

Confidence trick—the great disappearing act that keeps women experts off the air

June 6 2016, by Lis Howell



BBC Question Time: four men, one woman. Credit: Ian West / PA Archive/Press Association Images

The revelation by researchers from Loughborough University that 91% of press coverage of the EU referendum campaign featured men will

have come as no surprise to the delegates at the Women on Air conference – held at London's City University, on May 19. At the WOA conference, award-winning reporter [Penny Marshall](#), ITN's social affairs editor, said she had never felt more excluded from a national debate in her life.

Figures announced at the conference show that women are more likely to be excluded generally on national broadcast news when it comes to expertise and authority. Former work from City has shown that on national news bulletins, case studies and vox pops represent the genders equally at roughly 50/50 male/female.

But when it comes to authority figures the picture is very different. The latest figures from City show that on BBC's News at Ten programme, for every woman expert there are 3.8 men.

ITV News at Ten is much the same at 3.6 men to every woman. Yet Channel 4 has 2.2:1 and "Today" on BBC Radio 4 has 2.8:1. So it's not a great picture overall; but it is even worse when it comes to the referendum debate. Why is this?

Boy's club

In 2013, students at City who were monitoring flagship news for the surveys quoted above, looked informally at a snapshot of three weeks of ITN News at Ten programmes by genre and noticed that in those three weeks in July, the genre where men outnumbered women most as experts was not sport or international news, but British domestic politics – where ten times as many men as women were interviewed. This is not a hard and fast statistic but it is indicative. In the Brexit debate, there is a similar disparity. That is because it has become a domestic politics story about leadership of the Tory party.



Man on man: males dominate broadcast news. Credit: Patrick Wang

But that is not the whole answer. If this was a straight leadership campaign, instead of a leadership campaign by stealth, there would be women in there. Theresa May, Justine Greening, Nicky Morgan, Amber Rudd – to name but four – would all be quoted. Some of them may be contenders. And what about the women pundits? Where are the women economists or the women campaigners or the women academics?

To be sure

In 2014, City surveyed women who had taken part in the BBC's [Expert](#)

[Women training scheme](#). A high proportion of the women reported the need to be absolutely sure of their ground before appearing on air. This suggests that their confidence did not lie in their ability to argue but in their ability to present knowledge.

This need for confidence in their knowledge means that women are probably less likely to take part in debates where it is purely a question of conflict.

We all know that the Brexit issue is very much one of emotion and the constant complaint is that nobody really knows the facts. The result of this is that it becomes a gladiatorial combat between opinionated people on both sides with no opportunity for discussion or compromise. You are either in or out. This is not a club many women want to join. The clobbering style of debating fostered in certain schools and universities is not usually the style adopted by women even when they disagree.

Experts

Broadcaster	Ratio (men : women)	% change (since period May 2014 – Sept 2015)
Channel 4 News	2.2 : 1	+15%
Sky News (Sunrise)	2.8 : 1	+10%
ITV News at Ten	3.6 : 1	+27%
BBC Radio 4 (Today)	2.8 : 1	+3%
BBC News at Ten	3.8 : 1	+3%
5 News	2 : 1	-25%
Overall	2.9 : 1	

Results of the Women on Air monitoring survey, from October 2015 to March 2016. City University, Author provided

In a 2004 study sub-titled "[the dilemma of the informed woman](#)", psychologists Carol Watson and L Richard Hoffman asked 80 men and 80 women, placed into 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 problem-solving success. Yet other group members rated the informed women as significantly less likeable than the informed men. Women recognise this and do not want to be disliked, so they do not participate unless they are absolutely sure of their ground.

Nobody is really sure about what will happen if Britain leaves the EU. So it's better left to George and Boris, who have the confidence to speak without hard evidence – and to laugh off any gaffes. Hardly any women in public life have either that sense of entitlement, or the brass neck to apply it. So they keep their heads below the parapet.

This will change over time, as more women gain confidence and experience on air. Our next conference in 2018 may well show a difference in female expertise on TV and radio flagship news but that will be too late for the Leave and Remain debate. Or perhaps, and maybe this is too much to hope for, men may learn from [women](#) and opt out of slanging matches.

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