

Newsreaders as eye candy: the hidden agenda of public service broadcasting

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Abstract: Television news adds to the wider discourses that permeate society about feminine beauty. Women still face much greater pressure than men regarding their physical appearance and body image. How they look matters, especially with regards to newsreaders and broadcasters. We investigated the opinions of journalists and audiences about the appearance of women newsreaders and found that physical appearance plays a significant role for female presenters. Also, our research suggests that where women are glamorised they are belittled in terms of intelligence and their abilities. The audience for television news are aware of the narrow versions of beauty that are being presented and note that they would like to see more diverse representations of women reading the news.

Keywords: newsreaders, gender, sexualisation, age, representation, beauty, television news, discourse.

Aims

This study investigates the physical appearance of male and female newsreaders in England with reference to age, credibility and industry response. We argue that television news implicitly promotes stereotypical physical attractiveness, particularly for women. Recent research demonstrates that television is still the main source of news for many older people (Clausen, 2004 cited in Weibel, Wissmath and Groner, 2008, p.466) and hence forms part of the discourses that permeate society (Giles, 2009, p.318).

Women looking good

Much has been written about the preoccupation with image for women in the media (see Downs and Harrison, 1985; Demarest and Allen, 2005; Wykes and Gunter, 2005) and how these reinforce dominant discourses of beauty as well as patriarchal norms. Patriarchy literally means “the rule of the father and refers to an overarching system of male dominance” (Milestone and Meyer 2012, p.10). It is where the system may oppress and exploit women and where it works in the interest of males. We relate the lack of older female newsreaders to the general system of male dominance in broadcasting industries, where older men tend to enjoy prestige compared with older women who are devalued or lose their jobs.

Discourses of beauty relate to how the media tend to portray images and notions of feminine attractiveness where women are asked to be “always young, white, beautiful and thin” (hooks 1992, p.62). Thus, the media

communicate about and give substance to narrow notions of feminine beauty. The way that female newsreaders are presented, dressed, allowed (or not) to age, all add weight to the knowledge about perceived appropriateness of acceptable feminine beauty.

This very narrow image of femininity emphasises looks (Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994, p.1177) and stereotypical notions of beauty (Kaufman, 1980:37; Furnham, Hester and Weir, 1990, p.744). It has been argued that some organisations employ women who have the ‘right look’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009, p.385). For example, former GMTV presenter Emma Crosby admitted that she probably would not have landed the job if she had been less attractive (Cavendish, 2009). Similarly, the former *Sun* editor, Kelvin MacKenzie, argues: “The whole point of TV is that it’s about image” (*Daily Mail*, 2009). We argue that specific criteria regarding image apply more to women than to men, that the sex appeal of women is exploited (Chambers, Steiner and Fleming, 2004), and that by this means patriarchal power structures are reinforced (hooks, 1994, p.86).

This emphasis on physical appearance applies to newsreaders (Engstrom and Ferri, 2000 cited in Weibel et al. 2008, p.468) and particularly female, rather than male, presenters (Cash and Brown, 1989, p.368). Appearance, especially youthful appearance, is valued more than ability (Standord, 2005, p.464). In another example, *GMTV* presenter, Fiona Phillips, (cited in Price, 2009) noted that: “Men run television. They have this thing in their heads that you have to have some young, sexy woman and an older man.” Similarly, 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.” Conor Dignam, editor of *Broadcast* magazine, said there was “an element of the beauty parade about it” (Smith, 2005). And Peter Sissons (former prime time presenter of news programmes including *BBC News at Ten*) hit out at what were dubbed ‘autocuties’ in 2008 claiming that many newsreaders had not “earned the right” to do the job (*Daily Mail*, 2008). Journalists latched onto the term ‘autocutie’ to describe female newsreaders who were perceived as succeeding through looks rather than ability (Eyre, 2006). We argue that this perception also applies more to female newsreaders and feeds male perceptions of beauty, supporting the dominant discourses that permeate wider society.

Previous studies have documented that there is discrimination against older women in broadcast institutions. The 1960s television presenter Dame Joan Bakewell said: “. . . the lack of women over a certain age is damaging. There are no grey-haired women on TV as there are grey-haired men . . . it’s like they have all somehow died off” (Moore, 2009). As women age, or have children, they lose status within news organisations (Allan, 1999, p.136). Mariella Frostrup (2009) stated: “Take a look on your TV screens and you certainly won’t see what’s erroneously referred to as a ‘minority’ audience - those over 40 - fairly represented . . . the truth is that no realistic female presenter expects her career onscreen to run very far into her 50s.”

Older women tend to be replaced by younger women (Plunkett 2010). For example, in 2006 Anna Ford left *BBC News* after 30 years, at the age of 62, saying she felt she would have been “shovelled off “ to a graveyard shift if she had carried on (Revoir and Thomas 2009). After hearing of Dimpleby’s *Question Time* contract being extended until he is 77 she said: “I wonder how these charming dinosaurs such as Mr Dimpleby and John Simpson continue to procure contracts with the BBC, when, however hard I look, I fail to see any woman of the same age, the same intelligence and the same rather baggy looks” (Walker 2011). Moira Stuart was moved off the current affairs *Sunday AM* slot and resigned six months later (Martin 2007). Although she stayed tight lipped about her removal it generated a lot of discussion about ageism among her colleagues, MPs, the public and media (Martin, 2007). For instance, John Humphrys, who anchors the *Radio 4 Today* programme in his 60s said: “It may be pure coincidence but there do seem to be remarkably few women with a few lines on their faces presenting television news or current affairs compared with the wrinkled men” (Alleyne, 2007).

Miriam O’Reilly won an employment tribunal case against the BBC on the grounds of ageism. Aged 53 she was one of four female presenters of *Countryfile*, over 40, dropped in 2008 while John Craven, aged 68, was kept on (BBC 2011). The tribunal heard allegations that O’Reilly had been asked if it was “time for Botox “and was warned to be “careful with those wrinkles when high definition comes in” (BBC 2011). Michelle Mitchell, charity director at Age UK, said: “The idea that wrinkles or grey hair can sound the death knell for the careers of female TV presenters is beyond appalling, especially in a country where over a third of the population is aged 50 and over” (BBC 2011). Selina Scott also reached a settlement with Channel Five after launching legal action for age discrimination at the age of 57. She alleged that a deal to stand in for Natasha Kaplinsky while on maternity leave failed to materialise. Instead 28-year-old Isla Traquair and Matt Barbet, 32, were appointed (Revoir, 2009). So women who are chosen to read the news reinforce

discourses of beauty in cases where women remain young and beautiful. Such beauty is perceived by men as being a desirable hallmark of femininity.

Hamermesh and Biddle (1994, p.1186) argue that there is a significant penalty for 'bad' looks amongst men. However, we suggest that when male presenters have wrinkles and let their hair go grey, they are described as having interesting or distinguished faces. Likewise, older male speakers are seen as more credible than older female speakers (Strickland, 1980 cited in Weibel et al., 2008, p.471). Hence, women may self-select themselves out of the labour force if they do not perceive themselves to be attractive (Hamermesh and Biddle 1994, p.1188).

Methodology

We conducted 167 questionnaires (not the focus of this article), eight interviews with senior broadcast journalists and 20 interviews with audiences for television news. The industry interviews consisted of a mixture of telephone and face-to-face interviews, lasting from thirty minutes to an hour. The journalists included a range of well-known presenters, editors and producers who had worked across various industries including the BBC, ITV and Al Jazeera English. The interviewees were asked their viewpoints regarding a selection of news presenters and about their own newsroom experiences.

The 20 audience interviews (10 men, 10 women) were conducted in the interviewees' homes. They began with some introductory questions and then a flexible approach was adopted in an attempt to discover their opinions about newsreaders and attractiveness.

Beautiful newsreaders and dominant discourses

The journalists and interviewees commented that newsreaders were clearly chosen because of how they looked. One female presenter (industry interviewee) said: "I think if you are a young woman you have to be reasonably easy on the eye. It is unlikely you would get the job unless you fulfilled the attractiveness requirement." One former producer of BBC and ITV news and current affairs programmes said she had worked in environments where "the thinking behind the on-screener has always been to favour the better-looking women" (industry interviewee). Similarly, a senior broadcaster and former senior producer commented: "I think looks [for female newsreaders] definitely play a part. People have been chosen as anchors because they look attractive and people who were less attractive have not been chosen" (industry interviewee). One former male producer at ITV, commented: "I can't imagine any woman who is not good-looking, or who is fat, ever being taken on as a newsreader unless she is the funniest, wittiest person" (industry interviewee). So whilst there appears to be a measure of equality in the increased numbers of female newsreaders, they actually support the dominant discourses of femininity within patriarchal power structures. Hence, broadcasting institutions are promoting idealised images of women – particularly highlighting youth and a specific version of attractiveness. By casting particular types of women as newsreaders, this is perpetuating myths and stereotypes about women. As these discourses circulate they may seep through into everyday life (Giles 2009, p. 318) and promote idealised versions of femininity. Youth and narrow versions of beauty come to be perceived as the dominant discourse for women whereas male newsreaders are focused on in terms of their ability. Hence, men tend to be valued for their abilities whereas women tend to be valued for their looks.

A former BBC newsreader (female) noted that one "chauvinistic male boss ... made no bones about hiring blondes with big tits" (industry interview). However another female BBC radio broadcaster/editor (industry interviewee) argues there is now less focus on looks: "It is an historical legacy. A man could look like a bag of spanners with an attractive woman as a sidekick. This is a hangover and not the way women are recruited. There is something cheesy and old-fashioned about that now." Another former ITV producer (industry interview, female) commented that one particular female newsreader at the BBC was highly able but did not have a prime-time slot because she failed the criteria for stereotypical attractiveness. Hence, it is harder for such presenters and those working in this medium to escape the ideological notions of femininity.

Audiences are also aware of the stereotypes regarding female newsreaders. For example, Paul said: "It's difficult to think of female newsreaders that aren't attractive and therefore, attractiveness is obviously some quality they are selecting by." Another interviewee commented: "They are chosen for their look[s] and beauty . . . You only see young female presenters." Most of the interviewees were unhappy that female newsreaders did not look realistic and thought that news, particularly, should challenge dominant gender discourses.

News presenters may take the extreme measure of plastic surgery in order to fit such stereotypical images. One senior broadcaster, who was interviewed, said: "A reporter I worked with who very much wanted to be a presenter knew she wouldn't because she had a massive conk." That reporter went on to have plastic surgery and became a presenter within two months of the operation. She provided another example: "One

reporter I worked with had big boobs. She had a breast op and lost a lot of weight. She blossomed . . . and became a presenter.” One former prime-time national newsreader that was interviewed suggested that all women felt pressure to dye their hair but such pressures are magnified when women are on television. According to another former ITV producer Botox injections, teeth whitening and veneers have also become common (industry interview). She said: “It’s like *Stepford Wives*, making everyone look bland.” We argue that it not only makes everyone look bland, but it presents the news presenters (particularly women) in a particular way and this is part of the wider discourses about femininity which permeate society. *Sky News* presenter Kay Burley has spoken about having an eye lift after turning 40 and a facelift for her 50th birthday (Allan, 2011).

Some women are either passed over or do not apply to read the news because they perceive themselves to be too unattractive. A high-profile ITV news presenter stated: “If you consider yourself not to be the best-looking woman in the world then you won’t put yourself up for it” (industry interviewee - male). Similarly, a senior female broadcaster that was interviewed noted: “Women . . . know appearance is an important part of TV so they see it as a barrier.” So these implicit values are self-imposed by female presenters. Whilst there are many women behind the scenes, one male notes that some women will “never make it in front of the screen” and some make that decision for themselves. One female national newsreader said: “It is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because women are generally not accustomed to staying on much after the age of 50 there is a feeling women do not want to” (industry interview). A former BBC senior editor (male) said: “You may get a woman who goes off because she says she’s made to feel she can go no further. Has she been told this or does she feel this herself?” It is hard for women to single-handedly challenge these dominant discourses and so, rather depressingly, some women choose not to try.

A former newsreader suggested that female presenters often signed off their own careers when they became pregnant, noting there was dislike in newsrooms regarding ‘frumpy, mother type figures’ (industry interviewee - female). She said she knew of presenters, one currently high profile, who were choosing their jobs over motherhood. Presenters returning to the job after maternity leave, (such as Natasha Kaplinsky and Kirsty Young), have felt pressure to regain their pre-pregnancy shape. Young has said it does matter how you look on screen and said: “It is horrendous. But if you’re in television, you either get out if it bothers you so much, or you try to find a way of participating in the game that is acceptable to you” (Petre, 2010). Kaplinsky appeared to have regained her pre-pregnancy figure within five months of the birth (Hale and Cable, 2009).

Some female presenters find they are sidelined when they return to work after maternity leave, although one female BBC editor (industry interviewee) suggests that “this . . . may have happened in the 1980s” but is no longer the case. Despite such assertions, women still feel that they have to conform to certain gendered norms of beauty in order to read the news on television.

The age of beauty

Whilst the audience for television news is growing older (Chambers et al., 2004), the presenters (particularly female presenters) are getting younger (industry interview - male). A female national newsreader who was interviewed said: “When I was 29 there was a whole raft of women in TV, but there aren’t that many of them left now. Some have gone into production . . . but there are not many on screen.” She said there were plenty of 30-year-olds but few in their 50s. “It’s a strange phenomenon. This is not true of men. You think this is a career, all the time you are getting better and then you look around and there are only a few of you left. Things are seriously amiss . . . 45 is probably the turning point. It is when we first start to think ‘how much longer is my career going to last?’ It doesn’t occur to men in the same way . . . It would be nice to think 35-year-olds now are allowed to carry on until they are 60. At the moment they just disappear.” Similarly, a former newsreader (industry interviewee - female) noted: “Many (women) drop off news screens when they hit 35.” She said she had been dropped from her news presenter role and replaced with a younger journalist. This clearly reinforces patriarchal norms and it establishes wider norms in society that being older and even having grey hair, are not acceptable versions of femininity. Being young becomes the only acceptable version of femininity.

Audience interviewees also noted age as a factor. Sarah said: “The average age of female newscasters has come down since I was in my twenties.” Mark noted: “None of them have grey hair . . . I don’t think I’ve ever seen a woman reading the news with grey hair.” And another interviewee noted: “You rarely see an old woman presenting the news.” However, a female national newsreader (an interviewee) suggested that if you put an ashtray on the TV to read the news and left it long enough, people would get used to the idea and: “If you had a grey-haired 60-year-old woman reading the news and left her there long enough then people would get used to it.” But she warned about the impact of “unforgiving” High Definition television.

“There’s nowhere to hide with HD. It could make it worse for women.” She added: “One day they may let women grow older on screen.” Surely, we argue, the decision-makers could challenge such dominant discourses rather than reinforcing them?

The audience interviews showed that the familiarity, trustworthiness and credibility of newsreaders -- irrespective of gender -- increased the longer they were on screen. Sarah noted: “An older presenter would be more trustworthy simply because I feel they have more experience in life.” Reginald said: “Because you’ve seen them regularly for decades and they’re a familiar face . . . that’s part of trusting them.” Mark noted: “I think it’s having silver hair . . . Old men look more trustworthy.” Similarly Donna said she was more likely to trust people if “they’ve been around for several years. You think, well they probably wouldn’t be able to do that unless they were fairly reliable.” The fact that older female newsreaders may be replaced by younger models means that the female newsreaders are generally seen as less credible and less trustworthy than their male counterparts. Again this underpins the patriarchal power structures, where women have to work within the limits of acceptable femininity which places female newsreaders at a disadvantage and subordinate to male newsreaders.

Whilst there is pressure on men regarding looks, there is more diversity for male presenters. This was highlighted by a high-profile news programme presenter (industry interviewee - male): “The criteria for women are much narrower and unimaginative. With men it’s okay to have a craggy, lived-in, interesting and good face for television. With women they have got to be good looking. Blokes can be a bit of a minger but still get on TV because the criteria are wider.” A national newsreader (industry interviewee - female) suggested as men get older they gain “authority and gravitas” whereas “it’s very difficult to be an older woman” as a news presenter. She also said: “You aren’t accepted for quite the same things . . . Everything good about a 45-year-old man is the same as for a 45-year-old woman but it isn’t valued much.” Thus, whilst male newsreaders are allowed to have grey hair and grow older, women have to remain young and physically attractive.

Veronica, one of the interviewees, noted: “They tend to hang on to older men . . . but there seem to be less older women. I think it’s rubbish . . . it’s being decided on the public’s behalf that they don’t want older women on the television . . . I would rather have somebody good at their job.” Another interviewee, Joan complained about presenters like Moira Stewart being told they’re too old “whereas the men don’t have that requirement”. So the audiences themselves would like organisations like the BBC to challenge such dominant ideology.

However, when female newsreaders have been sexualised (such as the way that Natasha Kaplinsky was presented in the wider media as well as on the television screen) they tend to be taken less seriously. It can damage their careers, pigeon-holing them into a certain type of femininity. One high-profile news programme presenter noted: “One channel that’s guilty of going down the Barbie route is Sky Sports News.” A male interviewee noted: “You can’t quite take the bimbos as seriously as I could someone who is doing the job first and getting the numbers of viewers up second.” Ratings leapt when Natasha Kaplinsky first appeared on Channel 5 with more than 800,000 viewers tuning in. This was dubbed the ‘Kaplinsky effect’ (Thomas, 2009) However, it grew by 25 per cent when she was on maternity leave and dropped on her return. Miriam O’Reilly has drawn attention to the fact that viewers are tuning in for older presenters with five million viewers for *Rip Off Britain* with Gloria Hunniford, Angela Rippon and Jennie Bond, “. . . broadcasters are finding that, surprise, surprise, viewers are watching,” she said (Barnicoat and Spencer, 2011). This could lead to dismissive attitudes towards some female newsreaders. “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 that dumbs it down. Just loses credibility in my mind.”

Glamourising female newsreaders actually annoyed some audience members. “I do feel slightly irritated and slightly offended when news presenters look very like women who are put there to attract the male viewers” (Jean, audience interviewee). The male newsreaders appear to be better respected as professionals compared with women. Audience interviewees perceived some female presenters as being there to ‘look good’ rather than serious newsreaders. Another interviewee, Yasmin, noted: “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 . . . She’s labelled as being unintelligent or lightweight because she’s younger.” So the focus on physical appearance promotes a particularly demeaning version of femininity. This adds to our argument about physical appearance maintaining patriarchal power structures. Other discourses come into play here – where those female newsreaders who are sexualised are belittled in terms of their intellect and abilities in relation to male newsreaders.

PSB and industry change

One female national newsreader (industry interview) said: “There’s a huge swathe of women over 50 or 60 who hardly ever see themselves reflected on TV. It’s sad and bad and slightly mad . . . We do not see many women on TV who are not in the first or second flush of youth . . . It’s harder to be a presenter now.” Hence, she disagrees with a national producer/editor (also a female industry interviewee) who suggested that things had become easier for women. One former senior editor (a male industry interviewee) noted that whilst the BBC does take representation seriously “it takes time to be implemented”. However, an existing producer/editor (who still works at the BBC) commented: “The BBC is the most enlightened you’ll get anywhere” and that “it is more important what you do than what you look like” (industry interview). A senior broadcaster was more pessimistic “Without an open discussion about it, I can’t see how it will change.” Overall, we suggest that industry changes have yet to make an impact regarding older female news presenters. However the BBC themselves note that they are “committed to fair selection in every aspect of our work” and will increase the training regarding selection for new appointments” (BBC, 2011). They were aware of the “need to have a broad range of presenters on air – including older women” (BBC, 2009a).

Conclusion

Our study suggests that female newsreaders are still selected on the basis of their physical attractiveness and that there is still discrimination against older women in the industry. We found that when female newsreaders were glamourised, they were taken less seriously and the audience assumed they were less intelligent than their male counterparts. We also found that women appear to self-select themselves out of becoming presenters, based on their own assessment of their physical attractiveness. Women news presenters seem to ‘vanish’ from TV screens as they age and some resort to cosmetic procedures.

The lack of women with grey hair, compared with men, is worrying as it supports the trend that women are not allowed to age, but have to remain young and physically attractive. Similarly, the belittling of women who are young and attractive is also worrying as it bases intelligence on superficial looks.

Hence, we argue that the way female newsreaders are presented, supports and reinforces patriarchal norms and specific discourses of gender, despite the advances made by feminism in the 20th and 21st centuries. They also reinforce the dominant (male) discourses of beauty which provides limited role models for women. The pressure on female newsreaders to look physically attractive and young is part of the wider patriarchal power structures that dominate our society, as well as media organisations. We wonder, therefore, whether we will ever see a woman with grey hair reading the news.

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