



# University of HUDDERSFIELD

## University of Huddersfield Repository

O'Neill, Deirdre and Savigny, Heather

Female politicians in the British press: The exception to the 'masculine' norm?

### Original Citation

O'Neill, Deirdre and Savigny, Heather (2014) Female politicians in the British press: The exception to the 'masculine' norm? *Journalism Education*, 3 (1). pp. 6-27.

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/21747/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk).

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

# Articles

All papers in the Articles section are peer reviewed and discuss the latest research in journalism and journalism education. These are intended to inform, educate and spark debate and discussion. Please join in this debate by going to [www.journalism-education.org](http://www.journalism-education.org) to have your say and find out what others think.

---

## Female politicians in the British press: The exception to the 'masculine' norm?

**Deirdre O'Neill Leeds Trinity University and Heather Savigny, Bournemouth University 1**

As educators of journalists we are concerned with some of the most fundamental questions about the relationship between the media and democracy, and this we argue, is gendered. Through content analysis and interviews we look at the ways in which women MPs are represented in the British Press. We show that the way in which they are reported (or ignored) positions them as different from the 'male norm' and this in turn has consequences for

---

1 We would like to thank the AJE for their generosity in funding this project and would like to thank Tori Cann for her work in data gathering. Thanks are also due to the anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

the ways in which democratic politics is written about by journalists and experienced by female MPs. A press representation of women that sometimes serves to suggest politics is a ‘man’s game’, where women are regarded as the aberrant, exception to the rule, can alienate women representatives and likely future candidates. This in turn may have negative consequences for the democratic process, whereby women voters feel unrepresented in Parliament and turn away from political engagement.

## Introduction

**Is ‘Blair’s Babes’ a good headline? That headline (coined by *The Sun* in 1997) has given us pause to reflect on the kind of media coverage we want our students to produce.**

This headline invokes and reinforces the standard tropes about the ways in which women are re-presented in the media: women are objectified and adjuncts of men, rather than independent autonomous entities in their own right. But then this headline was in 1997. Surely things have changed? The many newspaper references since then to ‘Cameron’s Cuties’ (for example, *Daily Mail*, 10 August 2012) suggests that maybe little has.

For us, these and similar headlines prompted us to consider carrying out a systematic analysis of the way in which women politicians are represented in the press, the amount of coverage they receive, and the focus of this coverage. As we teach our students to challenge and negotiate the structures of power that they find themselves operating in, we argue that the way in which female politicians are represented helps us to understand some of the ways in which media and politics interact in a democratic society, and how this relationship is gendered. We argue that the way in which women politicians are currently constructed within the press serves to discourage women from taking part in politics, where women are constructed as the ‘other’ to the masculine ‘norm’ of what it means to be a politician. This, we argue, can only serve to undermine democratic ideals, producing a narrow construction of what politics is, and what it can be. Ultimately this type of gendered construction serves to reinforce hegemonic masculine discourses (which tend to characterise male dominated contexts). We believe it is important as educators, citizens and journalists to recognise that gender matters in the ways in which we talk about politics in the pages of our media. And if all citizens in a democracy are to be enfranchised, then all interests need representation in their own right (and while not the focus of this article, this argument can also be extended across other categories including race, class, sexuality).

In the project that we undertook, supported by the Association for Journalism (AJE), we looked at the way in which female politicians were represented in the British press. In the first part of the project, we looked at the amount of coverage they received and whether

the type of coverage was primarily related to political issues, or wider society and events, or personal issues (O'Neill *et al*, submitted for publication). The focus of this second stage of the study is how this plays out within coverage of the three main political parties. We know that the British press is partisan (Curran and Seaton, 2009, pp.69-73). But does this partisan bias have a gendered dimension? We explore the ways in which female politicians are represented in the British press, and how this relates to their proportional representation of women in Parliament. With knowledge of the partisan bias of the British press, we therefore asked: is the descriptive representation of women in Parliament reflected or undermined in media coverage? Has this changed over time? Does the positive or negative representation of women in the media have a partisan bias?

## Pedagogical rationale

Research into the representation of women provides journalism educators with an arena where some key concepts about the role of journalism in society come together: it allows educators and students to interrogate the relationship between journalism and democracy, and to ask how well the news media is performing its role as the fourth estate, in being a central conduit, providing access to and information about politics, politicians – regardless of their sex or party- and the parliamentary process. The fourth estate role of the news media underpins the claims made by the news media themselves to justify freedom of expression and to reject state interference. This is particularly relevant at a time when research by the Hansard Society (2012) has shown political engagement with parliamentary democracy to be at an all-time low. An Ipsos-MORI survey has shown that there is a gendered element to this lack of participation. In the 2010 election, where people did actually vote, in the 18-24 age group category, while 50% of the male population voted, only 39% of the female population cast their ballot (Ipsos-MORI, 2010).

In addition, studies such as this can contribute to students' understanding of how news is a manufactured and selective process, whereby journalists are at risk of adhering to a set of news values imbued with their own prejudices, ideologies and values, as well as the wider cultural values and dominant hegemony of the society in which they operate (O'Neill and Harcup, 2008). It can demonstrate how female politicians are constructed and re-presented to news consumers and citizens, in an arena which is densely gendered (Van Zoonen, 1994) and can encourage us to question whether the focus of any media attention is reductive and stereotyped and, if so, what damage might this do to the health of our democracy.

Finally, this research can feed into debates about the use of sources and access to the news agenda. 'Who the sources are bear a close relationship to who is news.' (Sigal, 1986, p.25). It has been demonstrated that certain groups are very often denied a voice in the media, for instance, asylum seekers (Philo *et al*, 2013), Muslims (Petley and Richardson, 2011) and trade unionists (O'Neill, 2007). While women are not a minority in the population as a whole, a number of studies have found that they are not given a proportional voice (Ross and Carter, 2011; Women in Journalism, 2012). So when women are in a minority, as they are in Parliament, do they receive their fair share of coverage in relation to their numbers as our elected representatives? This was the first stage of our research (O'Neill *et al*, submitted for publication) and provides a useful context for what we go on to investigate in the second half of our research, presented here. Our initial findings showed that female politicians were covered broadly in proportion to their numbers in Parliament in 1992 (9% of coverage and 9.2% in Parliament) and 2002 (17% of coverage

and 17.9% in Parliament), but there was a trend towards under-representation in terms of press coverage by 2012 (16% of coverage while 22% in parliament). Investigating gendered representations in politics can contribute to wider discussions about how certain groups are depicted in the media, and help encourage best practice for widening source diversity. These concepts and debates are central to any critique of the press underpinning journalism degree programmes. It is also hoped that research into some of the ways that female politicians are depicted in the press can provide a model for some investigations by journalism students as part of their own independent studies.

## The broader research context

As already mentioned, fewer women in the 18 to 24 age category voted in the 2010 General Election than men (Ipsos-MORI, 2010), while research from the Economic and Social Research Council reveals that in so-called advanced democracies like the UK, women know less about politics than men (Newman, 2013). As Newman points out:

*'Assuming women are every bit as capable of grasping complicated political news as men [... ..] it all comes down to that old problem – the absence of women interviewed or quoted in the media, which in turn impacts on how political information is communicated and received. Professor Curran [one of the authors] suggests this is because across the 10 nations, women were only interviewed or cited in 30 per cent of TV news stories. "Politics is projected as a man's world and that encourages a sense of disconnection," he adds.'*

In other words, the lack of females appearing in the media – particularly with regards to politics – is having a negative impact on the knowledge and engagement of the female electorate.

## Women in Parliament

Currently, women make up 22% of Parliament. Advances were made under New Labour: from 1992, under a Conservative government, to 1997 when New Labour came to power, female representation increased from 9.2% to 18.2%. Nevertheless, with women making up just over half of the population, progress remains painfully slow. As Table One below demonstrates, Labour has been consistently ahead in the numbers of women in Parliament. In 1992, of the 9.2% total number of women elected, 62% were Labour, 33% Conservative and 3% were Liberal. In 2001, of the 17.9% women elected, 81% were Labour, 12% Conservative and 4% Liberal Democrat and 3% other. In 2010, of the 22% of women elected to Parliament, 57% were Labour, 34% Conservative, 5% Liberal Democrat and 4% other.

The numbers of Labour women decreased in 2010, although it would seem that women disproportionately lost their seats. The numbers of Conservative and Lib Democrat female MPs have steadily increased, although they remain some considerable way behind Labour.

Table 1: Women elected in general elections since 1992

Election year	Female MPs	%	Con	Lab	Lib	Others	Candidates
1992	60	9.2	20	37	2	1	571
1997	120	18.2	13	101	3	3	672
2001	118	17.9	14	95	5	4	636
2005	128	20	17	98	10	3	720
2010	143	22	49	81	7	6	861

Source: House of Commons Research Papers 01/75, 05/33 & 10/36.

A Hansard Society briefing paper to mark International Women's Day, 'Women at the Top 2011' highlighted disappointing statistics about women's representation in politics and public life (Hansard Society, 2011). It found that 'there were no women on the new Coalition Committee or the Coalition Operation and Strategic Planning Group; of 184 Cabinet Committee and Sub-Committee seats, just 32 were occupied by women; there were no women at all on the Economic Affairs Committee, the Banking Reform Committee and the Public Expenditure Committee.'

## Senior Women in Politics

The numbers of women in senior political posts is particularly important, since senior figures are most likely to attract the most press attention. Figures from a report for the House of Commons on Women in Parliament and Government (Duckworth and Cracknell, updated 2013) demonstrate that in terms of women in government (not necessarily in the Cabinet), we have actually gone backwards. Perhaps surprisingly, the highest percentage of women MPs appointed as ministers came during the Labour Government of 1966-70 (38%), followed by the 2005-10 Labour Government (37%). There were seven women ministers (including three baronesses) in 1992 under the Conservative administration. While this is not many, the 1992-97 Conservative Government had one of the highest percentages of their female MPs appointed as ministers (although out of a relatively small pool of Conservative female MPs to start with), equalled only by the 1966-70 Labour Government (53% of their female MPs under both administrations).

So what is the current situation under the Coalition government? In fact, women have gone backwards in terms of government. In the Cabinet, four out of 22 Cabinet posts (18%) are held by women. This compares to five Cabinet ministers immediately before the September 2012 reshuffle. (To put this in context, there were four women in Gordon Brown's Cabinet after 2009 and eight in Tony Blair's final Cabinet.) Of 119 Government Ministers, including the Cabinet, whips, Lords in waiting and unpaid positions, 23 (or 19%) are women. Prior to the 2010 election, 30% of Ministers were women.

With regards to the 2010 General Election, the Hansard briefing paper noted that:

*'women were not involved in the TV leaders' debates (although all the main party leaders were male, Caroline Lucas and other minority party leaders were also not represented); the interviewing journalists were all male and there were just a few women on the advisory panels drawing up the question plan for each debate. More damning, however, was the fact that although there were nine BBC Daily Politics show debates held during the course of the campaign, of the 29 participants just two were women – Harriet Harman*

## Investigating newspaper coverage

What we wanted to investigate was whether this descriptive representation in parliament and in Government was reflected, reinforced or challenged in the amount and tone of national newspaper coverage. And has this changed over time? Our study, carried out in two stages, of which this is the second phase, focussed on a sample from 1992, 2002 and 2012 under three different governments. Given the broad trends uncovered in the initial stage of research - with female politicians as a whole becoming less visible and heard less over time in proportion to their numbers in Parliament (O’Neill et al, submitted for publication) - the aim in the second stage of the study was to analyse some of this data in more detail to discover the interplay of gender and political parties.

The specific questions we asked in stage 2 of the study were:

Q1. When politicians of different sexes are referred to, what parties do they represent?

Q2. What is the tone of the coverage for male and female politicians (i.e., favourable or hostile?)

Q3. Is gender a factor in how women in the three main political parties are represented? Is there likely to be a more negative story of a Labour female MP than a Tory or vice versa? And what of the Liberal Democrats? And are there any trends for parties and genders over time?

## Methodology

To answer these two questions we constructed sample news weeks for the years 1992, 2002 and 2012. These years were chosen as they represented a temporal gap, but also because there were different governments in office (1992, Conservative; 2002, Labour; 2012, Conservative/Liberal Democrats) – would the government in office make a difference to the kind of coverage?

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, although it is fair to say there are no strongly left-wing views represented in the national UK mainstream press. While some newspapers have switched allegiances in the past, particularly as the centre ground shifted to the right under Tony Blair’s New Labour, most British newspapers support the Conservative Party; this does not mean they are never critical of that party, but usually they report within a right-wing hegemonic agenda. However, the Mirror supports the Labour Party and the Guardian embodies liberal values with its readership split between Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters. Despite the rise of online journalism and blogging, ‘the commercial organizations that professional journalists work for are mostly driven by the same imperatives of profit and power as before.’ (Curran and Seaton, 2009, p.96). Original newspapers were examined, or microfilms of the originals, from the British Newspaper Library in London.

For each year, a randomised ‘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<sup>th</sup> June was used in 1992, and the Daily Mirror on Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> July 1992, and so on. The order of newspapers was randomly chosen. In 2002 the Sunday Times was used on Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> May, the Daily Mirror on Monday 10<sup>th</sup> June and so on. We examined all articles that mentioned a politician but only included those where the politician was the main actor, so they do not add up to 100%.

The categorisations coded and recorded included the gender and party of the politician mentioned in the article (in this study we focussed on the three main parties, the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats); whether the politician(s) portrayed in a story was represented in a positive, negative or neutral way, and how this divided on gender and party grounds. Implicitly, does the partisan bias of the press have a gendered effect?

Politicians were deemed to have appeared in articles with a positive tone if the article contained words or phrases that stated support for a politician or their actions or policies, or attributed positive qualities to the individual: for instance, ‘winning formula’, ‘confident performance’, ‘gaining support’, ‘ground breaking’. An example of such a story is from the Daily Express in 1992, which reported that ‘The conference was *electrified*’ [our emphasis]...by the performance of a female politician. A negative story was one that contained negative words or phrases about actions, roles or policies of a politician and, for instance, contained words like ‘embarrassment’, ‘humiliation’, ‘snubbed’, ‘crushing defeat’, ‘faced warnings/criticisms’, ‘no confidence’ or where the politician was subjected to negative personal descriptions. An example of this was Harriet Harman being called a ‘tit’ and ‘snooty’ in an article in the Sun in 2012. A neutral story would mention actions, roles, policies or individuals without any charged or judgmental language in the article, usually quoting a politician or reporting a policy without any comment and in a factual and straightforward way.

In addition, we interviewed ten female politicians from all parties about our quantitative findings and their perceptions about gender, politics and the press (all interviews were carried out in January 2014 and conducted by email or telephone, mostly the latter, and

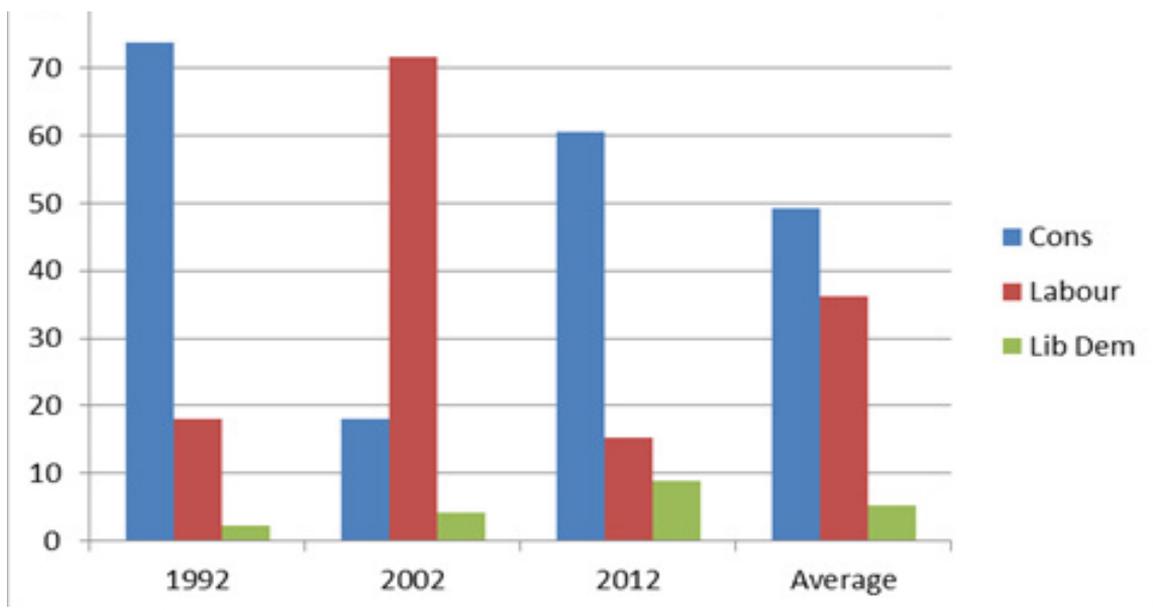
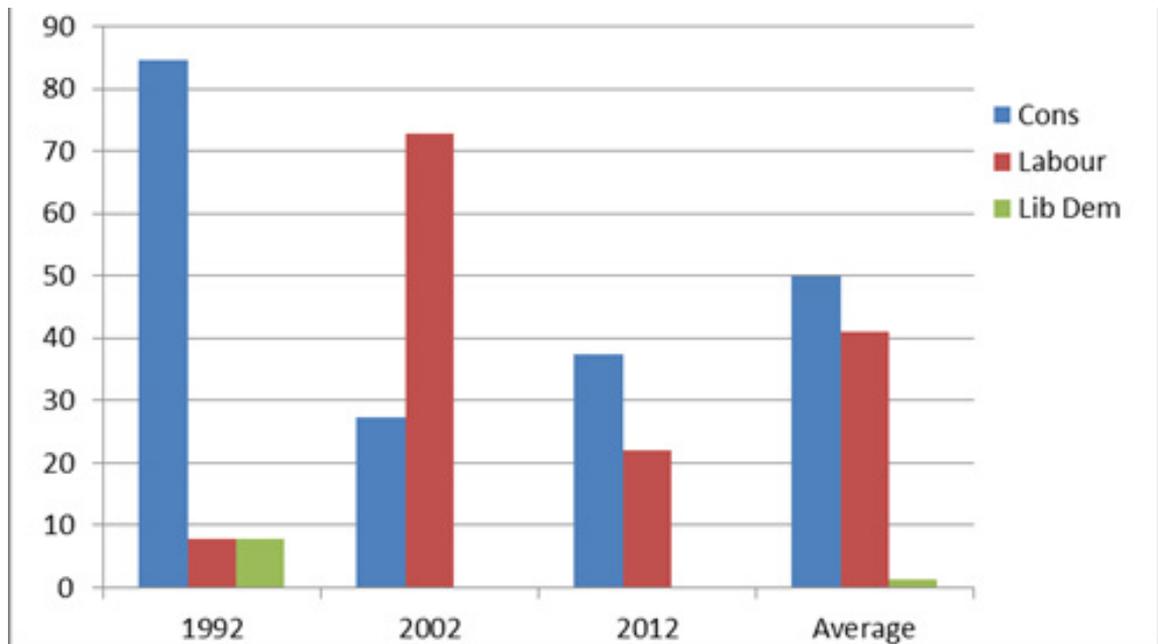


Figure 1a: Coverage of MALE politicians by political party over time (expressed as a percentage of all male politicians mentioned in each year’s sample)

Articles



**Figure 1b: Coverage of FEMALE politicians by political party over time (expressed as a percentage of all female politicians mentioned in each year's sample)**

the interviewees are anonymised). We include their comments in the Discussion section.

## Findings

### Q1. When politicians of different sexes are referred to, what parties do they represent?

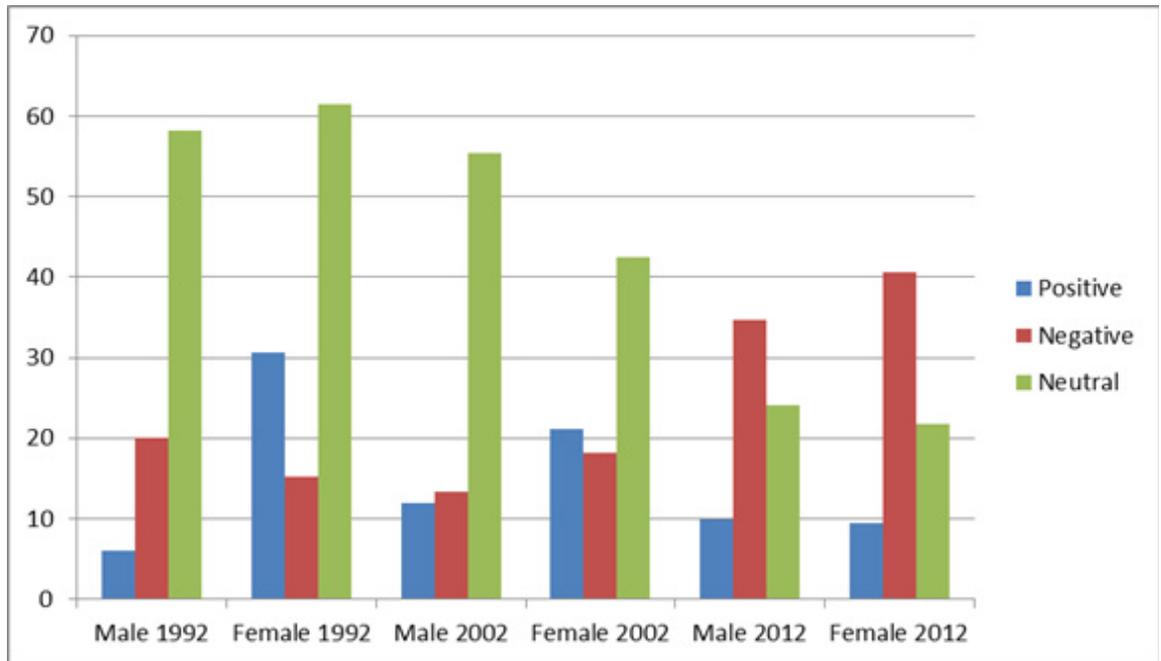
(NB: The charts presented here (Figures 1a and 1b) refer to Table 2 in the Appendix).

What we are seeing here (see Table 2 in Appendix) is that on average, both Conservative males and females get most of the coverage, with the press appearing to support the government of the day. When particular years are examined, predictably the party in power tends to get the most coverage – so the Conservatives (male and female) get most coverage in 1992, while Labour politicians (male and female) get the greatest proportion of coverage in 2002. With the Conservatives as the senior partners in the Coalition of 2012, they again get the largest proportion of coverage (males and females) out of any party.

Interestingly, in 1992, a higher proportion of Conservative female politicians feature in press stories (84.6%), out of all female politicians mentioned in the press, compared with a proportion of 73.8% for Conservative male politicians. In 2002, female Labour politicians get a similar proportion of coverage (72.7%) as male Labour politicians (71.6%), while Conservative women continue to get a higher proportion of coverage (27.3%) than male Conservatives (18%) in 2002, as in 1992. But by 2012, the situation for Conservative female politicians has reversed, with just a 37.5% proportion of coverage, compared to a 60.5% proportion of coverage for male Conservatives. Is this to do with the small proportion of women appointed to Government and Cabinet by the Cameron? Or is the press, which seems to have traditionally favoured Conservative women over Conservative men, beginning to change its stance? This is explored in the Discussion (below).

Back in 1992, while the Liberal Democrats, as the third party, received a lower propor-

tion of coverage as a whole, female Liberal Democrat politicians did at least as well as female Labour politicians at 7.7% each. And they received more proportional coverage than their male counterparts at just 2.2%. In 2002, Liberal Democrat coverage as a whole had not improved much (4.2% for males, 0 for women), and only rose to 8.8% for males in 2012, with no coverage for women. The real losers here are Liberal Democrat women:



**Figure 2: The percentage of positive, negative or neutral stories for each gender in each sample year**

they do not receive any coverage in 2002, nor do they feature at all in our 2012 sample (despite being part of the Coalition Government of the day). Overall, female Conservative and Labour politicians get a similar proportion of coverage when averaged over the three years sampled (44.9% and 41%, relatively). It is female Liberal Democrats who seriously lose out (1.3%).

**Q2. What is the tone of the coverage for male and female politicians (i.e. favourable, hostile or neutral?)** (NB: Figure 2 refers to Table 3 in the Appendix).

With regards to trends in tone over the years (see Figure 2 above and Table 3 in Appendix), in 1992, women received a greater proportion of positive coverage than male politicians, and more positive coverage than negative coverage. And like male politicians, the greatest proportion of stories featuring women presented them in a neutral light. This was broadly true of 2002, though we now see a greater proportion of negative stories at the expense of neutral and positive stories. By 2012, however, the situation has reversed. The proportion of positive stories have roughly equalised - 10% for males and 9.4% for females - in 2012. By far the biggest proportion of stories about female politicians are negative and the smallest proportion are positive. While this is also true of male politicians in 2012, the proportion of negative stories is greater for women in this year (40.6% for women compared with 34.7% for men). Nor have males undergone such a reversal trend over the years: in 2012 there are more than double the proportion of negative stories for women than in 2002 (40.6% in 2012 compared to 18.2% in 2002).

It is fair to say that the press appears to be becoming more critical of politicians as a whole. One of the biggest shakeups to confidence and trust by the public in those that represent us was the MPs' expenses scandal of 2009 and this is likely to have had a profound effect on the tone of coverage; we return to this point in our Discussion (below).

The increased negativity shown towards female politicians in 2012 can be seen as an unwelcome or welcome trend, depending on how the results are interpreted. It could be argued that hostile stories are a negative trend, or it could be argued that women are being increasingly treated in the same way as men by 2012, when the figures for positive, negative and neutral stories are beginning to equalise between the sexes. In other words, we must ask, are women starting to be viewed as the norm? Is this an inevitable result of being put in positions of power? But as we have discussed earlier, there are fewer women in Government in 2012 (19%) than in 2002 (30%) (Duckworth and Cracknell, updated 2013). So their numbers are still relatively low, with the Coalition having been criticised for not promoting women. Prime Minister David Cameron is nowhere near fulfilling his pledge that a third of ministerial jobs would go to women by the end of his first term. Are the political parties doing a poor job of raising the profile of women in terms of media relations? Or is there an inherent problem with the media and the way it views politicians as a whole, and women in particular? Some of these points are reinforced in the findings about gender and political party (see below) and, again, are further explored in the Discussion.

### **Q3. Is gender a factor in how women in the three main political parties are represented? Is there likely to be a more negative story of a Labour female MP than a Conservative one or vice versa?**

First, it is important to point out that the Liberal Democrats have not been included in Tables 4B and 4C (in Appendix) and Figs. 3 because female Liberal Democrat politicians were only referred to in our samples once in 1992, and males very few times as well.

Over the years, Conservative and Labour female politicians are mentioned as main actors a similar number of times. Unsurprisingly, most female Labour politicians are mentioned in 2002 when Labour was in power and the party had boosted the numbers of female MPs.

With reference to Tone, (see also Table 4B: Appendix), Conservative women receive more positive coverage in each of the three years sampled (45.5% in 1992 compared to 0% for Labour women; 33% in 2002 compared to 12.5% for Labour women; and 33% in 2012 compared to 0% for Labour women).

However, Conservative women receive more negative coverage than Labour women in 2012. No female Labour politicians were positively referred to in 1992 or 2012 and just a small amount of positive coverage (at 12.5%) in 2002, a year when Labour politicians as a whole received the greatest proportion of coverage. By 2012, the category in which both female Labour politicians and female Conservative politicians feature most is negative.

And while Conservative women proportionally get far more positive coverage in relation to the number of times they are mentioned than Labour, it is fascinating to see that where women do feature in their own right as the main actors in stories, they are increasingly attracting negative coverage and this is true of the Conservatives as well as Labour. As more Conservative women are promoted in the coalition government in 2012, we see them depicted negatively in 83% of stories that feature Conservative women (see Table 4B: Appendix).

The real problem for Labour in 2012 is how few female Labour politicians are cov-

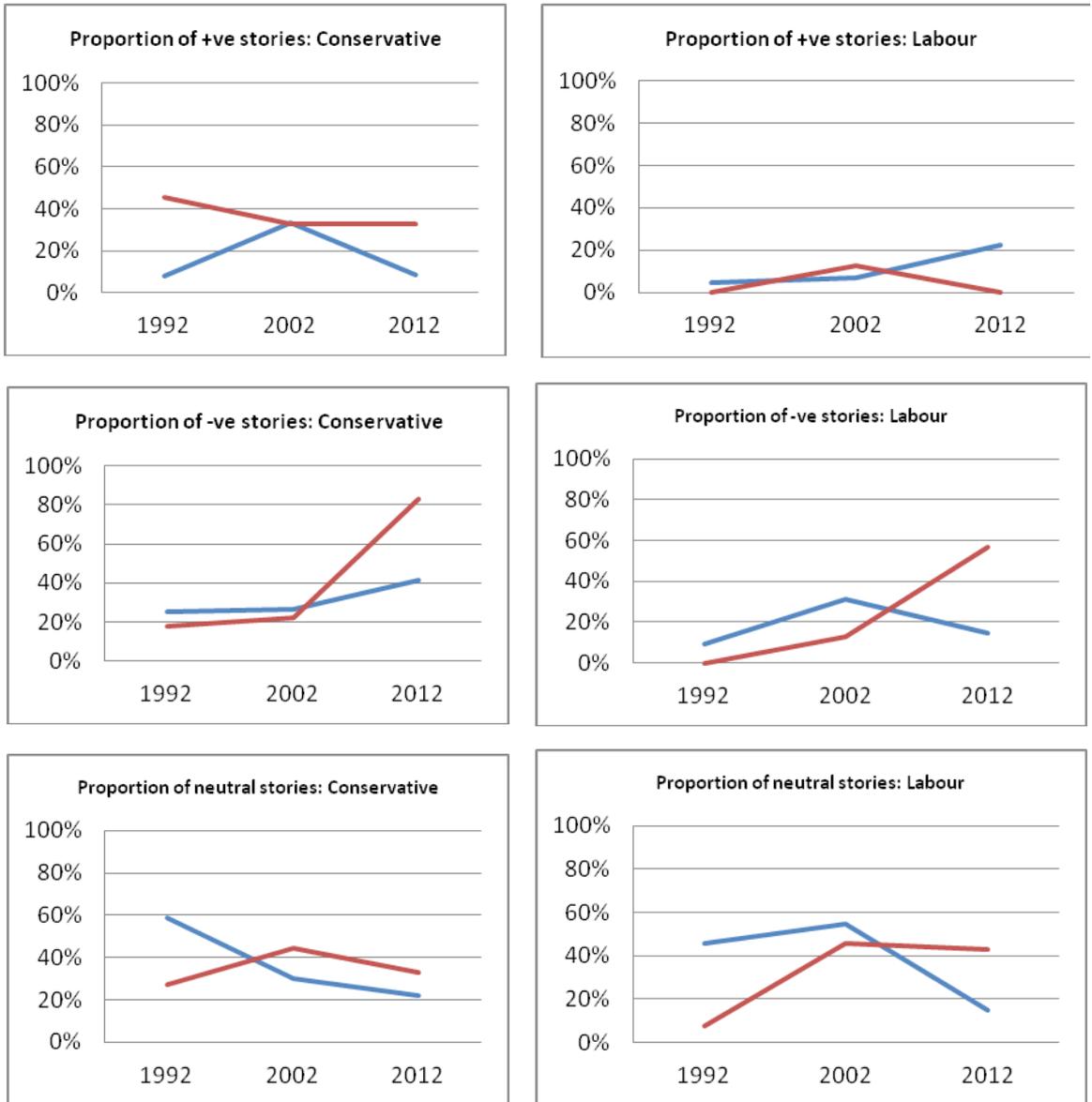


Figure 3: Map of tone of coverage over the years according to political party and gender (RED = females; BLUE = males) and refers to Tables 4B and 4C in the Appendix.

ered, despite the fact that Labour politicians get mentioned more often overall than any other party. The same is true of Liberal Democratic politicians, in particular women. One female Liberal Democrat is mentioned in a neutral category in 1992 (appearing as an inflated 25% since just four Liberal Democrats were mentioned in the sample) but no female Liberal Democrat politicians were mentioned in any category (positive, negative or neutral) thereafter. In particular, the lack of coverage of all Liberal Democrat politicians, regardless of gender – a party that makes up our government - is lamentable. What is left out of the news can be just as influential as what is included.

A comparison with male coverage reveals interesting trends over the years. In 1992, most proportional coverage is neutral for all male politicians (Labour and Conservatives – see Table 4C in Appendix). For males in 2002, Conservatives receive a similar proportion of positive, negative and neutral coverage, while for Labour the trend is different, with

males receiving mostly neutral coverage and very little positive coverage.

By 2002, positive and negative coverage tends towards equalisation for all female politicians (Labour and Conservatives, Table 4B: Appendix), with neutral coverage the biggest category, a similar picture to males in 1992, 10 years previously. This is probably to be expected as Labour is the party of government and the party in power always attracts some criticism. However, by 2012 clear differences appear between the genders and parties. While there are 33% positive stories for Conservative females, there are no positive stories for female Labour politicians (Table 4B: Appendix). The biggest category for Labour females is negative (57%), then neutral (42.8%). It should be pointed out that male Labour politicians receive slightly more positive coverage than neutral or negative (at 22.2%), a surprising result, while the other two categories – negative and neutral - hover at around 15% (Table 4C: Appendix). As the party in power, all Conservative politicians receive mostly negative coverage, but women receive a proportion of negative coverage that is double that of their male counterparts (83% for female Conservatives compared to 41.7% for male Conservatives – Tables 4B and 4C respectively, Appendix). And proportionally, female Labour politicians are receiving negative coverage almost four times that of their male Labour counterparts (Tables 4B and 4C respectively, Appendix).

So we appear to be seeing a pattern by 2012 whereby female Liberal Democrats are not given any coverage in our sample, and Labour and Conservative female politicians are receiving much more negative coverage proportionally than in the past: indeed, by 2012, female Labour politicians receive no positive coverage.

## Discussion

The issue of press coverage of politicians relies on a number of interplaying factors, not merely the press itself. Some of this lies with the political parties: the selection of female candidates in the first place and their subsequent promotion to more senior political roles, once elected - a politician with more responsibility has a greater chance of attracting press attention. Also important is the effectiveness of the media promotion of women by the party machinery. Finally, there is the structural, ideological and cultural complexion of media organisations, which affects what politicians and parties are deemed newsworthy, and what is the focus and treatment in terms of the subsequent coverage.

A senior Labour MP said that journalists too often adopted a 'lazy mode of journalism' when they focussed on women politicians, resorting to stereotypes and clichés. (Telephone interview).

One senior Conservative was clear about where she believed the problem lay:

*'Women are negatively stereotyped and often badly treated in the media. What really concerns me is that this can put women off applying to become members of Parliament. Contrary to what you might think, selection is not the issue for women in the Conservative Party, it's getting them to apply in the first place; not enough women are putting themselves forward. There is a gender bias, perhaps unconscious, in the press, whereby the background narrative is that it is difficult to combine family life with a career in politics.'* (Telephone interview)

While Cameron has been criticised for failing to promote more women, she pointed out that he was promoting women to junior posts so that they could gain experience for more senior roles, and that change will take a little time. She was more concerned that the Prime Minister would have access to a pool of able women to promote in the first place. And a

female Labour MP (telephone interview) also pointed out that the Liberal Democrats have few women coming through: she believed the allegations of sexual harassment by Lord Rennard will not have helped.

One Labour MP said she thought the Conservative Party did a reasonable job of promoting women in the media, making effective use of backbenchers and women on select committees, not just female ministers, though not all the Conservative women agreed. Three Labour MPs said that their own party was remiss in this area, and that a 'sexist filter' was operating, whereby the same narrow group of people were nominated to speak to the media, and this group includes few women, and only younger ones: 'only a select few are trusted' (Labour MP, telephone interview). One Labour MP said that a TV producer told her he had difficulty getting a woman on to a programme, because he could not get the party press office to nominate one. A number of female Labour MPs pointed out that the party press office and the campaigns team for the next general election are comprised of men only.

Related to this is the importance of social networks and connections when trying to be heard in the media. Shadow Home Affairs Minister Diana Johnson has written about this issue in the Guardian. In response to an article telling female MPs to 'man up' on the Guardian's website (Kite, 2013), Johnson commented, 'In the world of politics, where you have to make and break alliances to further your own political career, there is also the issue of women being excluded from male social networks' (Johnson, 2013).

The influence of broadcasting on newspapers cannot be ignored here, because different sections of the media feed off each other and gaining a media profile is a virtuous circle – attention from one part of the media leads to attention by other parts. 'It is increasingly hard for women over 50 to be seen on TV,' said one Labour MP (telephone interview). 'No doubt in response to this agenda, the Labour press office appears to promote younger faces, irrespective of experience and knowledge. It takes time to gain experience, so this is an important issue.' She also felt that TV producers did not help the situation if they placed older women besides glamorous young presenters, which only increased self-consciousness, inevitably leading to a lack of self-confidence.

With regards to the decreasing relative coverage of women suggested by our data, a Labour MP believed it could be due to the different style of political operation that women employ. 'An important news value is conflict,' she pointed out. 'People who are loud get coverage. But women often go and make deals and sort things out behind the scenes. They are not likely to get media coverage for this work.' And she was concerned that when women achieve change through applying persistent pressure, they can be portrayed as 'nagging'. An interesting observation was made about the power structures of the press. 'During the Leveson Inquiry, the male domination of newspaper management was striking. It was like journeying back 20 years. The tabloids decorate their pages with pictures of women's bodies, and the quality press with comment pieces by women, but few women are in the actual driving seat' (Labour MP, phone interview).

However, not all feedback was critical. Two female Labour MPs had perceived little difference in how they were treated by the press (email). However, one of these said she questioned why the press kept focussing on the number of women leaving Parliament. This focus was criticised by one Conservative MP:

*'When women like Laura Sandys have left Parliament through ill health, there has been lots of – quite negative - coverage about them leaving, along the lines "Conservative*

*women can't hack it", but not the same level or type of coverage about the men leaving' (telephone interview)*

Interestingly, in interviews most women did not at first complain about a focus on appearance and family life by journalists. Most took it for granted that this happened all the time and they were used to putting up with it. Yet this 'normalisation' of double standards reminds us of the importance of continuing to challenge coverage that trivialises women and detracts from what they are doing and saying. Indeed, one Labour politician said she made a point of contacting any journalist she felt was trivialising politics, adding, 'It is important to challenge this type of coverage, or it will never change. It only takes two minutes' (telephone interview).

Others were more vociferous: 'It's hard getting national coverage and the only thing I ever seem to get asked is about my kids, or being a female MP, at least from national media' (Liberal Democrat MP, email). And one Conservative MP summed up a view that many of the women raised: 'I want the newspapers and media in general to stop focusing on shoes, clothes and hair and to report on my contribution to Parliament' (telephone interview).

Another Labour MP said that women's expertise tends to get pigeonholed, so they are interviewed about issues relating to care or motherhood. 'There is a sloppiness in all political parties about finding out what women know and their expertise.' Related to this, a number felt that, as a woman, their expertise was ignored or sidelined by the press, particularly with regards to 'weighty' issues, traditionally associated with men. As one Labour politician said:

*'I have 16 years of experience in the Treasury, dealing with the UK budget and the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). I have more Treasury experience than the Shadow Chancellor. Yet I have never been asked anything by a journalist on economic affairs or international issues' (telephone interview)*

But most of the women felt they were interviewed on a much wider range of issues in the regional/local press; they stressed that the regional press was markedly different than the national press and generally gave them better coverage.

In addition to gender politics, some of our findings appear to reflect the ideological complexion of the British press, which generally favours right-wing policies. This is likely to account for differences between female politicians of different parties, with Conservative females generally receiving more positive coverage than female Labour politicians, particularly in 2012, when female Labour politicians received no positive coverage and the Liberal Democrats were seriously neglected. Indeed, Conservative female politicians seemed to exude a sort of 'Marmite effect', whereby they seemed to be loved or loathed in terms of press coverage, since they also received a large proportion of negative stories in 2012.

There were two big stories about female Conservative MPs that might well have contributed to making coverage more negative than it might otherwise have been. First, Nadine Dorries MP was heavily criticised in the press for appearing on reality TV show 'I'm A Celebrity; Get Me Out Of Here', particularly for neglecting her parliamentary and constituency duties while on the programme. Second, former MP Louise Mensch broke with protocol by resigning mid-term from her seat; she attracted a great deal of negative coverage for not waiting to resign at the next election. Both events were widely covered and probably skewed the results to some extent.

With regards to the higher negative coverage for women in general, there was a feeling

by the MPs interviewed that anything negative was often hugely exaggerated by the press, particularly for women. Clearly the expenses scandal of 2009 was a huge and important story - and no doubt explains the overall increase in negative press coverage we found over time - but a number of women interviewed believed female politicians sometimes experienced more unwarranted flak as a result of the fallout from this. One claimed she had received negative coverage, despite her expenses being in order:

*‘The press spun this as a negative story for me, despite the fact I was not required to pay any money back. It didn’t matter what good work I was doing – this usually came up in a newspaper article when I was Googled. And Jacqui Smith was held up as the “poster girl” of the expenses scandal – yet those who went to prison were all men’ (Female Labour MP, telephone interview)*

Another felt that the press did not understand the unique position of mothers of young children with regards to expenses. ‘They question why you have a flat in London with more than one bedroom, or why your young child has to travel on the train with you’ (Labour MP, telephone interview). And a Conservative MP stated: ‘While there is a focus on the personal lives of all politicians, women come under even more scrutiny’ (telephone interview). Both Conservative and Labour women highlighted the Daily Mail as being particularly negative towards female politicians.

When asked about why women seemed to be receiving more negative coverage than their male colleagues, as indicated by our data and suggested by many of our interviewees, one Labour MP believed it could be because women were sometimes ‘going out on a limb’ with regards to the media: if they are being blocked within their own party, they may seek publicity in other ways, dealing with journalists directly, and they are then without the support and experience of a press office, which could make negative coverage more likely.

Another felt the political parties could do more to train women in dealing with the press and developing journalistic contacts. She pointed out that many women were by nature less willing to push themselves in the media, unless they had something valid to say: ‘yet broadcast journalists have told me they are bombarded by male MPs willing to appear. Women seem to wait to be asked’ (telephone interview).

## Conclusion

The treatment of all Liberal Democrats in 2012 by our press – minimal coverage - is possibly an indictment of the partisan nature of our press, but some of the problem may lie within the party itself. Certainly, the lack of women – a party issue - is reflected in the coverage. In addition to receiving less coverage with regards to their numbers in Parliament, and their voices being heard less, these findings suggest that female politicians are experiencing more negative coverage than in the past, regardless of whether they represent Labour or the Conservatives, though Conservative women can expect to receive more positive coverage than Labour women, and women of both parties are now experiencing more negative coverage proportionally than their male colleagues. Female Labour politicians receive the least positive coverage over the years and received no positive coverage in our 2012 sample. This suggests there might be both a gender and ideological filter operating with regards to coverage of female Labour politicians, not particularly surprising in a right-wing dominated press.

How gender plays out in the press is clearly perceived by some female politicians as an

area of concern, whether the causes lie internally - within the political parties themselves or the political process - or externally, with the press. And it is worth noting that there were some similarities in the issues they raised, across parties, namely the focus of press attention, the underlying narratives that appear in the press about women in politics - such as women not being able to 'hack' politics - the trivialising of women's contribution to the democratic process, and a more negative tone in general. This appears to suggest that the news values of (at least some) journalists are influenced by gendered stereotyping.

And a number of the politicians we interviewed pointed to the same, narrow range of sources that journalists seem to rely on, a trend pointed out as long ago as 1980 by Gans in his work on sources, and subsequently by Bell in 1991. Labour politicians also point to the role of their own press office in promoting a small select group in the media.

Within society, many factors already militate against women entering public life. The regressive trends highlighted by our findings, taken in context with other media developments, such as the rise of internet trolls churning out appalling misogynist abuse and rape and death threats to women who have aired views or campaigned publicly (notable examples being academic Mary Beard after she appeared on Question Time, and feminist campaigner Caroline Criado-Perez and MP Stella Creasy), creates a climate that makes it more difficult for women and which can put competent women off taking public office.

Added to this is a gender bias that can trivialise or humiliate and undermine women. Throughout 2013, the period immediately following our last data analysis, we saw examples of newspaper journalists and editors continuing to cling to an outdated gender bias that simply would not be tolerated in most businesses: whether it is Home Secretary Theresa May's clothes (Gayle, 2013); a major newspaper offering a hefty sum in the hunt for Shadow Minister Gloria de Piero's topless pictures (taken when she was 15) (Baxter, 2013); or the tweets of Tom Newton-Dunn, the political editor of the Sun, questioning MP Stella Creasy's right to raise the issue of Page 3 while wearing a blue PVC skirt. Writing in the Guardian online on 12 December 2013, Nell Frizzell rightly ridiculed Newton-Dunn's preposterous comments:

*'That's the thing about us feminists – we are completely out of clothing control. We've thrown our sense of sartorial decorum to the wind. Giving neither a willy, nor a nilly, we have smashed the civilised link between the right to speak, and the precise consistency of fabric wrapped around our undercarriage.'*

Back in 2001, a Guardian article highlighted research by The Guardian/Women in Journalism that suggested press coverage of female politicians was having a detrimental effect on the political process:

*'Most of the women MPs who won their seats at the last [1997] election believe that the way they have been portrayed in the press will deter other women from standing for parliament. They think that local parties will be less likely to choose them and they say their effectiveness was undermined by the continual presentation of them as "babes" and "Stepford Wives"' (Perkins and Ward, 2001).*

Thirteen years later, our quantitative and qualitative research suggests that little has changed.

It may be too simplistic to state that more women in Parliament, and better press coverage of female politicians - jettisoning gendered double standards and obtaining women's views on a wider range of issues and debates - would automatically make for increased engagement by women voters. But it would certainly do no harm to the level of political discourse and debate – which would surely increase the chances of wider citizen involve-

ment, whatever their sex.

It is fair to say this research has only just begun to explore longitudinal trends in the representation of female politicians, and, with limited samples, can only point to possible trends.

Our central argument aim has been that news coverage has a gendered dimension to it. As educators of journalism students, our news makers of the future, we need to remind them that gender blindness does not equal gender neutrality. That is, an understanding of the gendered dimension of news coverage is essential if we are to make sense of the possible consequences for democracy. To marginalise women is to limit the diversity of democratic debate, rendering it representative only of a narrow range of views. Healthy democracy depends on healthy journalism; to have healthy journalism we argue, we need to educate our future journalists to reflect on their role within existing power structures, and the opportunities and responsibilities they have, in shaping democratic society. We have sought in these pages to contribute to the debate about the representation of women in the media, and the health of the relationship between journalism and democracy, provoking our journalism and media students to reflect on their own practice.

## Bibliography

Baxter, Holly (2013) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/18/gloria-de-piero-topless-pictures-hunt-politicians>), 18 October 2013, accessed 10 January 2014.

Bell, Allan (1991) *The Language of News Media*, Oxford; Blackwell.

Curran James and Seaton, Jean (2009) *Power Without Responsibility: Press, Broadcasting and the Internet in Britain*, London: Routledge.

Duckworth, Nick and Cracknell, Richard (last updated November 2013) *Women in Parliament and Government*, Standard Note SN/SG/1250 ([www.parliament.uk/publications](http://www.parliament.uk/publications))

Frizell, Nell (2013) <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/12/tom-newton-dunn-stella-creasy-skirt>, 12 December 2013, accessed 10 January 2104.

Gans, Herbert J. (1980) *Deciding What's News: A study of CBS evening news, NBC nightly news, Newsweek and Time*, London: Constable.

Gayle, Damien (2013) 'Theresa May stuns with another bold fashion statement... just days after denying she's the new Cara Delevingne', Daily Mail, 12 November 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2502193/Theresa-May-stuns-bold-fashion-statement-denying-shes-new-Cara-Delevingne.html>, accessed 11 January 2014.

Hansard (2011) 'Women at the Top 2011', Hansard Society Parliamentary Briefing Paper, <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/research/women-at-the-top/women-at-the-top-2011/>

Hansard (2012) Audit of Political Engagement 9: Part Two 'The Media and Politics' <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Audit-of-Political-Engagement-9-Part-Two-2012.pdf>

IPSOS Mori (2010) How Britain Voted 2010 <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2613/How-Britain-Voted-in>

Johnson, Diana (2013) 'Don't tell women MPs to "man up". We're tough enough already', <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/dec/05/women-mps-tough-man-up>, 5 Dec 2013, accessed 10 January 2013.

Kite, Melissa (2013) 'Women MPs must man up. We need more battleaxes, fewer shrinking violets', <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/28/women-mps-battleaxes-not-shrinking-violets>, 28 November 2013, accessed 10 January 2014

Newman, Cathy (2013) 'British women know less about politics than men, but why?', 3 January 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-politics/10154822/British-women-know-less-about-politics-than-men-but-why.html> accessed 10 January 2014

O'Neill, Deirdre (2007) 'From Hunky Heroes to Dangerous Dinosaurs: Journalism-union relations, news access and press coverage in the 2002-3 British Fire Brigades Union dispute'. *Journalism Studies*, Volume 8 (5), pp.813-830

O'Neill, Deirdre and Harcup, Tony (2008) 'News Values and Selectivity' in Karen Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch (eds) *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, Routledge, London, pp.161-174.

O'Neill, Deirdre, Savigny, Heather and Cann, Victoria (2014) 'Prada, politics and power: A quantitative approach to the representations of British female politicians in the press' (submitted for publication)

Perkins, Anne and Ward, Lucy (2001), 'The rise and fall of Blair's babes' <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/may/24/gender.uk>, 24 May 2001, accessed 16 January 2014

Petley, Julian and Richardson, Robin (eds) (2011) *Pointing The Finger – Islam and Muslims in the British Media*, London: Oneworld Publications

Philo, Greg, Briant, Emma and Donald, Pauline (2013) *Bad News for Refugees*, London: Pluto Press

Ross, Karen and Carter, Cynthia (2011) 'Women and news: A long and winding road'. *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 33 (8): pp.1148-1165.

Sigal, Leon, V. (1986) 'Sources Make the News' in Robert Karl Manoff and Michael Schudson (eds.) *Reading the News*, New York: Pantheon Books, pp.9-37.

Van Zoonen, Liesbet (1994) *Feminist Media Studies*, London: Sage.

Women in Journalism (2012) Seen but not heard: how women make front page news, [http://womeninjournalism.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Seen\\_but\\_not\\_heard.pdf](http://womeninjournalism.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Seen_but_not_heard.pdf)

# Appendix

**TABLE 2: Amount of coverage in relation to gender and political party**

YEAR	Male			Female		
	Cons	Labour/*	Lib Dem	Cons	Labour	Lib Dem
1992	73.8% (99/134)	18% (24/134)	2.2% (3/134)	84.6% (11/13)	7.7% (1/13)	7.7% (1/13)
2002	18% (30/166)	71.6% (119/166)	4.2% (7/166)	27.3% (9/33)	72.7% (24/33)	0% (0/33)
2012	60.5% (103/170)	15.3% (27/170)	8.8% (15/170)	37.5% (12/32)	21.9% (7/32)	0% (0/32)
Total	49.3% (232/470) men referred to are Cons	36.2% (170/470) are Lab	5.32% (25/470) are Lib Dem	44.9% (35/78) women referred to are Cons	41% (32/78) are Lab	1.3% (1/78) are Lib Dem

**TABLE 3: Tone of coverage presented in terms of gender**

	MALE			FEMALE		
	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	NEUTRAL	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	NEUTRAL
1992 (men are mentioned 134 times, women 13)	6% (8/134)	20.1% (27/134)	58.2% (78/134)	30.7% (4/13)	15.3% (2/13)	53.8% (7/13)
2002 (Men are mentioned 166 times, women 33)	12% (20/166)	13.3% (22/166)	55.4% (92/166)	21.2% (7/33)	18.2% (6/33)	42.4% (14/33)
2012 (Men are mentioned 170 times, women 32)	10% (17/170)	34.7% (59/170)	24.1% (41/170)	9.4% (3/32)	40.6% (13/32)	21.8% (7/32)
Total	Male positive (45/470) = 9.5%	Male negative (108/470) =23%	Male neutral (211/470) = 45%	Female positive (14/78) = 18%	Female negative (21/78) =26.9%	Female neutral (29/78) =37.2%

**TABLES 4 (A, B&C) Tone of coverage presented in terms of gender and party**

TABLE 4A shows all years, genders and parties are presented, expressed as percentages of the total amount of times each party is referred to in each year's sample, and with

the original figures provided so that the number of times a party is mentioned in each category may be understood in real terms. The latter is useful, because if a party is only mentioned once, for example as a positive story, the percentage would be 100% positive for a particular year, but we also need to know the results are skewed by the fact that this party is largely ignored and rarely features in th mainstream press.

**TABLE 4A\***

YEAR	PARTY	POSITIVE		NEGATIVE		NEUTRAL	
		FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE	MALE
1992	Cons (110 mentions)	4.5% (5/110)	7.3% (8/110)	1.8% (2/110)	22.7% (25/110)	2.7% (3/110)	52.7% (58/110)
	Lab (34)	0	2.9% (1/34)	0	5.9% (2/34)	2.9% (1/34)	38.2% (13/34)
	Lib Dem (4)	0	0	0	0	25% (1/4)	50% (2/4)
2002	Cons (39)	7.7% (3/39)	25.6% (10/39)	5.1% (2/39)	20.5% (8/39)	10.3% (4/39)	23% (9/39)
	Lab (143)	2.1% (3/143)	5.6% (8/143)	2.1% (3/143)	25.9% (37/143)	7.7% (11/143)	45.5% (65/143)
	Lib Dem (7)	0	0	0	0	0	71.4% (5/7)
2012	Cons (115)	3.5% (4/115)	7.8% (9/115)	8.7% (10/115)	37.4% (43/115)	3.5% (4/115)	20% (23/115)
	Lab (34)	0	17.6% (6/34)	11.8% (4/34)	11.8% (4/34)	8.8% (3/34)	11.8% (4/34)
	Lib Dem (15)	0	13.3% (2/15)	0	33.3% (5/15)	0	46.6% (7/15)

\*Please note that the figures do not add up to 100%, since we only included stories where the main actors were portrayed in a positive, negative or neutral way. For instance, in some stories, the politician quoted is not the main focus of the story. Instead they are, for example, briefing against another politician, or supporting another politician and it is this other politician who is the main focus of the story. These stories about others were not included.

TABLES 4B and 4C go on to divide the data into tables for each gender (and party) and to present the percentages as a proportion of the number of times a particular gender from each party is mentioned. **The Liberal Democrats were mentioned so rarely that they have not been included in TABLES 4B and 4C.**

**TABLE 4B: Tone for Conservative and Labour FEMALE politicians expressed as a percentage of total amount of times females from a particular party are mentioned**

1992 Conservative Females (11)	Female + 45.5% (5/11)	Female – 18.1% (2/11)	Female neutral 27.2% (3/11)
1992 Labour Females (13)	Female + 0	Female – 0	Female neutral 7.7% (1/13)
2002 Conservative Females (9)	Female + 33% (3/9)	Female – 22% (2/9)	Female neutral 44.4% (4/9)
2002 Labour Females (24)	Female + 12.5% (3/24)	Female – 12.5% (3/24)	Female neutral 45.8% (11/24)
2012 Conservative Females (12)	Female + 33% (4/12)	Female – 83% (10/12)	Female neutral 33% (4/12)
2012 Labour Females (7)	Female + 0	Female – 57% (4/7)	Female neutral 42.8% (3/7)

**TABLE 4C: Tone for MALE Conservative and Labour politicians expressed as a percentage of amount of times males from a particular party are mentioned**

1992 Conservative Males (99)	Male + 8% (8/99)	Male – 25.3% (25/99)	Male neutral 58.6% (58/99)
1992 Labour Males (21)	Male + 4.8% (1/21)	Male – 9.5% (2/21)	Male neutral 61.9% (13/21)
2002 Conservative Males (30)	Male + 33.3% (10/30)	Male – 26.7% (8/30)	Male neutral 30% (9/30)
2002 Labour Males (119)	Male + 6.7% (8/119)	Male – 31.1% (37/119)	Male neutral 54.6% (65/119)
2012 Conservative Males (103)	Male + 8.7% (9/103)	Male – 41.7% (43/103)	Male neutral 22.3% (23/103)
2012 Labour Males (27)	Male + 22.2% (6/27)	Male – 14.8% (4/27)	Male neutral 14.8% (4/27)

