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Deirdre O'Neill, Heather Savigny, Victoria Cann

**Institutions:** University of Huddersfield, Bournemouth University, University of East Anglia

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## **Women Politicians in the UK Press: Not seen and not heard?**

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### **Abstract**

*This article asks questions about the ways in which female politicians are depicted in press coverage. Previous research has explored the ways in which female politicians are constructed as 'other' from the male politician norm (Van Zoonen, 2006), where 'men were taken to stand for the whole human population' (Gill, 2007: 9). Other work has shown that coverage emphasises their appearance (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011) or femininity (Harmer and Wring, 2013). But there has been less research on the visibility of women in politics in our media: women not only need to be involved in politics, they need to be seen to be doing political work. Through analysis of British press coverage using samples from the last 20 years, we examine the relative visibility of women MPs compared to men, the extent to which their voice is heard, and the context of the coverage. We argue this may well contribute to deterring women from taking part in Parliamentary politics.*

Ideally, a healthy democratic system should be representative of the society it serves: first, because of what that conveys and symbolizes to an electorate about citizenship and who is valued in society; second, so that issues pertinent to all members of society have a greater chance of being aired and addressed by our politicians; and, third, so that society will benefit from the widest possible range of skills and experience being utilised in the governance of the country.

Arguably, in the wake of the expenses scandal and cynicism about our parliamentary representatives and the electoral system, in the UK the issue of parliamentary representation is more vital than ever. It is well documented both in academic research and in the press, that within the British context potential voters feel alienated from the democratic process, believing politicians to be out of touch with the lived experiences of ordinary people (e.g. Dunleavy *et al*, 2010; Mason, 2013). For women, the gap between gender representation in Parliament and their numbers in the general UK population remains a cause of concern (see recent APPG Women in Parliament report, 2014).

Although women are better represented in British parliament than ever before, progress has been extremely slow. From 1945 until 1987, the number of women MPs fluctuated mildly, but it failed to reach above 30. As a result of the UK 2015 General Election 29% of MPs in the House of Commons are women (up from 23% in 2010). the highest proportion ever. However, this figure tells us that women comprise just 22.6% of the total number of MPs, yet women are 52% of the population. This means that the UK ranks 65th out of the 70 top ranking countries of the percentage of women in parliament, below Iraq and Afghanistan (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2014). Some academics argue the numbers of women in politics are not rising fast enough. Murray argues quotas for women (2010) and for men (2012) should be an option and, as has been noted (Lovenduski, 2012), at the present rate it will take over 100 years for women to achieve descriptive<sup>1</sup> representational parity.

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<sup>1</sup> where descriptive representation refers to the actual numbers of women in Parliament, and substantive representation refers to the way in which women's interests are articulated and represented. This distinction is useful as it highlights the differing ways in which women and their interests may be represented. It also reminds us that not all women may represent women's interests, and that men also may well substantively represent women [see Childs and Krook, 2006]

Since Parliamentary politics does not operate in a vacuum, we argue that in order to make sense of the descriptive under-representation of women in British Parliament, we also need to consider the ways in which women are depicted in the British media. Thompson (1999) argues that the term 'mass' no longer applies to the ways in which we engage with media; that different audiences have different interpretations of media messages and that reception can be different from producer intent. He also draws our attention to the circulation of symbolic forms, and how these 'symbolic' forms represent underlying trends. For the purposes of our study, we reflect on the symbolism associated with the ways in which female politicians appear, or not, in our newspaper coverage. This in turn highlights the ways in which dominant power structures (in this instance patriarchal) are negotiated and contested, and become reconstituted. In what follows we explore the ways in which female politicians are represented in the UK press, in particular their visibility and voice, as well as the context of press coverage.

## **Background**

Research has shown that women tend to be less interested than men in politics (Jennings and Niemi, 1981; Verba *et al*, 1997) and less knowledgeable (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). Counteracting this gendered lack of interest, there is also evidence, in the US context at least, that women can become more politically engaged by the inclusion of women candidates (Atkeson, 2003; Verba *et al*, 1997). While one British study did *not* find that women were more likely than men to be mobilised by the numbers of women in Parliament, it did, at the very least, establish that the presence of more women in Parliament has a positive effect on *both* men and women's perceptions of the democratic process (Karp and Banducci, 2008).

At the same time, women are not necessarily hammering on Parliament's doors to become candidates. Attracting them to the political arena and retaining them can prove problematic. The senior Conservative MP in charge of candidate selection, deputy party chairman Sarah Newton, has said it was much harder to get women to stand for parliament than men (Rigby, *Financial Times*, 25 April 2014). The sexism that women have experienced within Parliament has been historically documented (Castle, 1984, in Cochrane, 2012). And a report by the Fawcett Society has detailed that such sexism in parties is a major factor in women standing down (Watt, 2013). This gendered culture is compounded by women's treatment in the media. A recent APPG Women in Parliament (2014) report argued that a survey of candidates cited media intrusiveness as a key factor in discouraging them from standing. Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party Sarah Newton has singled out the UK press in particular. She argued that a hostile press was a major deterrent (Rigby, *Financial Times*, 25 April 2014).

Modern-day politics is conducted in a highly mediatized environment. It is rare for most citizens to attend political meetings and experience politics and politicians first hand. Thus the media play a key role in the way in which women might come to perceive the opportunities that they have to become politicians, and how women voters – and all voters - perceive how they are represented in the UK's Parliamentary process.

Research has shown that, in general, there are fewer news items about women's interests or featuring or quoting women as 'experts' (Ross and Carter, 2011; *Women in Journalism*, 2012). Indeed, Howell (2014) has found that the ratio of male to female experts on radio and TV news programmes to be 4:1, a figure that has not changed in two years of monitoring broadcasts. This clearly has implications for female politicians – as political experts – in getting exposure.

The background to our research then is that not only are women marginalised in their public life, but *if* and *when* they are represented in public life, this too is a space where they are marginalized. This is a problem because if women do not see their likeness reflected in politics, why would they wish to take part, either as voters, or as elected representatives?

### ***Women politicians and the media***

'Blair's Babes' was the 1997 *Sun* headline that epitomised a media approach towards women which focuses upon women as objects, defined only in relation to men, not worthy of media attention in their own right.<sup>2</sup> Women are rendered worthy of media attention as subjects of a 'male gaze' (cf. Mulvey, 1975) rather than as expression of political voice. As Van Zoonen (2006) and Harmer and Wring (2013) observe, female politicians are more often represented as celebrities; newspapers and magazines pore over their personal lives, photographing them in evening gowns, emphasising their desirability (or lack thereof). This is in stark contrast to their male counterparts who tend to be represented with reference to their political viewpoints. In the run up to the 2010 election, not only were women largely absent from the election campaign (Harmer and Wring, 2013; Ross *et al*, 2013) but where women were discussed, pages were devoted to 'leader's wives' – women as glamorous adjuncts of men rather than autonomous or indeed political beings in their own right (Higgins and Smith, 2013).

In a wide-ranging discourse and content analysis, Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen (2011) analysed the ways in which female politicians are constructed in the press across Europe. They focused on France, Italy, Spain and the UK. They found that frames are constructed that focus on women as mothers, and the 'personal', which overshadows the representation of the parliamentary political. While feminists have been at pains to demonstrate that the

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<sup>2</sup> 'Blair's babes' refers to the female MPs and parliamentary candidates in the Labour party at the time that Tony Blair was the Labour leader.

personal sphere is also political, at the same time, it is perhaps ironic, or somewhat symbolic of historical and contemporary gendered relations of our society that the media re-construct the focus of the political woman to be primarily concerned with the personal. Garcia-Blanco and Wahl Jorgensen do, however, find cultural variations, and these cultural variations were more significant than the political leanings of the newspaper. Notably, in the UK reporting was much more likely to focus on clothing and issues of sartorial elegance - one has only to think of the periodic press attention to Home Secretary's Theresa May's clothes and shoes - whereas the Spanish and Italian press focused on issues of motherhood.

Baird (2009) condemns coverage that casts women as decorative, not substantive, which she says is sexist precisely because it distracts from women's political ideas. This fascination with the personal and superficial continues to undermine women politicians' contribution to public life and is a regular cause of complaint by women politicians (Ross, 2002; Ross and Comrie, 2011; APPG Women in Parliament, 2014; O'Neill and Savigny, 2014). Speaking about the difficulties of attracting women candidates, Sarah Newton, Deputy Chairman of the Conservative Party in charge of candidate selection says, 'Women are trivialised in the media and women are deterred by what they see. [...] If I could wish for one of the barriers to be removed, it's the press.' (Rigby, *Financial Times*, 26 April 2014). And

Women therefore tend to be constructed as feminine (in a narrow understanding of what femininity looks like) and female politicians are often constructed as 'other' from the male politician norm (Van Zoonen, 2006). This further exacerbates the 'male as norm' problem, where 'men were taken to stand for the whole human population' (Gill, 2007a: 9). Women politicians in the media are in a 'double bind' (Campus, 2013); not only are they expected to conform to the narrow ideals femininity, but through this they are unable to conform to the



male 'norm' of what it means to be a politician. The Habermasian public sphere is an arena that is widely conceptualised in the academic literature to characterise the environment where the media and politics interact. Yet as has been observed, this is a highly gendered sphere, with politics assumed to be the preserve of men (Fraser, 1990). This reflects a long history of political public life as a male domain. The Athenian idea of public and private is one that has long been central to politics (from the days of Aristotle and Plato where politics was the reserve of public life). Second wave feminism tells us that the personal can also be viewed as the political. However, this reminds us that women can not only experience politics in the realm of the personal, but also the reverse: women can (and should) play a role in the public sphere. Recent feminist scholars have explored the ways in which the contemporary age can be understood as 'postfeminist' (McRobbie, 2009, Tasker and Negra, 2007). This can be understood to have a profound impact on how women both experience politics as well as how are represented when 'doing' politics within the UK. This is because it has been suggested that the distinctly neoliberal context provided under postfeminism (Gill and Scharff, 2011) leads to the pursuit of self-making rather than collectivity (Negra, 2009). Meanwhile discourses of postfeminism also posit that feminism has 'had its day', and thus the aims of feminism have been realised. Women are perceived to have more choice and experience parity with their male counterparts; they are said to be able to 'have it all' (Negra, 2009). Women's struggles in both the private and the public sphere have therefore been rendered invisible – the problem of the individual rather than the collective. Furthermore, this move toward neoliberalism can also help to explain apathy toward the political system, and women's disengagement from politics more broadly. This is significant as this time period, from the end of the second-wave, through the third and arguably post-feminist stage, provides the context for the analysis provided in this paper.

Van Zoonen's (1997) seminal feminist media studies has paved the way for critically analysing women's mediated representation in its wider cultural and systemic context, an

approach that drew attention to the processes of production and consumption. There have been wide-ranging studies, which highlight that fewer than a quarter of subjects in the news are female, and women have a limited role in news production (WACC, 2010; Women in Journalism 2012). Franks (2013) found that women are under-represented in certain fields of news production, politics being one of them. That women are less likely to produce the news has significant consequences for its construction. For example, female politicians are more likely to be constructed as 'outsiders' to the public sphere (Lister, 1997).

More recent research on the coverage of women MPs in UK newspapers found that women appeared to be receiving a more negative press, both compared to men and compared to previous decades (O'Neill and Savigny, 2014). But even allowing for the argument that politicians of whatever gender must accept inevitable negative coverage in a press that plays a key role in holding politicians to account, there is evidence that the focus of coverage is frequently different for female politicians, in a way that would be inconceivable for male politicians. For example, a front-page strapline in *The Times* in 2013, 'Why I chose politics over having kids', about Labour MP Gloria De Piero, was one that is unlikely ever be written about a man in public life (Midgley, *The Times*, 15 October 2013) (given the associations being made with women and the domestic realm) Ironically, the article opened with some sympathy towards De Piero and other female MPs for the sexist comments and attitudes they have to contend with. However, the focus of the article was not about De Piero's 'decision' regarding children; it was largely about her tough upbringing and why she felt passionate about poverty and sexism in her new role as Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities. In other words, the strapline was a distortion, with an underlying message that suggests successful political women are deficient in some way, substituting the 'normal' ambition to have children with political ambition, a dichotomy that has been theorised as pervasive within postfeminist discourses of 'having it all' (Negra, 2009). Indeed, the fact that

De Piero was questioned about children at all in the feature is revealing. The acid test is to ask ourselves the question, 'would this happen to a male politician?'

Some of this type of reporting does not go unchallenged however, either by society or some sections of the media. The *Daily Mail* earned the condemnation of MPs earlier in the year for its coverage of the new women in the cabinet on the 'Downing Street catwalk'. 'The newspaper referred to the employment minister Esther McVey as "thigh-flashing Esther" on its front page, before examining the hair, legs, bag, shoes, dress and makeup of nine ministers on a double-page spread. ....The Conservative former cabinet minister Cheryl Gillan ... said she was appalled at the treatment of her female colleagues. Speaking on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, she said: "I sat at the breakfast table with my male colleague, saying I cannot believe we have all these exciting politicians into key positions and what people are talking about it is what they are wearing, their makeup, how tight their jacket is and what their shoes look like. I think it's just insulting. In the same way, when I left office, I was very cross with the media treatment.'" (Mason, *The Guardian*, 16 July 2014).

While these examples are ones that have courted controversy, nonetheless they also serve to reinforce a dominant trope: that the British press treats female politicians differently, focusing on appearance and clothes in particular (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011; Harmer and Wring, 2013; Ross, 2002; Ross and Comrie, 2011). Campus (2013), in her work on women political leaders, highlights the tensions between retaining femininity and credibility in the choices women make in clothing. But while women may be disadvantaged and undermined by the media's fixation on their appearance, the wider fashion choices that women can make can offer a site of control. No doubt some women without the time or

inclination to negotiate the tensions within their clothing options will envy the limited 'uniform' of authority and power available to men, the well cut suit and tie, but in this visual age when manipulation of image is vital for those in public life, sartorial choices can be central to managing the public persona and attracting media attention in the first place (Ross, 2002). The attention paid to Margaret Thatcher's hair and voice, when she first became Prime Minister in the UK, is a case in point. But strategies to capture the media spotlight in this way are risky, according to Ross and Comrie (2011), since they can undermine a woman's otherwise important and serious input into political life. This critique, of course, is one that suggests that clothes themselves cannot be political, a position that has been contested by scholars over the years (Warner, 2014; Johnson and Lennon, 1999) and one that deserves further academic attention.

So for women's contributions to politics to be noticed at all, they must receive media coverage. In a mediatized world, no coverage is a form of political death. 'Unless the media reports your contribution, your opinions – your existence – then for all perceptive purpose you do not exist.' (Media consultant Nancy Woodhall, a founding editor of *USA Today*, in Braden, 1996, p8). Media play a key role in what is symbolically important (cf. Thomson, 1995) and it is this issue of relative *visibility* of women politicians in the press that this study focuses on, by comparing the frequency and type of coverage women in politics are receiving in UK national newspapers, comparing samples of coverage over the last twenty years, and comparing this frequency with that of male politicians

### **Our Study**

Our study is therefore less concerned with what women are doing in the political arena, but rather what they are *seen* to be doing. To investigate this we focus on four key areas of inquiry: is the quantity of coverage proportionate to the number of women in Parliament? How often do we hear the voices of female politicians in the press compared to male

politicians? What kind of coverage do female politicians receive? Has coverage changed over time? We analyse samples of coverage over a 20-year period: 1992, 2002 and 2012. Underpinning this analysis, we argue, are questions about the discourses of power that are negotiated in our daily politics. We suggest political power is structurally and culturally located in interactive and iterative overlapping relationships. First, we see power located in the relationship between media and politics; second, power is underpinned by a wider set of patriarchal capitalist structures that position the relationship between the media and politics. So if we want to understand the nature of the relationship between media and politics we argue that we have to undertake a gendered analysis of the treatment of and the attention given to political figures in the news media. In seeking to expose these underlying structures, we sought to address the following questions:

Q1. In all articles mentioning MPs, what percentage are male and what percentage female and how does this relate proportionally to their representation in parliament?

Q2. In all articles mentioning MPs, what is the ratio of male to female politicians' quotes, and how does this relate proportionally to their representation in parliament?

Q3. What is the focus of coverage (i.e. Personal? Political? Other events?)

- and in what ways have the above changed over the last 20 years?

## **Method**

We were seeking to provide a snapshot of trends over time and so we chose three periods of ten years apart, over a 20-year period, which were also characterised by different political persuasions in government: 2012 (Coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats), 2002 (Labour), and 1992 (Conservative).

Seven UK national newspapers (dailies and their Sunday equivalents where appropriate) were used in this study: 'red-top' titles *The Sun* and the *Daily Mirror*; 'mid-market' titles the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*; and 'quality' titles, *The Guardian*, *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. As well as representing the main sections of the newspaper market, the chosen newspapers cover the political spectrum in the mainstream press. Original newspapers were examined, or microfilms of the originals, from the British Newspaper Library.

For each year, a 'newsweek' sample was analysed, moving from May through to November, with data from each day of the week being recorded once over the seven month period. So, for example, *The Times* from Monday 8 June was used in 1992, and the *Daily Mirror* on Tuesday 7 July 1992, and so on. The initial order of newspapers was randomly chosen, and then the same sequence was analysed during each of the periods in the data collection. In 2002 the *Sunday Times* was used on Sunday 12 May, the *Daily Mirror* on Monday 10 June and so on.

In this study we noted stories that primarily focused on Members of Parliament and recorded the gender of the politician; whether the story was primarily about politics (for example, policies, Parliament, a politician speaking about other politicians), about wider society or events, but featuring politicians, (such as the presentation of a prize or opening of a building), or primarily personal, focusing on personal aspects of their lives, or appearance, or qualities (for example, comments about clothes were included in this category, as well as short items showing a [male] politician exercising and commenting on their sweaty features, or a senior politician using Zen Buddhism to cope with stress). Where a politician was quoted, their gender was also noted.

## **Results**

**Q1. In all articles mentioning MPs, what percentage are male and what percentage female and how does this relate proportionally to their representation in parliament?**

(Total of 542 articles in sample).

YEAR	Total	Male	Female	
	<b>542</b>	<b>86.7%</b> <b>(470)</b>	<b>14.2%</b> <b>(77)</b>	<b>% women in parliament</b>
1992	147	91.2% (134/147)	8.8% (13/147)	9.2%
2002	199	83.4% (166/199)	16.6% (33/199)	17.9%
2012	196	86.7% (170/196)	16.3% (32/196)	22%

In 1992, 9.2% of British MPs were women and the quantity of their coverage in the press (8.8%) was therefore roughly proportionate to the numerical representation of women in Parliament. We can see a similar situation in 2002 when 17.9% of MPs were women, and they received 16.6% of press coverage. However, when we move forward to 2012, we witness a decline in the quantity of coverage in the press compared to the quantity of women in Parliament (22% women; 16.3% press coverage). The trend highlighted here is that women are becoming less visible over the sampled decades.

**Q2. In all articles mentioning MPs, what is the ratio of male to female politicians' quotes, and how does this relate proportionally to their representation in parliament?**

(Total of 204 direct quotes in our three newsweek samples)

YEAR	Total	Male	Female	% females in

				<b>parliament</b>
	204	87.3% (178)	15.2% (31)	
1992	61	80.3% (49/61)	19.7% (12/61)	9.2%
2002	61	90.1% (55/61)	9.8% (6/61)	17.9%
2012	82	86.6% (71/82)	13.4% (11/82)	22%

In the same way as coverage – and thus, visibility - appears to have decreased, women are being quoted less often than 20 years ago, when there were fewer women in parliament, as well as fewer female being quoted in proportion to their current representation in parliament. We argue that hearing from women directly is important, firstly, in terms of raising their profile; hearing from them is inextricably linked with the idea of overall visibility and respect for their views. It signals that what they have to say is important. In addition, a direct quote is less likely to be distorted or misrepresented, even more significant in a press that studies have shown to display sexist tendencies in terms of reporting women (Gill, 2007; Ross and Carter, 2011) and women politicians in particular (Harmer and Wring, 2013, O’Neill and Savigny, 2014; Ross and Comrie, 2011; Ross *et al*, 2013; Van Zoonen, 2006).

**Q3. What is the focus of coverage (i.e. political, society, personal?)**

YEAR	MALE			FEMALE		
	Political story	Story about an event or society	Personal story	Political story	Story about an event or society	Personal story



1992 (Men are mentioned 134 times, women 13 times)	68.7% (92/134)	19.4% (26/134)	3% (4/134)	46.1% (6/13)	53.8% (7/13)	0% (0/13)
2002 (Men are mentioned 166 times, women 33 times)	72.9% (121/166)	12% (20/166)	14.5% (24/166)	63.6% (21/33)	21.2% (7/33)	15.1% (5/33)
2012 (Men are mentioned 170 times, and women 33 times)	58.2% (99/170)	26.5% (45/170)	5.3% (9/170)	53.1% (17/32)	40.6% (13/32)	9.3% (3/32)

Male MPs appear in more straightforwardly political stories over each of the years sampled, and on overall average, 11% more often. In contrast, female politicians appear in more stories related to wider society or events, about 14% more often on average. 2002 saw a big rise in personal stories for *all* politicians, male or female (indeed the proportion for both genders is similar). This could be related to the trend towards personalising the coverage of politicians identified by Langer (2011), or even the celebritisation of politicians (Street, 2004). However, by 2012, the gap between women and men with regards to a personal focus is widening. While it could be argued that, as women emerge into the political arena, they are increasingly being subject to the sort of scrutiny that leads to personal stories being published, it is nevertheless significant that the personal focus, relatively speaking, is almost *double* that of male politicians. This suggests that gender is increasingly dictating the focus

on the personal by 2012. If this trend proves to continue, we would appear to be going backwards in terms of attitudes towards women in politics. This temporal fluctuation and the increase in the focus on the female personal leads us to reflect upon the way in which female politicians are reported. While the objectification of women in the media is nothing new, postfeminist accounts point us to the increasingly narrow ways in which women are constructed in and by the media (Cf. Van Zoonen, 1997; Banyard, 2010). To make sense of this data we therefore need to look more closely at what is actually being said.

## **Discussion**

First, it is important to stress that our results reveal a mixed picture. Refreshingly, in all the years sampled, a great deal of routine coverage of female politicians, particularly senior ministers, was surprisingly straightforward, focusing on reports about policy. In 1992, Secretary of State for Health, Virginia Bottomley's stance on the dentist strike provides a useful example. In 'taking on' the unions, this Tory politician was praised by the right-wing press for her stance and conviction. We also found that in 1992 former Prime Minister Thatcher was presented as a much-missed politician, particularly in comparison to the then Chancellor, Norman Lamont, who was presented as incompetent. Such was the dislike for Lamont that the headline for the *Express* was 'Lamont flops on his big day' (9 October 1992).

In 2012, the (then) Culture, Media and Sport Minister Maria Miller, who was also Equalities Minister, was in the news a great deal. This is because of the 2012 London Olympics, and the fact that she has been concerned that one of the legacies should be better coverage of women's sports. Miller wrote to broadcasters and, as well as congratulating them on their coverage, asked that they give more prominence to women's sports coverage, which she believed was marginalised in the schedules, if covered at all (Wright, *Independent*, 15 September 2012). In addition, Miller had to deal with the Leveson Inquiry into press

standards and the subsequent lengthy debate about how to regulate the press. Most of this coverage could not be described as sexist.

### *Frames and stereotypes*

However, periodically, UK newspapers revert to misogynist gendered stereotypes or frames. In addition to the objectification of women MPs as primarily decorative (Harmer and Wring, 2013; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2011), our study highlighted other gendered approaches to the coverage of women politicians. For example, despite mostly neutral coverage, Maria Miller does not escape entirely unscathed from being undermined because of her gender. Quentin Letts wrote a Parliamentary sketch in the *Daily Mail* on 6 Sept 2012 where the Secretary of State for Culture was said to have 'squeezed her knees together and blushed with the excitement of it all.' Letts reduces a senior minister to a girly ingénue.

As well as this infantilisation of female politicians, there is a tendency to portray them as weak and emotional. For instance, the *Daily Mail* carried a story headlined 'Women minister "reduced to tears"...but one has a smile on her face' (Martin, *Daily Mail*, 6 September 2012), accompanied by an unflattering picture of ex-Environment Secretary Caroline Spelman with the caption 'upset', and a full length flattering one of Anna Soubry, promoted to health minister, captioned 'Rapid rise: Former TV girl Anna Soubry'. The 'girl' in question is a mature and experienced woman of 53. The story proceeded to report on 'rumours' that three women wept when demoted in a reshuffle.

And while there was little routine, overtly hostile treatment of women, such attitudes clearly continue to exist on some papers, albeit suppressed, only to occasionally bubble up as breath-taking examples of personal and sexist attacks, particularly if newspaper editors or proprietors perceive their interests to be threatened in any way. For instance, on Friday 5 October 2012, the *Sun* carried a lead story headlined: 'Leftie Hattie, 62, from Camberwell makes a right tit of herself', alongside an unflattering picture of Labour deputy leader

Harriet Harman. This is because Harman had the audacity to satirise the *Sun*'s Page 3 topless models by describing herself as 'Hattie, 62, of Camberwell ...with today's news in briefs' in a speech at the Labour Party Conference (Schofield, *Sun*, 5 October 2012). The article also says she 'appeared to suggest...that a man's place is in the kitchen' (Harman said nothing of the sort in her speech) and quoted a Page 3 model claiming that Harman was 'belittling' and 'patronising' Page 3 models, while topless model Peta Todd, labelled Harman a well-to-do 'whinge-bag'. Thus Harman was presented through yet another reductionist frame, the hypocritical and privileged hard-line feminist, who, in her objection to Page 3, was trying to prevent other women earning an honest buck as topless models. However, little was mentioned about displaying passive and posed, semi-naked young women in a 'family' newspaper to make a buck for Rupert Murdoch, and the effects this might have on how women are viewed in wider society. Harman's views were, in effect, dismissed as those of an out-of-touch, ideologically-driven, posh woman who needs to lighten up – a caricature that feminists have become familiar with.

While some of these frames, such as emotional fragility (failures of femininity) or humourless harridan (failures of feminism), seem to be at odds with each other, they are all tactically employed in different situations in the service of undermining women in public life.

#### *The focus of coverage*

With regards to the context of press coverage, this study found there is a greater emphasis for women MPs on the personal and wider societal issues or events. They appear in fewer stories concerned with the 'business' of politics, dealing with Parliament or policies, or supporting or attacking other politicians. As found in previous studies (Van Zoonen, 2006), women politicians continue to be 'othered'. What is more, this is combined with a tone that is becoming increasingly hostile towards women over time and compared to men (O'Neill and Savigny, 2014).

However, these types of 'softer' contexts can also provide opportunities for women to make the personal political and raise wider issues that can be indirectly brought on to the political stage, in a way that may connect with the electorate. In addition, while some of this focus is undoubtedly sexist, and contributes to undermining and trivialising women's contributions to politics, such attention can also provide a limited means of image management and media attention for some women.

In our 2012 sample, one backbench female politician guaranteed herself press coverage by appearing on popular TV 'reality' programme *I'm a Celebrity: Get Me Out Of Here*. In doing so, Conservative MP Nadine Dorries took the celebrityisation of politics to a new level and was criticised in the press for neglecting her role as an MP. That said, West and Orman (2002: 112) have pointed out celebrity politics may 'reinvigorate a political process that often stagnates', and certainly Dorries claimed her aim was to popularise and promote politics (Cardo, 2014). Whether or not one shares this view, what is clear is that Dorries played an active role in embracing celebrity culture, with all the attendant press coverage, to achieve her ends. Clearly politicians of either gender are not entirely passive in the media presentation of either themselves or their politics. But this does not negate the point that female politicians are proportionately presented more often in stories where the focus is not on the political.

#### *Visibility and voice*

This personal focus becomes more significant when juxtaposed with the other apparent trends found here, namely that both compared to men and over the last few decades, women are being seen and heard less frequently compared to their descriptive (actual) numbers in Parliament. Conversely, men tend to be over-represented in the press compared to their descriptive numbers in Parliament, both in terms of how often they are the focus of articles, and how often they are directly quoted.

By hearing less of women's views in their own words, the language of politics becomes more male in style and tone. Yet women voters – indeed all voters - may relate better to the way that women MPs speak about and present policies and ideas. Speaker of the Commons John Bercow has blamed the combative and rowdy tone of political exchanges in the Commons for women leaving politics and for widespread disengagement with and disapproval of the political process and politicians (Coates, *The Times*, 18 April 2014). In addition, direct quotes are less likely to be less subject to misreporting than indirect quotes, and confer authority on the speaker. Direct quotes signify that what the speaker has to say is important. The trend identified here suggests that citizens are having significantly less opportunities to hear what women have to say in their own words.

Combined with rendering women less visible, these trends are arguably more pernicious than overt sexist coverage, which can at least be highlighted and challenged. 'Bias is easy to spot,' said Ben Bradlee, former *Washington Post* editor, 'except for the bias of omission' (in Braden, 1996, p2). As we have argued above, in this mediatized political age, to struggle to be seen and heard is a form of political death.

Given their relative low media profile, women – as seen in the Dorries example - may feel under more pressure to use methods outside of the purely political to attract media attention, a strategy not without its hazards (Ross and Comrie, 2011). Whatever the original source of this focus on the non-political or appearance, women are likely to find themselves in a bind about whether to attempt to capitalise on this means of obtaining coverage, or to opt out, risking media invisibility. In our sound-bite and visual culture, where politics is 'packaged' to the electorate (Franklin, 2004; Louw, 2005), all politicians – male and female - will endeavour to influence the media to some degree to manage how they are constructed and presented to the electorate. But the trends here suggest that this is more difficult for women.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the coverage of MPs in the press amounts to a media construct that appears to reinforce the notion that the 'serious business' of politics is primarily male, and which favours the reporting of the achievements and views of the male politician.

## **Conclusion**

Our data reveals a mixed picture of how women are represented in newspapers in the past and present. It is fair to say that routine coverage is relatively straightforward most of the time. Nor is the press homogenous in its approach to women politicians. Some journalists challenge and condemn what they perceive to be sexist depictions. It would be interesting to carry out further studies that explore possible gendered differences in political coverage between newspapers, or to focus on different types of journalism, such as Parliamentary sketch writing, where such journalists, mostly male, are granted a degree of latitude and subjectivity in their descriptions of politicians.

Nevertheless, the nature of the coverage of female politicians in the UK remains problematic, with the focus for women, by 2012 at least, differing from that of their male counterparts, with them appearing more often in non-political stories and a greater emphasis on the 'personal', though of course men do not escape this entirely (Labour leader Ed Milliband's treatment in the press has hardly been kind to his appearance or personal qualities). While women have made some progress in their descriptive (numerical) representation in politics, their interests remain narrowly defined and homogenised around traditional patriarchal views of what women are and what they should be. The coverage fails to reflect a diversity of women's interests and experiences (across race and class for example, cf. hooks, 1991). Women in politics are still 'othered'. Our findings also suggest there is little that challenges the wider patriarchal structures which underpin the ways in

which media and politics are 'played out' on the public stage and which underpin the production of journalism, where men continue to dominate political reporting (Franks, 2013).

Thus, while most coverage is not routinely misogynist, the press does resort to periodic breakouts of covert and overt sexist coverage, ranging from the childish to downright nasty, which focusses on appearance rather than ability, or reduces women to stereotypes such as inexperienced 'girls', sexy pin-ups or harridans. Many women politicians and voters may perceive such coverage as demeaning, offensive or intrusive, giving some credence to the views expressed by Sarah Newton on the difficulties of attracting women candidates (Rigby, *Financial Times*, 25 April 2104) or in retaining women MPs (APPG Women in Parliament report, 2014).

Ironically, because the numbers of women in Parliament in 1992 were so lamentably low, female politicians are likely to seem more visible to the average reader than 20 years ago. But in relative terms, the opposite appears to be happening: they are under-represented in the press compared to 10 or 20 years ago, and this is of real concern, since it can be more pernicious than obvious sexism or prejudice, which can at least be highlighted and discussed. Any gains in parliamentary representation by women – and they are painfully slow in themselves – are being undermined by their decreased visibility and voice in the UK press. If the apparent trends found here can be further validated in future studies, they present serious hurdles for women wishing to enter public life. As well as the risk of having their work trivialised or undermined, our findings seem to suggest that women are at greater risk of political 'death' than men in politics through a press coverage (or lack of coverage) that simply omits to cover their views and achievements to the same degree as that of male politicians. In this context, gaining media attention by means outside of the purely political – such as exploiting newspapers' enthusiasm for pictures of women



politicians looking attractive or glamorous – can seem like a means of resistance to the real threat of political annihilation by omission. However, those not able or willing to play this game – and many would argue that women should not have to resort to such measures - face major challenges in gaining press recognition. All of which combine to marginalise women in politics and suggest they are less serious political players.

As one door to power is slowly prised open for women wishing to enter public life, through slow but steadily increased numbers in Parliament, it appears that another is being closed on allowing them to be *seen* and *heard in* public life. The apparent trends highlighted here are likely to have serious repercussions for women considering entering politics, and on the electorate's perception of women's contribution to politics, and who is valued in our society. We therefore call on much more research to be undertaken in this area, not only in the UK and the West, but also globally. It is only with the requisite knowledge *how* female politicians are represented that we can look for models of fair and equal representation, as well as calling for change.

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