

Book Review: Women and Journalism

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*In many countries, the majority of high profile journalists and editors remain male. Although there have been considerable changes in the prospects for women working in the media in the past few decades, women are still noticeably in the minority in the top journalistic roles, despite making up the majority of journalism students. In this book, **Suzanne Franks** provides an overview of the ongoing imbalances faced by women in the media and looks at the key issues hindering gender equality in journalism. Reviewed by **Lauren Maffeo**.*



Women and Journalism. Suzanne Franks. I.B. Tauris. August 2013.

Find this book:

Earlier this year, the plight of freelance journalists [went viral](#). Outraged (rightfully) after an *Atlantic* editor asked him to revise a previously published article for free, Nate Thayer posted their exchange [on his blog](#) to the cheers of unpaid freelancers everywhere. “So now, for those of you who remained unclear on the state of journalism in 2013”, Thayer concludes, “you no longer are.....”

In this recent book, *Suzanne Franks* adds gendered, historical context to the debates on the state of journalism today. Across five accessible chapters, Franks considers the key issues facing female journalists: “from on-screen sexism and ageism to the dangers facing female foreign correspondents reporting from war zones”. It is telling that Franks – a former news and current affairs producer for the BBC who has worked on programmes including *Newsnight* and *Panorama* – parlayed this work into academia, rather than a continuous career with one of the world’s most renowned media brands. This book quickly reveals why. Eschewing academic jargon, her findings make *Women and Journalism* a must-read for all considering this RyanAir ride of a career.



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Franks first illustrates how the traditional landscape for women in news has evolved – or not – throughout this past century. Paradoxically, she discusses the unique spaces that women currently lead in news, leaving the reader to wonder how much of this “progress” remains entrenched in norms of empathy that “only women can occupy”. Franks’ strength as an author lies in the historical context that supports her contemporary claims. What is most striking about her use of census figures from 1901 and confidential BBC reports from 1973 is the fact that, in 2013, not much has changed for women in news. The media offered more opportunities for educated women in 1931 than medicine or law – 31% of working women that year were working as journalists, compared to 7% as doctors and less than 1% as lawyers.

But 40 years later, documents including the aforementioned 1973 BBC report revealed a culture entrenched in patriarchal mores. “Women have class bound voices unsuitable for news reading...[and may introduce emotion”, one senior manager warned. “Young male journalists do not like working in the Parliamentary Unit, where there is a female Duty Editor in charge”, said a separate radio newsroom senior manager (pp. 3-4).

So what has changed another 40 years on? Sadly, not much. A 2011 analysis of by-lines across several UK national newspapers revealed the average ratio of male: female bylines to be 78:22. Less than one in six of the 200 journalists to testify as part of the Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press by Lord Justice Leveson in 2012 were women (although women were strongly represented as victims of press exhumation). In 2013, the *Daily Star*'s Dawn Neesom is the only editor of a national daily newspaper in the UK. And in its 90-year history, no woman has served as director general of the BBC or as the head of any other major broadcasting institution.

Franks quickly dispels arguments for lack of female interest in news. She writes of the shift from the “school of real life” vocational journalism to a profession requiring academic training - a shift that saw female enrollment in the University of Missouri’s first US journalism programme jump from 15% of the first class in 1908 to 60% in 1984. Despite this “pink collar ghetto” (Beasley and Theus, 1988), women were—and still are—less likely than men to earn entry-level roles into newspaper and broadcasting positions.

Those who did succeed were younger, underpaid compared to their male counterparts and less likely to have children; a product of “ivory tower” academia that “did a good job with the skill-preparation mechanics but...taught no workplace-setting skills” (Beasley and Theus, 1998: 27). As recently as 2012, women outnumbered men 2:1 on several of the UK’s premier journalism programmes, numbers that are almost exactly reversed throughout the profession.

Franks refuses to let the numbers generalise. She gives credit where it's due, pointing out that under *Financial Times* Editor Lionel Barber, the paper has the second highest number of female bylines and employed more female journalists than any other UK national paper in 2011. She also applauds the unique framework that female correspondents have brought to war and conflict reporting. “There is a focus upon the human cost of war, rather than weapons and fighting”, Franks declares. Women have now been able to occupy a novel space in journalism, rather than attempting to make space for themselves in the existing one.

But that doesn't make her complacent. In her chapter, “Beyond the Glass Ceiling”, Franks discusses the “Mrs. Thatcher Factor”—the danger of believing that because some women have seen success, full progress has been made. And whilst freelance work has left more room for individual “brand building” for isolated cases such as [Gaby Hinsliff](#), the social network era has made rising to the top even tougher for women, especially if they want to have families. “Some mothers do continue in journalism in very demanding full-time roles—but a disproportionate number of those who reach the highest and busiest levels are either childless...[or] have what are still considered to be unconventional domestic arrangements.—such as a non-working partner at home” (p. 42). Several other issues abound, from the lack of female anchors over 40 to female reporters seeing their story pitches handed to male colleagues.

Franks romanticizes the world of freelancing as a “reinvention of journalism” where a woman can “curate, edit, and crucially reinvent herself as a brand, all from the kitchen table” (p. 44). Until she problematises the shift from permanent journalists to freelancing “mummybloggers” in the Conclusions and Recommendations section, it could be argued that Franks seems guilty of the Mrs. Thatcher Factor herself. Likewise, Franks vaguely compares trends in US vs. UK news without discussing how the UK’s [uniquely poisonous](#) tabloid culture might contribute to a lack of national policies such as non-transferable leave.

Regardless, of paramount to Franks’ research are the parallel challenges and opportunities that news has offered women throughout the last century. Her thesis that women have been most successful at “expanding the agenda” is well founded—and I hope she will pursue her idea to explore how female entrepreneurs might monetize the digital revolution where the boys club at the top has failed.

Lauren Maffeo earned her MSc in Gender, Media and Culture from the London School of Economics in 2012. She is a freelance journalist for the Guardian and The Next Web, reporting on topics from content discovery and self-drive cars to [ICT literacy](#) and [digital storytelling](#). She served as an ambassador to Taiwan's National Youth Commission in November 2012, filing stories on the island's evolution [from aid recipient to donor](#) for the Global Poverty Project and [digital division](#) for The Next Web. She can be found on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#). Read more reviews by Lauren.

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