

## **Audience responses to the physical appearance of television newsreaders**

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### **Summary:**

Women still face much greater pressure than men about their physical appearance and body image. How they look matters, especially with regards to newsreaders and broadcasters. In this study, we investigate the opinions of those who watch television news in relation to the appearance of news presenters through the use of 20 semi-structured interviews with female and male viewers and 167 questionnaires. We found that audiences were well aware that female newsreaders may have been chosen for their appearance and many of our respondents thought that this was rather unjust. The audience felt that male newsreaders were credible whether they had grey hair or were young and good looking. Where women were glamorised they were often belittled and trivialised in terms of intelligence and abilities. We found that audiences were more interested in the actual news than newsreaders' appearance and some respondents wanted more diverse representations.

**Key Words:** Newsreaders, gender, sexualisation, age, representation, television news.

### **Introduction**

Although there have been many more women entering journalism (North, 2009) and there are now more female newsreaders, Holland's (1987 in Van Zoonen p.43) argument that 'female newsreaders have been constructed as pleasurable objects for men to look at' is still the case almost 60 years after the first female TV newsreader appeared on British television (Thumin, 1998). Holland (1987: 133) suggested that women newsreaders were 'seen as an opportunity for jokes, pictures and suggestive comments' and further 'every detail of their dress and appearance was commented on, their styles were compared, their sexuality stressed'. She could have been writing about contemporary newsreaders. Thus the mainstream ideologies relating to gender filter into the newsrooms and into media generally (Fiske, 1987). Values and discourses circulating via the media can permeate

everyday life (Giles, 2009), and because television is still the medium that provides news for a majority of people (Clausen, 2004 in Weibel, Wissmath and Groner, 2008), there is a strong cases for continuing to explore the ideologies of beauty underlying the selection of its newsreaders. In this essay we add to the debate by offering evidence about the responses of TV audiences to female newsreaders. We highlight and develop the arguments of previous research such as Holland (1987) whose seminal chapter 'When a woman reads the news' still has resonance in the findings of our contemporary research. We also focus on how audiences respond to female newsreaders and whether the dominant gender stereotypes are reinforced or challenged. We examine in particular how audiences respond to television newsreaders and how audiences may even challenge and resist the ideology which lies behind it.

The media, and television in particular, play a powerful role in perpetuating myths and stereotypes about physical attractiveness (Downs and Harrison, 1985). It tends to present a narrow image of femininity focussing on visual appearance (Wykes and Gunter, 2005), and indeed emphasises appearance above other qualities (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994). Organisations, including broadcasting institutions, often promote idealised images of women – a glamorised version of attractiveness - through employing women with the 'right look' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009:385) and sex appeal (Chambers, Steiner and Fleming, 2004). Furthermore, although for both sexes, newsreading is an area where there is a focus on physical appearance (Engstrom and Ferri, 2001), this is particularly the case for female newsreaders (Cash and Brown, 1989). There is a 'deliberate resexualisation and recommodification of women's bodies' (Gill 2003 cited in North, 2009:198) including those who are newsreaders.

Lying behind these processes are particular standards about what qualifies as beauty (Gangestad, Thornhill and Yeo, 1994). These standards may change over time (see Kaufman, 1980; Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz and Thompson, 1980) but for women, beauty is currently associated with thinness (Demarest and Allen, 2000, Wolf, Nichols and Decelle, 2010), and a youthful appearance (Weibel et al., 2008).

There is particular discrimination in broadcasting institutions against older women (for example, see Helworth, 2002). Journalist and television presenter Joan Bakewell (cited in Demarest and Allen, 2000) was outspoken in 2009 about the lack of grey haired women on television generally, and Anna Ford, a former newsreader, has been particularly revealing about the selection processes which marginalise older women (Thorpe, 2012). Grey hair for women suggests that they are no longer presentable on television. One has only to look at the criticism Mary Beard received due to her grey hair (Grose, 2013). Older women are replaced by younger women, for example Moira Stuart and Anna Ford were allegedly dropped by the BBC because of their age (Martin, 2007; Revoir, 2009). By contrast, older male news readers, often with grey hair, are perceived as being more credible (Strickland, 1980, cited in Weibel et al., 2008).

Thus women newsreaders are focused on because of their beauty and youth, and often belittled by being glamorised or sexualised. Of course, we are not suggesting that

women who make it into the ranks of newsreaders lack professional competence, but rather they face an additional hurdle in the selection process, and additional performance requirements are exacted of them. For example, BBC journalist Kate Adie (cited in Leonard 2001) commented 'They want people with cute faces and cute bottoms and nothing else in between ... they are more concerned about the shape of your leg than professional ability'. The phrase 'journalistic damsels', noted by Allan (1999: 130), neatly encapsulates the dual selection and performance criteria which evidently apply to women.

The study reported in this essay adds to the existing literature on media sexism through an investigation of potential resistance by audiences to the ideologies implicit in newsreader selection and performance. Resistance is a notion that can be difficult to define, as there are many interpretations (Burchell, 2009), but we focus here on whether audience members resist by recognising and critiquing the image-focussed values underlying the selection of female newsreaders. We do not demand that to count as resistance audience members go further and challenge the overall structures of the broadcasting institutions (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004), although some may of course do so. We are therefore interested in how audiences consume television news and how they respond to television newsreaders (male as well as female). As Carter et al. (1998) pointed out, the social relations of consumption of programming is important.

In summary, therefore, we are interested in the reactions and perceptions of audience members, female and male, to the largely glamorised, youthful images of female newsreaders, and in particular whether audiences internalise the implicit notions of female beauty or challenge such ideology. We recognise that the way people respond to what they see on television may depend on their gender, age, class and other contextual conditions including individual audience perceptions (Haas and Gregory, 2005), and so we also explore some of these dimensions.

## **Methodology**

In order to uncover subtle layers of meaning (Winchester, 1999; Lavie and Lehman-Wilzig, 2005), we conducted a mixture of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews: a total of 167 questionnaires, and 20 interviews (10 interviews with females, 10 with males) during 2010 to 2011. The 167 questionnaires were conducted in England in the West Midlands region, mostly administered face-to-face, though with 21 completed online. The questionnaire was piloted with 10 people answering questions and adjustments then made to some of the questions. All the research was carried out by two of the authors of this essay, rather than using research assistants. The two researchers knocked on doors in various geographical locations mostly in Worcestershire (Redditch and Worcester City). They also asked respondents for others who might be interested in completing questionnaires and thus using the snowballing method (Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock, 2010). The few who completed the questionnaire online were found through social media. The two authors were in daily contact regarding the process of administering the questionnaires and discussing the target quota. During this process it was noted that it was still important

to capture information from those who did not watch television news in terms of age and other demographics. We aimed for a quota of at least 60 female respondents and 60 male respondents. Percentages were used to compare responses by gender and age.

The questionnaire consisted of a mixture of closed and open questions and ended with demographic questions about age, gender, ethnicity and occupation. The questionnaires had 94 female respondents and 72 males. There were 40 respondents aged between 18-20 years, 22 aged between 21-30 years, 29 aged between 31-40 years, 39 aged between 41-50 years, 19 aged between 51-60 years and 17 in the 61+ years (1 respondent did not give their age). Most of the respondents (89%) described themselves as White British, whilst the remaining 11% consisted of a variety of ethnicities including Indian heritage (2.4%), African (1.8%) and mixed heritage (1.2%). We also captured the demographic information of respondents who did not watch television news.

It is important to understand that our sample is not intended to be a complete cross-section of the British population; our purpose is not to make generalizations about the whole population. Rather, we use our data to argue that some of the viewpoints that we highlight are sufficiently prominent within TV audiences to raise questions about the apparent assumptions of the news broadcasters over the sexualisation of women news presenters. We also use our sample to show that there are interesting differences between some social categories, such as (for example) between older and younger viewers. Thus we are able to raise valid issues for broadcasters to address, and some important questions for future researchers to follow up

The questionnaires asked respondents which channels they tended to watch news on, and why. They were asked whether they watched specific news programmes because of certain newsreaders and if so, what was it that made them want to watch. We made it clear that the newsreaders we were asking about were the main anchors rather than sports or other newsreaders. Respondents were asked whether they thought some newsreaders had been chosen because of how they looked and were asked to give examples if they thought this was the case. The questionnaire also asked whether they thought male newsreaders should be attractive and respondents were asked to give some reasons for this answer. Similarly, we also asked whether they thought female newsreaders should be attractive and respondents were asked to give reasons for their answer. They were also asked whether they preferred the news to be read by a specific gender (female or male) or whether they thought that the news should be read by women and men together or separately. Again they were asked to give reasons for their answers.

We were aware that there are difficulties inherent in questionnaires – for example, whether people may or may not want to admit that attractiveness is important to themselves let alone to a researcher. Thus, it was also decided to conduct interviews to explore these notions in more detail. The questionnaire respondents were asked whether they would be willing to take part in an interview on that topic. Those who agreed to this gave their contact details for the researchers to contact them at a later date. It was decided that one author would conduct all the interviews and that there would again be a quota of

10 males and 10 females to aim for. The interviewees were respondents who had identified that they watched national news programmes on television such as the BBC News at Ten, News 24, Sky News, or ITV news.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with people who watched television news. These took place in the homes of interviewees and lasted from 45 minutes to an hour and a half. The interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed by one of the researchers. The interviews began with some introductory questions and then adopted a flexible approach to stimulate discussion (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). Introductory questions included 'Do you think female newsreaders are chosen for their looks?' and 'Do you think male newsreaders are chosen for their looks?' Names of all respondents have been changed to provide anonymity.

### **Audience Responses**

Interviewees and questionnaire respondents alike were well aware that newsreaders are chosen for their appearance and that this is much more the case for women than for men. 76% of respondents thought that some newsreaders had been chosen because of how they looked. For example Paul said: '[It's] difficult to think of female newsreaders who aren't attractive, and therefore attractiveness is obviously some quality they are selecting by [for women].' This highlights the view that female newsreaders are focused on in terms of physical appearance, whilst male newsreaders do not have the same criteria being applied.

Respondents also showed awareness that notions of age and youth are associated with those of beauty. In the interviews, one person commented: 'They are chosen for their look[s] and beauty and [this is] one of the reasons why you only see young female presenters. You rarely see an old woman presenting the news.' Other people made similar comments. In the questionnaires, for example one person wrote: 'men are often middle aged and women [are] good looking and slim.' Sarah, another interviewee, noted that newsreaders are 'always young and good looking and I can't believe that there aren't other people who'd like to be newsreaders who are not young and good looking.' Thus, we do find audience members who challenge ideas about what attributes female newsreaders should have and therefore challenge the dominant discourses that audiences want to consume stereotypically attractive female newsreaders.

When asked about their own preferences, respondents were more concerned that the newsreader should be able to do the job than they were about their appearance. One female respondent said: 'I think it is more important that the newsreader is intelligent, articulate and able to ask the necessary questions [and] communicate well to the viewer... if they can do the job properly, it shouldn't matter how they look.' Another respondent thought that: 'They should be able to present the news in an appropriate way. You may as well ask should doctors or nurses be attractive.' Similarly, one male respondent said: '[How] good they are at their jobs should be of more importance' and 'I watch it for the news, not how attractive the presenters are.' A female respondent noted: 'I do feel slightly irritated

and slightly offended when news presenters look very like women who are put there to attract male viewers.'

When asked whether female newsreaders should be attractive, only 25% of female respondents and 28% of male respondents thought that they should be. Most people thought that it was not important how the newsreaders looked. Appearance was considered by our questionnaire respondents even less important for male newsreaders. This challenges the notion that the audience for television news tune into the news to see attractive newsreaders – whilst this may be the case for some, the majority of people in this study tuned into the news to see the news itself.

There were some respondents who thought that physical attractiveness was a desirable quality for newsreaders; for example one respondent said that newsreaders should be 'nice to look at ... makes news more enjoyable.' There were gender differences in such responses. Of all female respondents, 21% suggested that male newsreaders should be attractive and 25% suggested that female newsreaders should be. On the other hand, of the male respondents, a much smaller 6% thought that male newsreaders should be attractive, whereas 28% of these male respondents suggested that female newsreaders should be.

However, for the oldest age category (61 and above), nearly half the respondents (47%) thought that female newsreaders should be attractive. When this was broken down by gender, it was found that more males expressed a desire to see attractive female newsreaders whereas females more usually expressed a desire to see attractive male newsreaders. As this was the only age group where this preference for attractive newsreaders was apparent, therefore, most of the audience who watched television news did not have a strong preference about whether the newsreaders were attractive. This differs from what appears to be assumed by the industry (Wolfe and Mitra, 2012).

It was not uncommon for respondents to differentiate between 'good looks' and smartness, noting that although they were not interested in looks, they did want the newsreaders to be well presented. Joan commented: 'I just don't think what they look like should matter as long as... smartness maybe but not glamour and good looking.' Another respondent noted: 'They need to be respectable and smartly dressed.' They did not want the newsreaders to be 'scruffy': 'Neither male nor female have to be pin ups, but [they] shouldn't be scruffy.'

Some of the comments from the questionnaire highlight these differing opinions. One male respondent in the 18-30 age group in response to a question about whether male newsreaders should be attractive noted: 'It shouldn't matter but to be fairer to female newsreader the same criteria should apply'. Another male respondent in this age group noted that 'Maybe because it's easier on the eye, but if they're good enough they should not be judged upon appearance'. Some of the male respondents aged 18-39 years did think that female newsreaders should be attractive, offering comments such as 'Nice to look at and makes news more enjoyable.' Male respondents in the 31-50 age group noted that: 'being a good newsreader is [the] only important criteria.' Another male respondent noted:

'I do not mind whether newsreaders are attractive or not. What is important is that their appearance is not such that it detracts from the story they are reading whether that be that they are too attractive, too ugly, too flamboyantly dressed or whatever.' Another male respondent (aged 31-50 years) wrote: 'I watch it for the news not how attractive the presenters are.' Thus, most of the male respondents felt that newsreaders should not be judged upon their appearance but their abilities.

In relation to female newsreaders, one male respondent wrote: 'An attractive female broadcaster tend[s] to shift focus from the item of news' and 'their ability and presentation is the important thing.' In the 51+ age group, one of the male respondents noted: 'Most channels have 1 male and 1 female. Usually the males can be any age but Sky Sports presenters (female) are young and good looking.' One male respondent (51+ years) noted that it is 'nice to look at an attractive woman' but another disagreed, 'because the newsreader is there to read the news' rather than being there to look good. Yet another man in the 51+ age group added 'I am a man – would prefer to look at an attractive woman to an ugly one.' Despite these comments, most of the male respondents felt that the newsreaders' abilities were again more important rather than how they looked.

Similarly, one female respondent in the 18-30 age group, reflecting on male newsreaders, said being 'easy on the eye should not limit any gender based on their attractiveness'. Another female respondent in this age group noted that: 'they have to look more believable than attractive'. A number of female respondents (18-30 years) felt that looks were less important compared with being able to do the job. 'I don't think it matters. The people interested in watching the news wouldn't mind what the person looked like as long as they were good at delivering.' When asked why attractive female newsreaders were chosen, one female respondent in the 18-30 age group commented: 'for male viewers possibly to draw them in' but added 'it is whether they are good readers that count, not physical appearance.' Similarly, a female respondent in the 31-50 age group said about male newsreaders 'I don't think they should necessarily be attractive but I do think they shouldn't be unattractive.' Another female in this age category noted: 'It's not about how they look more about how they present themselves.' One female noted: 'they mustn't be off-putting or distract from what they're saying, but [there is] not the same pressure to be actually good looking.' Most of the respondents thought that looks were less relevant than ability to read the news.

When asked about female newsreaders, one female respondent aged between 31-50 years wrote: 'As long as the person can read the news appropriately they don't have to be glamour models' and 'they are presenting the news not themselves.' A woman in the 51+ age group suggested in relation to male newsreaders that as long as they are 'Clean, tidy and not distracting [that is] more important than [being] attractive' and 'it's good to see an attractive man' whilst another female (aged 51+) noted they were 'not interested in how they look as long as they are clean and tidy and can speak clearly.' Asked whether female newsreaders should be attractive, a woman in the 51+ age group answered: 'Attractive females are easy on the eye. For me it is difficult to believe in an unattractive woman.' One

respondent (aged 51+) summed up the difference between male and female newsreaders by commenting: 'there are young female newsreaders but no older females.' Hence, most female respondents also noted that abilities were more relevant than looks for both female and male newsreaders.

For some of those who thought that the physical appearance of newsreaders matters, there was a tension, as highlighted by one interviewee who commented: '[I] feel it shouldn't matter, but if I'm really honest, I don't want to look at an ugly person.' However, some of those who indicated that physical appearance matters were making the point that it is extremes of beauty that are not desirable. One comment was: 'I guess if they were too stunningly attractive or too stunningly unattractive, it might be a bit distracting from the message they're trying to give. They should come across as professional, as you would expect to see somebody present themselves in a formal professional situation.' This was also echoed by some other interviewees such as Donna, who noted: 'I prefer not to have anything that makes you detract from what they're saying, so if they were really unpleasant on the eye that could be a problem. That's very judgemental but that's probably how it is and if they were there purely for their beauty then I would find that a problem as well. So I think it's their voice which probably matters more ... it's speed, it's diction. Variety in their voice.'

An emphasis on appearance was sometimes seen as impacting detrimentally on the newscasters' image. Veronica commented that for female newsreaders to be taken seriously, they should 'not overly flaunt their own sexuality ... [that] would show that that person is wanting to be taken more seriously as a professional, in a professional role, than just there to be good looking or eye candy.' One male interviewee, Bob, noted: 'You can't quite take the bimbos seriously as I could someone who is doing the job first and getting the numbers of viewers up second.' He went on to say:

I think it's about this credibility thing that if you have two people telling you something serious and one was in a suit and tie and one was in a red dress with a low cleavage, which do you believe... to me news is a serious matter and it normally affects people's lives ... so it kind of needs to be given that weight and I think sometimes the sort of blonde boobs takes away that weight. I mean people like Orla [*Orla Guerin journalist*] – I mean she's no picture but she presents from the most difficult places ... you sort of feel they're passionate about it and they feel for what's going on whereas some of the younger fashionable ones, I just don't feel have that credibility ... it's almost like they're trying to glam up to gain attention and to me that dumbs it down. Just loses credibility in my mind.

Some respondents also noted the age dimension of sexism. Joan commented: 'The women have to look young and glamorous and the likes of Moira Stewart being told she's too old



for it... whereas the men don't have that requirement and so it's two completely different sets of recruitment criteria based on what sex you are.' Yasmin similarly said that:

[It's] unrepresentative of society and I think it puts pressure on older women in any profession then to kind of hang on to their jobs and not be replaced by somebody younger. I think it really does matter.... I think particularly there is a responsibility there to be kind of more of a real mirror of society as it is.

Mark said: 'none of them [female newsreaders] have grey hair... I don't think I've ever seen a woman reading the news with grey hair. I don't think it would be distracting.' What this recognises is that notions of female beauty are (for women) very strongly associated with youth, whereas men are allowed to have grey hair, and in fact this (grey hair) tended to be associated with being distinguished for male newsreaders.

Similarly, in the comment from Veronica we can see resistance to the ideology of women being valued for youth:

They tend to hang on to older men ... but there seems to be less older women. I think it's rubbish. They don't suddenly become less able or inarticulate or not able to do their job, but it seems to be that ... it's being decided on the public's behalf that they don't want older women on the television ... but to me personally I would rather have somebody good at their job doing it, and it seems unfair and discriminatory when they're kicked out earlier.

Particularly belittling, according to some respondents, is the pairing of a young female newsreader with an older male presenter. Yasmin commented:

The other thing that I really object to is when a young woman is placed in the position of co-presenting with an older man and she's made out to be kind of young and silly ... and there's a kind of flirtatious relationship. It's ageism in reverse. She's labelled as being unintelligent or lightweight because she's younger.

Another interviewee said: 'My perception is that ... women have to be attractive and men have to either show gravitas or be funny ... so the men have to show the substance and the women are there to just look nice.'

## **Discussion**

It seems that television broadcasting organisations still often employ female newsreaders based on their physical appearance, choosing women newsreaders who fit a particular 'look' (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009; Wolfe and Mitra, 2012). In doing so they promote notions of

femininity which focus on a narrow image of beauty, often associated with youth as well as stereotypical and sometimes glamorised physical attractiveness.

However, many of the audience members in our research showed resistance to this ideology of physical attractiveness. While they did not all regard appearance as completely irrelevant (they did, for example, want to see newsreaders who were smartly dressed), overall they wanted a more balanced approach to newsreader selection, with a focus on their abilities and professional competencies rather than their appearance. Being able to identify the newsreader as a professional is seen to be important, as is being able to identify with them, whereas it may be that when a newsreader is promoted in terms of looks it becomes more difficult for audience members to identify with such idealised images. Thus, our respondents questioned the wisdom of the broadcasting institutions in their apparent recruitment and presentation criteria, for women and indeed sometimes for men, as well as in the lack of diverse representation of newsreaders.

Our respondents showed a particularly dismissive attitude towards the over-glamorisation and sexualisation of women newsreaders. It may therefore be that when female newsreaders are selected for or required to display such qualities, it harms their credibility as professionals. They tend to be taken less seriously and this might actually be damaging for their careers as it pigeonholes them into a certain type of femininity and one that tends to be relational to men (Matheson, 2005: 80). This confirms some of the suggestions in the literature that although physical attractiveness is sometimes positively correlated with intelligence (Haas and Gregory, 2005; Kanazawa and Kovar, 2004), sexualisation has a negative correlation with intelligence, and one could argue that practices based on it uphold the patriarchal structures at some level (hooks, 1994).

Thus, significant parts of the audience have readings of TV news which challenge its dominant constructions of femininity. However, this is 'externally defined resistance' (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004: 565), where the broadcasters seem unaware of the complaints of audiences for television news. It seems that the broadcasting institutions are the ones with power to change such notions about women and the primacy of female beauty, and could usefully be made aware of the forceful and critical views held by many audience members. Even though gender roles in society may have changed and audiences are hoping for wider images of femininity, it seems that the broadcasting industry and journalism in particular, are promoting and reproducing traditional and stereotyped images of gender. As most of the senior positions are still male (North, 2009) the characteristics of newsreaders presumably reflect the views of those making decisions about who should be reading the news.

## **Conclusion**

This research therefore adds to the evidence that audiences, or at least some parts of the audience, do have the capacity to actively resist the ideological component of the television texts with which they are presented. In this case what they are resisting is a deep-rooted sexism in selection and presentation of women television newsreaders along with resisting

the dominant stereotypes of women. Women are used to seeing themselves from the viewpoint of others, male and female (see Mulvey, 1991), but the majority of our respondents did not want to gaze at a male or female newsreader in a particular way. Instead most wanted to watch the news presented by a professional, male or female, who do the job well. One could argue therefore, that most of our audience are displaying a desire for a news gaze rather than a newsreader-focused one.

The current situation reflects what might be termed a 'hidden' discourse of femininity, one which foregrounds a woman's physical appearance and attractiveness. This dominant discourse does not have the usual characteristic of dominant discourses of being openly shared. Instead it is concealed from public view because newsreader selection criteria are rarely made public. However its results are openly on display, and it is clear from our research that the implicit discourse is evident to many viewers, and actively resisted by some. As Foucault and others imply, wherever there is a dominant discourse, there is always the potential for resistance and for rival discourses to be generated and circulated.

For newsreaders, though, whilst newsreading is a 'far cry from the male bastion it was 50 years ago' (North, 2009:1), we are still looking forward to the day when 'women reporters are working in sufficient numbers that they are no longer judged by their looks, their personalities or their private lives and when we, the audience, are able to absorb merely the news that they are reporting' (Sebba, 1994:10 cited in Carter et al., 1998). The audience is more sophisticated than the industry gives them credit for. Certainly the audiences we talked to seem to want to concentrate on the news whereas it seems that the industry itself is not prepared to trust the audience in this.

### **Biographical notes:**

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