

# A Study on the Relationship between Journalism and Feminism in Britain

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**Abstract:** *This paper aims to analyze the relationship between journalism and feminism in Britain and find out whether journalism became feminized over time by discussing how women engaged in the newsroom and the orientation of feminine feature in journalism in different stages. This essay adopted the historical approach and consisted of three parts. The first two parts reviewed the development of the female newspaper and broadcasting journalists in the initial stage and post-war period, and then the following paragraph discussed the overall situation of female journalists in contemporary British society. By analyzing the development of female journalists and their journalistic style in history, the trend of journalism would be revealed, as well as whether the influx of female journalists had made journalism become feminized over time in Britain.*

**Keywords:** *Journalism, Feminism, British history, Gender equality*

## 1. Introduction

Dating back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, journalism was the male-dominated field. Women were considered as individual consumers or the collective market for news. Due to increasingly reliance on advertising revenue since the 1880s, women began to be hired by the news agency to attract female readers. The news term “women journalism” emerged, which was used to describe the focus of female journalists at that time: merely about fashion, arts and family affairs from the “human interest” angle. The women journalism undoubtedly ensured women have a place in the new agency, but it also caused several controversial. For example, the narrative of female journalism was questioned outside the “serious” reportage and aimed at producing gossips. Besides, it is argued that involved women into news production pulled down the average wage of the industry (Chambers et al. 2014, P15).

Newspaper and broadcast journalism occupies a central place in the modern mass media. There is no denying that the allowance of women into journalism was an economically oriented decision, but the past two centuries also witnessed the achievements female journalists made, not only in the domestic sphere, but also in the successful narrative of serious issues. In fact, there was a strong flow of British women into the journalism during the World War II, while the whole situation may not as optimistic as it looked. As Rakow and Kranich (1999) argued that women journalist forced to cater into masculine narratives of news discourses, because the maleness was always taken for granted in journalism.

In an attempt to show the relationship between journalism and feminism in Britain, this study will mainly focus on the development of the female newspaper and broadcasting journalists in different times, as well as the overall situation of female journalists in contemporary British society. With further analysis, it can be revealed whether journalism in Britain has become feminized over time.

## 2. Female journalist at the early stage

As claimed by British journalists Emilie Hawkes Peacocke, “The modern journalism, is that of the rise of the Women’s Story”(Peacocke, 1936, P.29). With the expansion of newspaper, British press needed to capture a broader readership to attract advertisers. Therefore, women’s department in journalism was created to specifically targeting the female group and then led to the rise in a number of women work for newspapers. Historically, women journalists started from the white, well-educated and middle-class women who were interested in the “light” topics, such as domestic issues or changing fashion. Compared with “serious” issues related to politic and economic that dealt by male journalists, the role early female

journalists was mere to evoke emotional feelings, sensationalism and attract female readers. A new term, "New Journalism" was also developing at that time, which aimed to link the news with human interest and promote the social reform from all classes (Carter, 2002). Women journalism became the "sob sister" of the movement in Britain and successfully took advantage of the media power to drive forward the reform agenda. The position of early female newspaper journalists in the press from 1850 to 1945 was quite controversial. On the one hand, there was a host of critical comments of women entered media field from male journalism. In their opinions, the occupation of journalists would be too arduous for women and would probably result in the decrease in femininity and health (Steiner, 1992). On the other hand, the early female journalists would be rejected by news agency if they did not cater to the light journalistic style or present the feminine feature. However, for those who wrote soft news in a feminine manner, even they accepted the convention gender roles, the position of them were still professionally marginalized.

Compared with newspaper journalism, the development of broadcast journalism in Britain started late in 1923 when the British Broadcasting Company was founded, which played the role of the educative and moral force to improve the knowledge and manner (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991). Initially, female journalists were excluded from broadcasting journalism in BBC according to the "strict Presbyterian moral code" set up by the Director General, John Reith (Chambers et al., 2014, P.29). That put the restriction on both of the employment and promotion on women in broadcasting. There was no chance for married and divorced women to get employed in BBC at that time. Besides, young, unmarried women also faced several barriers to getting into broadcasting. For one thing, the early microphone in the newsroom was designed for the vocal range of male journalists, so that the sound of women would be tinny. For another, the women's voice were considered less authority and gossip-oriented by the BBC management (Shingler and Wieringa, 1998). As a matter of fact, BBC viewed women as the audience rather than producer from the start. For example, BBC set special house for women by establishing the program *The Women's Hour* in 1923, which mainly talked about fashion trend and an item on the adoption of babies. Even it was shut down due to the inappropriate broadcast time and complains from National Federation of Women's Institution, but it set a good example for other female programs. As another series called *Household Talks* broadcasted through the 1930s in BBC. While these changes did not promote the status of female journalists or brought much change in British journalism. Because most of the topics were just around domestic affair and the experts used in these programs were male (Barrett, 2002). With the continuously growing audience, gender stereotype it represented was reinforced at the same time. The women's page in newspaper paved the way for feminine broadcasting in BBC, yet women encountered multiple barriers and had few opportunity to prove their professional skills in Broadcasting field. Consequently, the expansion of broadcasting female journalists was lagged behind those in the newspaper. Moreover, the black women were mostly excluded from both of printed and broadcasting area. It can be seen that the press opened the door for women with several conditions in the 1900s. Consequently, the visible prejudice and bias were prevalent for early female journalists (Chambers et al., 2014).

### **3. The female journalist in post-war era**

There was a great stir of female newspaper journalists in the postwar era. During the World War II, a great number of women were hired to filled positions vacated by men who went to the front. Women took advantage of this opportunity to make several advances in the newsroom. They were empowered to write hard news instead of the women's page, which made them feel like the real journalists (Stott, 1973). However, this sense of satisfactory did not last, as men returned from the battlefield and reclaimed their jobs. The beginning of the post-war period was a dark time for female newspaper journalists. Some journalists reported that they were asked to give the position back to the men they replaced, some were replaced by men who just being recruited. Even those who kept their job were forced to go back to the light journalistic writing style. Further, the reproduction responsibilities, as Delano (2003) pointed out, became the big barrier for women to become profession journalists. At that time, childbearing could be viewed as one reason that women quit from the news agency, but it also became the kindly excuse for not recruiting female employee. Besides, women could be simply dismissed when they announced pregnancies. Nearly one in four women journalists put off having babies for their careers, but they were still excluded from the mainstream hard news. Moreover, the female group was deliberately ignored by major serious national newspapers in Britain in the 1950s, only the tabloid newspapers included the women's page. The *Daily Mail* was an exception at that time by adopting an "unusually intimate tone" (Chambers et al. 2014, P37) to attract both male and female readers. The situation of female newspaper journalists gradually got better, due to the competition between the newspapers and commercial television. The commercial television followed the step of tabloid newspapers to adopt the feminine

approach to draw attention from the female-oriented advertisers in the late 1950s. Therefore, the national newspapers also launched the women page to catch the trend. It is worth mentioning that these advertisements contained gender bias though they were introduced by female journalists. The task of female journalists in women's page was to provide guidance about how to be perfect, and then would imply that the way to be perfect was to use the products in the advertisement. In these advertisements, Women were materialized and commercialized, leading to the further marginalization of women in society (Whitehorn, 1997).

The 1960s witnessed the increase of the number of women journalists in Britain. At first, the restrictions of female journalists were decreased, as they were allowed to write other topics beyond homemaking and domesticity on women's page. Then, the political issues which dealt with social concern, like divorce or addiction, were discussed on women's page in answered the call to the second wave of feminism. Early radical feminism, arising at this time advocated that personal is political, which emphasized the connection between personal experience and larger social and political structures (Harutyunyan et al, 2009). This theory inspired female journalists in their work. For example, the former journalist of the Daily Telegraph and the Guardian, Jill Tweedie, an excellent female journalist who put the radical journalism into practice by discussing the obstacles female faced in daily life. Besides, she also explored the serious political connected with women, like rape within marriage, which was considered inappropriate to put forward in public sphere (Eagleton and Parker, 2006). To put it in another way, the 1960s marked the milestone for female journalists, they had more freedom in choosing the topics and the journalistic writing style.

However, the British press encountered the more severe financial problem in the 1970s, the problem was that the proportion of male readers were much higher than female. Consequently, magazine writers were headhunted by the newspaper to produce the light news, which pushed women journalists to go backward to the emotional, the domestic affair (Heller, 1999). The following researches appeared to be more critical, as the study showed that majority of female journalists encountered or seen discrimination against women (Sieghart and Henry, 1998). Another research pointed out the harassment in the newsroom by showing that 60 out of 227 participating journalists were awarded of the existence of harassment of female journalists and 10% claimed they had the experience of harassment (Walsh Childers et al., 1996). The problem of harassment still lingered even now. Overall, despite the routine trivialized and maligned from male journalists, the situation of women journalists was generally improved, along with the women of color in the post-war period, especially in the 1960s.

Like the trend in the British newspaper, the broadcasting journalists first suffered from a decline in numbers. During the World War II, many women were employed or promoted to cope with the great wartime expansion of BBC. However, only a few women kept their position after the war and the majority of them were either asked to hand over their job to men or went back to the feminine field (Tunstall, 2003). World War II indeed exerted significant influence on journalism in Britain, in particular to broadcasting journalism. In terms of radio broadcasting, the Forces Programme shifted to the Light Programme, which consisted of pop songs and entertainment speeches. Interestingly, Women's Hour, the program of BBC that has exactly the same name of the first feminine broadcasting program set a good example to resist gender stereotype in 1946. It not only provided advice of family affair but also dealt with medical and sexual issued and human relationship, even the feminist movements (Feldman, 2000). Though some programs included the feminist features, such as the campaign for equal pay or more salary for homemakers, the grass-roots feminists were still ignored in comparison with other issues. The potential reason might be the loose between feminism and journalism. Moreover, most television and broadcasting program targeting on housewives, as they were the one who would pay attention to their programs and buy the products in advertisements (MacGregor, 2003).

The 1950s was a competitive and expansive decade for broadcasting journalism. In order to attract the maximizing audience, it made lots of attempts to attract the female audience, like organized female audience research to listen to women's opinion or considered to let women present the evening news (Carter, 2002). A noted achievement during this period was the first appearance of female reporter read news bulletin on television in 1955. While the content of this news was about the domestic kitchen and faced a relatively small audience since it was broadcasted during the lunchtime. In fact, most of the efforts could hardly shake the conventional principles and prejudice against women. The 1960s marked an important achievement for printed journalists, but the female broadcasting journalism was not as lucky as they were. The misogyny Male anxiety exerted the negative influence on women in BBC 's Talks Department.

Carter (2002, P.103) noted the misogyny Male anxiety is "displaced onto the figure of the women, caused the male subject to fear, mistrust and even loathe because by her very existence she poses an

insoluble problem to him. To put it in another word, the broadcasting department was afraid of female reporter's ambitious and competencies would put threat on male domination in this area. Therefore, there were still few female on-air voices, the male anxiety reinforces the gender gap in broadcasting at this time. After the 1970s, the female broadcasting area was shifted from the domestic affair to sex, and then public gradually accepted the female broadcasting journalists. Refer to the black women; it was until the 1980s that they were recruited in the newsroom (Childs and Storry, 2013). It was a satisfying and exciting time for female broadcasting journalists, but the beginning of post-war era made them suffer from career frustration. Television was domestic medium, as the master of domestic space, the female group earned back the attention of broadcasting newsroom. However, it posed two threats: one is that the broadcasting regarded the women as the major audience rather than the producer. The other is that with more women participated in television and more light program broadcasted, men were afraid women would gain the initiative. This growing male anxiety hindered the development of female in the broadcasting field.

#### **4. Contemporary female journalists**

It was hard to define the term "contemporary journalism", but as Scott (2005) noted that transformation from printed and broadcasting journalism to online journalism in the mid-1990s could be seen as a sign of contemporary journalism. There were three trends related female journalists at the beginning of this period. First one is inspired by post-feminism, the mainstream media presented the image of superwomen, who were bale to balance work and family, but remained sexy at the same time. The wonderful life it portrayed was a fantasy, which added more pressure on the female group. The second one is that more organizations set up to advocate gender equality in journalism. For example, Women in Journalism was founded at this stage that aimed to increase the visibility and power of female journalists, along with the National Union of Journalists to encourage them to improve personal skills (Ross, 2001). Women journalists gained more respect due to the efforts of these organizations.

Moving to the recent year, there was no doubt that female journalists played an increasingly important role in news agency in contemporary society, as a recent study conducted by the University of Oxford showed that 45% of British journalists were women in 2015, which was quite high proportion compared with other industry in the UK. For instance, there were only 33% of female medical consultants and 31% female practicing barristers in the UK (Thurman et al, 2016). Indeed, it was quite easy for women to get jobs within news industries since the 1990s. As a matter of fact, the number of women working in news agencies far outnumbered the male journalists in Finland (Zilliacus-Tikkanen, 1997). However, in term of the wage and promotion, female journalists remain underpaid and under-promoted. In terms of wages, research revealed that the salary of two in three male journalists was over £2,400 a month, in comparison to half of the women in the newsroom. Besides, women and men had the similarly proportions of rank, yet senior female journalists were often found themselves stuck in the junior management roles. In addition, the male journalists believed that they have more power in selecting the news story and deciding the focus point of the story. As argued by Chambers (2004), the market-driven contemporary journalism had two characteristics, "heavily criticism for abandoning objectivity and impartiality, and a trend of employing large numbers of women." But the data revealed that the rise of journalists did not result in the advancement of female status and salary.

#### **5. Conclusion**

This essay discussed if the journalism has become feminized over time through analyzing the situation of female journalists and the feminine features in journalism from different stages in Britain. At the early stage around the 1900s, newspapers began to rely on the advertising revenue and produced "women journalism" to get more female readers, but it was extremely difficult for black women and female broadcasting journalists to find a place in the newsroom. For those who were hired by the news agency, they were trapped in the "light" topics, as only allowed to write about the domestic affair or fashion trend. The World War II provided women journalists to write beyond family affair, but they suffered from career setbacks as men back to the absolute dominant position in news organizations. Due to the second feminist wave, not only the number of the number of women journalists were booming in Britain, but also the restrictions on the content of female journalists were decreased. However, the "Male anxiety" spread the fear that women would control the journalism, along with the financial problems, lead to a drawback to "women journalism". In contemporary society, there has been an obvious difference in the increasing number of female journalists and the level of their occupation level, as more women entered the industry, but most of them often appeared of low-status position.

There were several twists and turns in the development of British female journalists, which Women majorly played passive roles in these transformations. The male-domination was hardly changed from the beginning to end. It had become a norm for women to cluster around particular domestic genres, whereas the hard news, crime, or politics were men's areas. The influx of women in journalism was not necessarily connected to the change of journalism, men still occupy the position of decision-makers. So far, from the angel of the development of female journalists, journalism was not feminized.

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