the informed woman” (Watson and Hoffman 2004). The other, associated influence seems to be what Johnson (2014) identified as a princess-like need to be wooed, persuaded, and reassured – a type of behaviour reported by fully half of the journalists responsible for booking guests onto news shows.

We suggest that if broadcast news organisations genuinely wish to produce news informed by experts who better represent society, in Britain and elsewhere, they need to take the difficulties caused by the pushy and princess attitudes into account, recognising that the time taken to persuade a highly qualified female expert to appear on air is time well spent. Increasing the numbers of women in the public eye is surely one of the best ways not only to increase women's confidence but also to counter the damaging perception – by the women themselves no less than by journalists – that having and effectively communicating expertise is a predominantly male activity.

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To access the original research article, please see the full reference and DOI here: Howell, Lis, and Jane B. Singer. 2017. "Pushy or a Princess? Women Experts and British Broadcast News." *Journalism Practice* 11 (9): 1062-1078. doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1232173