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How do journalists and MPs perceive female politicians to be represented in the British media in 2017 and could these perceptions help to explain why fewer Members of Parliament are women?

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Table of Contents

Abstract		4
Introduction		5
Literature Review	<i>Women in Politics</i>	7
	<i>The Printed Press</i>	12
	<i>Women in Journalism</i>	17
	<i>Broadcast Media</i>	20
Methodology		23
	<i>Table One</i>	25
	<i>Ethics</i>	28
Findings and Analysis		29
	<i>Table Two</i>	47
Conclusion		49
Bibliography		52
Appendices:		
	<i>Ethics Form</i>	59
	<i>Consent Forms</i>	60
	<i>Information Sheet</i>	64
	<i>Blank Consent Form</i>	65
	<i>Dissertation Questionnaire – Journalist</i>	66
	<i>Dissertation Questionnaire – Political Commentator</i>	68
	<i>Dissertation Questionnaire – MP</i>	70

Abstract

There has historically been a gender imbalance weighted towards men in Parliament in the United Kingdom since women were first allowed by law to stand for Parliament in 1918. Certain reasons for the lack of parity and its possible effects on democracy have been discussed by scholars, as has the media's contribution to this. Many pieces of research into the media's representation of female politicians concentrate on newspaper analysis. There are few studies which draw on interviews carried out with female politicians and journalists. My findings interpret the perceptions of nine elite participants on the issue of how female politicians are currently represented in the British media. The participants are all professionals from the domains of politics and media. This research adds to existing studies by providing contemporary, empirical insight into how both female and male politicians and journalists consider that female politicians are represented in the British media in 2017 and whether the representation is an issue for gender equality in Parliament. It also extends to analysis of the broadcast media as well as encompassing the printed press.

Introduction

In 1997, the proportion of women Members of Parliament (MPs) rose to 18% following the General Election that year (Apostolova and Cracknell, 2017, p. 5). Prior to this, women had never held more than 10% of the total 650 available seats in Parliament (ibid). It was thus hailed a landmark victory (Ross et al., 2013, p. 5; Adcock, 2010, p. 135).

The scarcity of female MPs baffles me and has ignited an enthusiasm to find out why. It is apparently a fact that appals MPs so much so that there is a Women and Equalities Committee in Parliament tasked with encouraging women to stand as candidates for Parliament (House of Commons, 2017). A cross-party campaign has also been established by a group of voluntary activists. The campaign, entitled 50:50 Parliament, lobbies party leaders to address the gender imbalance (50:50 Parliament Campaign, 2016).

My bemusement at the issue is justified. There are key reasons why women should be encouraged into Parliament as can be demonstrated by some of their achievements. In 1918, women were entitled by law to stand for Parliament (Apostolova and Cracknell, 2017, p. 7) following the motion put forward by Herbert Samuel "that . . . it is desirable that a Bill should be passed forthwith making women eligible as Members of Parliament" (House of Commons, 2010, p. 3). It can be argued that this was a radical step forward and it is surely the beginning of parity in politics between the genders. The significance of this was noted by the first female MP, Viscountess Astor, in her maiden speech: "I do not want you to look on your lady Member as a fanatic or lunatic. I am simply trying to speak for hundreds of women and children throughout the country who cannot speak for themselves" (ibid, 4). A female point of view is as valuable to democracy as a male one.

“The debate about the composition of the House of Commons is one of the hardy perennials of British politics” (Campbell and Cowley, 2014, p. 444). It seems likely that gender imbalance in Parliament is an often revisited topic. The media are “the most important source of information for most people in advanced democracies” (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 229). The imbalance thus operates alongside this media supremacy in the United Kingdom. The aim of my dissertation, therefore, is to understand what perceptions exist amongst politicians and journalists around the presentation of female politicians in the media with a view to discovering whether this could contribute to a lower number of women MPs than men. I propose to expand on existing work in this field by researching the following question:

How do journalists and MPs perceive female politicians to be represented in the British media in 2017 and could these perceptions help to explain why fewer Members of Parliament are women?

Literature Review

Women in Politics

A “healthy democratic system should be representative of the society it serves” (O’Neill et al. 2016, p. 293). In the interests of democracy, it is important to foster female participation in politics (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 422). Moreover, society can never be truly equal without women in senior political roles (ibid). As a mature democracy, Britain must take note.

In sharp juxtaposition to the contended benefits to democracy, the long hours and expense (Campbell and Cowley, 2014, p. 431) are cited as examples of deterring women from a career in politics. It is equally clear that there is a desire for structural change in Parliament to attract women (ibid).

It is undeniable that women politicians are an asset to both Parliament and democracy. Female MPs have been instrumental in developing policies to benefit women (Gay and Cracknell, 2013, p. 13-20). Examples of this are Eleanor Rathbone, who was successful in bringing about the Family Allowances Act 1945 (ibid, p. 7) and Barbara Castle, who championed several noteworthy laws on child benefit and pensions (ibid, p. 9). In addition to this, it was Margaret Thatcher who introduced a Private Members’ Bill in the House of Commons to allow the Public and the Press to attend meetings held by local authorities and other public bodies (House of Commons, 2010, p. 5). The bill enabled greater scrutiny in local government (Gay and Cracknell, 2013, p. 16) and thus impacts positively on democracy.

The latest census carried out in the United Kingdom in 2011 revealed a population comprising 31 million men and 32.2 million women (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Against this backdrop,

only 32 % of MPs were women at the 2017 General Election and world ranking for the number of women elected to Parliament is 46th (House of Commons, 2017, p. 3). It seems astonishing that almost a century on from Viscountess Astor's speech, the female portion of the population is still not represented proportionally in Parliament. We need to understand why. The highest proportion of female candidates (29%) stood for Parliament in the 2017 General Election (ibid , p. 8). This election was in fact groundbreaking in terms of female politicians entering Parliament as 208 out of 650 seats were won by women (ibid, p. 4). The signs may be encouraging, although at this pace there will not be equal representation in Parliament until 2062 (Fawcett Society, 2017). It is possible to infer from this that the number of MPs in Parliament is becoming more reflective of the population split, but a gender balance in Parliament continues to elude us.

On a global level, it is evident that men still command the world of politics (Holtz-Bacha, 2013, p. 62). We need look no further than those present at G8 meetings (ibid). Reference is made to Angela Merkel being the sole woman in attendance (ibid), but Theresa May now figures. This could be a sign that women are slowly gaining some ground in the most senior political positions and, I think, adds weight to the progress made in the United Kingdom.

As a woman, I am very keen to ensure that female voices, such as mine, can be heard. The vision, in part, to research this topic has come from the impact that the sad death of Jo Cox, MP has had on me personally, not least because she championed the celebration of diversity as is reflected in her well publicised maiden speech in the House of Commons. The Jo Cox Women in Leadership Programme (Labour, 2017) has subsequently been set up by the Labour Party to honour the campaigning carried out by Jo and to encourage more women to enter politics (BBC, 2016). In fact, 63 % of the shadow cabinet (Parliament, 2017a) and 33 % of the Cabinet are women (Parliament, 2017b). That is encouraging.

All political parties now agree that the House of Commons should be representative of the people it serves (Cowley 2013, p. 139). The achievements detailed above can be attributed to both sides of the House. David Cameron pledged in 2005 to address the lack of female MPs in the Conservative Party which he repeated later in 2010 and 2015 (Campbell and Childs, 2015, p. 149). This concurred with Ed Miliband who, in 2012, expressed a wish to achieve “a politics where politicians look like the constituents they represent. That’s not what Westminster looks like today” (Cowley, 2013, p. 138). Based on the census figures, his assessment was correct. Furthermore, he argued “we are right to say we need more women and we need 50 % of our MPs being women in my view, that is the only way we can be a truly representative country” (ibid, p. 139). Both former Party leaders had recognised a problem with gender representation in Parliament, which makes my research all the more meaningful, particularly as it will add the voices of current politicians and journalists to those of leaders like Cameron and Miliband.

Despite being able to boast two female leaders, both elected as Prime Minister, the Conservative Party trails behind the Labour Party in terms of the number of female MPs (Adcock, 2010, p. 135; Campbell and Childs, 2015, p. 150). It would appear that Labour have addressed the problem with relative ease through gender quotas and putting forward women only candidate shortlists for the 2005 and 2010 General Elections (House of Commons, 2010, p. 6; Kenny, M, 2015, p. 13). Traditional Conservative values seem to present the Party with a greater challenge in embracing an increase in the number of female MPs. The reason behind this is that feminism challenges gender norms, whereas conservatism in fact supports these norms (Campbell and Childs, 2015, p. 156-158). Moreover, in the USA only 19.6 % of the United States Congress are women; of these, 78 are Democrats and 27 are Republican (CAWP, 2017). This suggests that the same challenge could be applicable to political parties outside the United Kingdom with Conservative values.

The question of gender balance, however, transcends merely numerical definition. “The kinds of experiences which women will have already had as daughters, mothers and workers are likely to give them perspectives on social and other policy areas which are absolutely different from those

of their male colleagues” (Okin, 1990 cited in Ross, 2002, p. 127). The quote embodies why, in addition to mirroring the pure population numbers, there should be a requirement for a gender balance in Parliament. Ross (ibid) further clarifies that women relate better to how an issue will affect other women as a result of their own experiences. It also revisits Viscountess Astor’s ambition all those years ago to speak for women. Absolute certainty on how a gender balanced Parliament contributes to democracy (O’Neill et al., 2016, p. 293) is now illustrated.

In view of a reduced presence in politics, there are consequently perhaps insufficient female role models in society (OpCit research (KMRC) Ltd, 2013, p. 34). As a result of winning the Conservative Party leadership contest in 1975 and General Election in 1979 (BBC 2017a), Margaret Thatcher can be credited, in my view, as a trailblazer of Parliament for female politicians. Whether an admirer or not, it surely cannot be disputed that “Thatcher did break down barriers for women in politics, whether she had intended to or not” (Wheeler, 2016). Indeed, she said in 1952 “I hope that we shall see more and more women combining marriage and a career” (BBC 2017a). This must have been inspirational to women less than a decade after the Second World War. That Britain can boast such an enduring Prime Minister, is a reason why it is important to encourage women to pursue a career in politics. With reference to Thatcher, Rasmussen (1981, p. 620, cited in Campbell, R and Childs, S, 2015, p. 150) pondered whether successful female politicians could spur other females on to take up these roles.

It is evident from the foregoing that reasons detailing why a career in politics is challenging for some women have already been documented by scholars; likewise, the reasons why it is imperative to reach a more balanced Parliament in terms of gender. There is perhaps a more surprising element to contemplate: fashion.

“Fashion always has a part to play in the political arena” (Fury, 2015). In order to understand the pertinence of my research, it is important to reflect on how female politicians have been covered in

the British media. For example, Theresa May is frequently associated with her shoes as substantiated by Day (2014). Day appears to express incredulity that May can be so closely associated with her shoes despite holding the senior role of Home Secretary in the Cabinet at the time of writing. Moreover, the piece raises alarm at taking anything so unusual as a female MP seriously, let alone one wearing those shoes (ibid). The press seems enthusiastic about reporting on Theresa May's clothes and appearance. One newspaper even focussed on her choice of dress throughout the entire General Election campaign in 2017 (Holt, 2017), including her apparent rejection of Tory blue (ibid, 2017).

One of the most notorious articles which has been published in the printed press in 2017 is "Nevermind Brexit, who won Legs-It!" as referenced by Oppenheim (2017). In my opinion, one of the reasons why this article became so well known is because of the criticism it attracted for being sexist (ibid). In the article, the appearance of female politicians triumphed over their policies on Brexit (ibid).

However, prominent male politicians have equally borne the brunt of media commentary on their appearance. There has been press speculation on whether David Cameron wears expensive Savile Row suits (Dominiczak, 2015) and Jeremy Corbyn has been lauded for dressing "abysmally" (Fury, 2015) as this is in keeping with the demographic he is trying to attract (ibid).

It could be argued justly that female politicians do sometimes seem to seek media coverage of their appearance. For instance, Theresa May appeared in a photo shoot for the magazine, *Vogue* (Pentelow and O'Connor, 2017). Nicola Sturgeon also took part in a photo shoot published in October 2015, despite sharing with the *Telegraph* her feelings on the unforgiving media examination of her appearance (Johnson, 2015).

Whilst my research does not concentrate on social media, it is worth noting that some female politicians have spoken publicly about the “rivers” of abuse they receive on social media (Hinsliff, 2017). However, online abuse does not only target women. A study of Twitter carried out by the University of Sheffield and BuzzFeed identified that in fact male Conservative MPs received the most abuse during the 2017 General Election (ibid).

The media are prolific and far reaching in the United Kingdom, which is why it is significant to learn more about their influence in this area of politics. By collecting empirical data from politicians and journalists, I aim to provide new depth to the knowledge available, by offering insider opinion about the current relationship of politics and the media with focus on media representation of women in British politics.

The Printed Press

“Modern politics is mediated politics” (Bennett and Entman, 2001 cited in Aalberg and Strömbäck, 2010, p. 167). I return to the notion of media dominating Western democracies (Strömbäck, 2008, p. 229) and it is accordingly important to consider how the media represent politicians. The media are vital to politics to the extent that “it is crucial for politicians to be visible in the media as a prerequisite for political success” (Aalberg and Strömbäck, ibid, p. 171). In order to pursue a career in politics, it seems there is no way of escaping media coverage. In particular, I have chosen to focus on how female politicians are represented in the media in view of the “widespread assumption that national politics in the United Kingdom is a man’s game” (Ross et al., 2013, p. 4) and because they are outnumbered by their male counterparts in the United Kingdom. Moreover, the newspaper reports detailed above suggest a concentration on the appearance of female politicians to the exclusion of their policies. It is possible that women could be deterred from entering politics as a result. I want to discover what current professionals in the industry believe, which will enhance existing studies on newspaper coverage.

Laura Bates, author of *The Everyday Sexism Project*, which aims to document and publicise acts of sexism encountered by women, claims that as a result of the media, voters will understand about a female candidate's appearance, but about a male candidate's policies (Wylie, 2016). This claim is important as it suggests that media coverage discriminates between male and female politicians in its coverage and therefore skews the notion of gender equality. It underpins the significance of my research question and raises the possibility that women politicians may not be able to contend seriously with their male counterparts if the media prioritise appearance over policies. Furthermore, Fallon et al (2011, p. 1) assert that women are more likely to participate passively in politics such as signing a petition, but less likely to stand for Parliament or even write a blog (ibid, p. 4). This study indicates that there could be a problem for democracy in Britain, given that over 50% of the population are women, and underlines the importance of female role models in politics in order to keep female citizens engaged in democracy. These findings place some responsibility for poor representation of female politicians with the media.

The media appear to enjoy a position of power as they have the potential to shape public opinion (Holtz-Bacha, 2013; p. 64, Kahn, 1994, p. 154). Media coverage, for women in particular, can be "crucial" (Holtz-Bacha, 2013, p. 64). In view of the powerful media presence in today's politics, Adcock (2010, p. 136) is keen to focus on the part the media play in representing women. By carrying out content analysis of news coverage of the 1997 General Election, Adcock (2010) assesses how frequently and in what way women were represented. Her rationale is to establish whether the representation contributes to a lack of parity in Britain's democracy and she concludes that indeed women were "marginalised as serious political speakers" (ibid, p. 150). There is further suggestion that male politicians are preferred at the expense of female politicians and that male politicians should be afforded greater credibility than their female counterparts. The power of the media is highlighted as it "has the potential to contribute significantly to women's symbolic and substantive political and cultural representation" (ibid, p. 152). Drawing such a conclusion from

analysis of newspaper articles strengthens a requirement to seek the opinion of politics and media professionals. The views that they offer will build on the research carried out here.

O'Neill et al (2016, p. 298) conducted content analysis of newspaper articles between 1992 and 2012 to understand how women politicians are portrayed in the British press and if there have been any changes over the twenty year period. Far from progressing towards equality in representation, their study reveals that the serious issues present in politics belong in a man's world aided by a press which prefers to report the views of male MPs and sideline the women (ibid, p. 303-304). The outcome of this study provides further evidence that women politicians are not deemed as figures of authority in the same way as men.

The British General Election in 2010 has also been studied. Reports on candidates in twelve newspapers from broadsheet to tabloid, both weekday and weekend editions were sampled during the four weeks leading up to election day to assess how each gender was covered (Ross et al., 2013, p. 3). In their sample of stories that covered both genders, 71 % of the articles reported on men only compared with 8 % that only featured women (ibid, p. 9). The preference to discuss male politicians in the press at a relatively recent election is further demonstrated. The lower number of female candidates compared to their male colleagues can explain some of the gender bias in newspaper reporting (Ross et al., 2013), but the study confirms that proportionally speaking, female candidates still received less coverage than males (ibid, p. 9).

I referred earlier to family commitments and why this might preclude women from pursuing a career in politics. Motherhood is seriously scrutinised in politics and in the newspapers. Walsh (2015, p. 1028) references an article in *The Times* from May 28, 2013 published following the death of Margaret Thatcher. It claims she was "a better politician than wife and mother". Walsh (ibid) further ponders if equal attention would be devoted to paternity in the case of a male politician, while Holtz-Bacha (2013, p. 68) is certain it would not. Female politician Chacón of

Spain was criticised severely in the media on an international level for embracing the role of Defence Secretary in 2008 whilst heavily pregnant (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 429). Harmer et al. (2016, p. 4) blame the media for reinforcing the idea that masculine traits are a prerequisite to success in politics. Senator Barbara Boxer similarly articulates that female politicians who are mothers, are usually asked how the children will be looked after (Boxer & Boxer, 1994 cited in Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015, p. 1687), which is an idea corroborated in Holtz-Bacha (2013, p. 64). There seems to be expectations of women rooted in society which make it more difficult for women to progress in politics and media focus on aspects such as motherhood could be increasing the difficulty. Harmer et al. (2016, p. 2) discuss that “research has shown that women leaders struggle to meet the demands of masculine leadership ideals” whilst Holtz-Bacha (2013, p. 63 and 73) suggest that society’s expectations of a woman does not marry with reaching the top of a career (ibid). They argue that women not only have to battle men throughout a career in politics, but also the preconceived ideas of society (ibid, p. 62). They term this a “double-bind” (ibid, p. 63). Wheeler (2016) cites journalist Miranda Green’s assessment that female Labour politicians generally repudiate female Conservatives like Theresa May and Andrea Leadsom because they “don’t fit their idea of a feminist”. Both women are female politicians who have achieved senior roles in politics whilst also maintaining a family life. The idea of a “double-bind” is reinforced by such criticism from some female Labour MPs.

As noted, gender bias in the media is recognised globally in relation to politicians (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 422, Vos, 2013, p. 389 and Harmer et al., p. 3).

Press coverage from 1999 to 2008 of Elizabeth Dole, Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton and Claire McCaskill across two election campaigns (Meeks, 2012, p. 175) is analysed with specific focus on the end of each campaign, which is deemed to be the most influential on the reader (ibid, p. 182). The basis of the research was to understand how the American press reflected male and female politicians according to novelty labels, political issues, and character traits (ibid, p. 178).

The results show that women were viewed with less familiarity than men, but women received more coverage of policies and traits than men (ibid, p. 187). In addition to this, the more senior the office, the more the news became gender related (ibid), which adds credence to the suggestion that women seeking such positions are “norm-breakers” (ibid, p. 188) and is compatible with the previously referenced idea of the ‘double-bind’. Labels of this kind could explain why women might not want to pursue a career in politics as they are judged endlessly against men rather than on merit. Meeks (ibid) consequently highlights the potential ability of the media to shape public sentiment that politics is not for women. However, a less savoury theory is also put forward that the media are just waiting for female politicians to make a mistake to be able to demonstrate that they do not belong (Holtz-Bacha, 2013, p. 66). Research to determine whether current politicians and journalists agree with these theories will enhance existing studies as will opinion from those working in the broadcast media where data is not so abundant.

Chacón, a member of Zapatero’s largely female Cabinet of 2008 in Spain has been mentioned. Content analysis of newspapers from four European nations was conducted on the coverage of the Cabinet members two weeks after the election (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012, p. 422). It reveals that the British press solely published articles that focused uniquely on their appearance (ibid, p. 430). It transpired from this study that the role of the female politician is made harder by the press in view of the commentary on aspects such as appearance of the women politicians rather than judgements being made on the education and experience for the role (p. 437). Judgement of female politicians on merit is again lacking. Media representation of female politicians appears to be significant in terms of what they can achieve. It seems therefore pertinent for me to study the British press and its focus on appearance.

Research carried out on political marketing (Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015, p. 1677) considers its application to female politicians based on the work of Sociologist, Erving Goffman. Interviews were

held with four senior female politicians as well as members of their staff and media. A political consultant references a requirement to 'downplay' the looks of a female politician in order not to overshadow her policies with her appearance (ibid, p. 1685). This is in contrast to men who are seemingly limited to the type of suit they wear (ibid). These interviews are particularly revealing in terms of the first hand views they share from people working in the field. They show an insight into the lengths necessary for a woman to go to in order to be taken seriously in the media. Similar research from a British point of view should be welcomed to the field of study.

Women in Journalism

The relationship between politicians and journalists is relevant. A survey of MPs in Norway and Sweden was carried out to establish their relationship with journalists (Aalberg and Strömbäck, 2010). It revealed that male MPs enjoy a more comfortable relationship with the media as well as more contact with journalists (ibid, p. 181). This is one of only very few studies that involve Members of Parliament directly as part of research rather than newspaper analysis. The relationship between journalists and politician is perhaps a factor in how male and female politicians are covered in the media.

It is apparent that many media outlets are run by men (Eleanor Mills, chair of campaign group Women in Journalism cited in Reid, 2015) and that senior roles are held by men whilst women find promotion into senior roles more difficult (Thurman et al., 2016, p. 9). The majority of the workforce – 55% - are men (ibid, p. 8). Thurman et al. (2016) encompass both written and broadcast media. It is perhaps also meaningful that most senior executives in the broadcasting industry are male (Eikhof and York, 2016, p. 158). If fewer journalists are women, then it could account for why male politicians appear to be covered more favourably than female politicians. Equally, if female politicians prefer to speak to female journalists, then a lower number of female journalists in broadcasting suggests that female politicians will not receive as great an amount of

coverage as their male colleagues. However, Eleanor Mills believes that there is increasing gender diversity in the profession, particularly as “half their readers are women and they've got to have women in writing the stories” (Reid, 2015).

Female journalists quote female politicians more than their male colleagues (Vos, 2013, p. 402). It is therefore significant that studies have revealed that there are fewer female journalists as this could suggest female politicians will receive less coverage. The study carried out by Ross et al. (2013) exposed that the majority of the articles written on women politicians were by female journalists (ibid, p. 17). It could therefore be suggested that the female journalists have a role to play in ensuring that female politicians are regarded seriously and that more emphasis is placed on their policies rather than appearance. The results of the study corroborate that female politicians prefer to speak to female journalists.

The study examined by Ross et al. (2013) also documents how many female journalists covered the 2010 British election and whether the sex of the journalist had any impact on the content of story that was reported. The results showed that 80 % of the campaign coverage was reported by male journalists and that male journalists usually use male subjects (ibid, p. 12). If this is the case, then it is logical that male politicians will appear more frequently in the papers.

Research by the Women, Men and Media Project in America routinely concluded for almost a decade up to Miller's (1996, p. 515) analysis in 1996 that there is a dearth of both female guests and presenters across the written and broadcast media to the extent that women are “significantly underrepresented” in the news.

In the United Kingdom, indications are that the representation of female guests on the news has not improved on the findings from America given above in almost twenty years. Two surveys

carried out by students at City University between March 2012 and October 2013 checked over 200 news programmes and between October 2013 and March 2014 monitored Sky News evening bulletins, BBC News at Ten, ITV News at Ten, Today on BBC Radio 4, and Channel 4 News (Howell, 2014). The results show that the number of male to female guests invited on to a programme always came out at 4:1 respectively (ibid).

Howell (2014) considers whether broadcasters might perceive male guests to be more authoritative whilst women appear less confident (ibid). The consideration is important in the context of journalists not taking risks (ibid). The suggestion is that they are unlikely to deviate from this practice. If she is right, then female voices will continue to be overshadowed by the men's and women politicians could struggle to promote their policies on television and radio.

Howell (2014) highlights the Today programme's reluctance to embrace female reporters. Her point is significant because the Today programme is largely a politics show. It is equally significant in view of the points already raised on journalistic practices. If male reporters, like male journalists, choose to interview a male politician rather than a female one, women will fight to be heard. To put this into context though, a survey of participants in the training days for female experts held by the BBC in 2013 showed that even leading female experts in various fields were not comfortable with being on air as guests (Howell, 2014). Perhaps there is a real lack of confidence amongst women, but women must overcome this in order to contribute fully to society and ultimately be represented equally with men.

The opinion that the number of male journalists has dominated the number of female journalists is recurring. Analysis of ten major newspapers as well as ten mid market newspapers in the USA over a one month period as part of The Women, Men and Media project in 1989 revealed that 85 % of interviews on the front pages were with men whilst men wrote 65 % of the front page stories

and 74 % of opinion pieces (Bridge, 1996 cited in Miller, 1996, p. 514). Moreover, analysis of news programmes in 1995 revealed that 80 % of the nightly news was reported by men. However, 61 % of the news on CNN was presented by a woman, but only 23 % of guests were women (Bridge, 1995, p. 8 cited in Miller, 1996, p. 514-515).

Ross and Carter (2011, p. 1161) contend that the greater number of male journalists lead to news consumers viewing issues from a male perspective. This is problematic given that a female audience will have different priorities (Savigny and O'Neill 2014). Ross (2002, p. 167) claims that women recognise that most journalists are men and consequently politics are reported through a man's eyes. Political correspondents in the lobby in the British Parliament are no exception (Fawcett Society, 1999, p. 24, cited in Ross, 2002, p. 169). This could consequently overshadow what is important to women (ibid) and drown out the voices of female politicians. It will be interesting to learn how politicians and journalists regard the representation of female voices in the media as it will provide much needed expansion to the existing information.

Broadcast Media

My research has revealed that the majority of scholarly work on female politicians in the media is based on newspaper coverage. Westlye (1991 cited in Kahn, 1994, p. 158) contends that newspapers provide coverage of elections that is more reflective of the campaign than the broadcast media. A further benefit of newspaper analysis is that articles were saved on microfilm, whereas tapes of television coverage are almost impossible to obtain (Kahn, 1994, p. 158). These restrictions in relation to broadcast material probably explain why so many studies concentrate on content analysis of press reports. Focus on newspapers will perhaps shift in the future given the technological advances of catch-up television and podcasts. Again, the current lack of broadcast material supports a research requirement in this area.

“Political opinion is not shaped by the direct experience of politics, but is rather a consequence of the images which we are given via news accounts of politics” (Lippmann, 1992 cited in Ross, 2002, p. 120). Images of both male and female politicians are likely to effect public opinion (Ross, 2002, p. 120). The influence of television is here deemed to be strong and there is a similarity with the influence detailed previously in relation to the printed press. An analysis carried out in America of broadcast media using voting data for the 2006 gubernatorial and Senate elections (Lenz and Lawson 2011, p. 575) has indicated that people with little knowledge of politics, but who watch television frequently, voted in these elections largely on candidate appearance. This suggests that those who watch television might be persuaded to vote based on appearance (ibid) and is in keeping with Lippmann’s statement above. It equally strengthens the case for ascertaining the perceptions of current journalists and politicians regarding media presentation of politicians in Britain and the possible impact on gender balance in Parliament.

Appearance became critical with the advent of television (Ross, 2002, p. 64). Lenz and Lawson, (2011) have demonstrated that image is a key factor in the outcome of politics. Participants with little political knowledge voted in greater numbers for a competent looking candidate. It would seem that appearance is an enabler to success in this instance, although the study revealed those with increased political knowledge were not as affected by television images (2011, p. 586). Nonetheless the importance of appearance cannot be denied. It will be valuable to understand what perceptions of female politicians in the media are held by members of their respective industries.

A more recent study (Vos, 2013, p. 390) states that male and female politicians are allocated different amounts of television coverage. The analysis of Flemish television news at 7 pm on both a Commercial and a Public Service broadcaster between 2003 to 2010 evidences that broadcasters prefer to headline male politicians rather than female ones (ibid) apart from during election campaigns (ibid, p. 403).

Results of her study acknowledge that female politicians feature less in the news because they do not hold senior positions in politics (ibid, p. 402) and an audience is perhaps more eager to learn what the more senior politicians have to say (ibid, p. 392). Female politicians are accordingly afforded on average eight minutes less time on air than their male colleagues (ibid, p. 402). Furthermore, there is clear gender bias where male politicians of the same rank as a female are preferred (ibid). Even in the broadcast media, female politicians' policies appear to carry less weight than those of their male counterparts. It would be understandable if women were deterred from pursuing a career in politics.

An addition to analysis of newspaper and television coverage of female politicians, Ross (2002) conducted interviews with female politicians to obtain their views on how they are represented in politics. Whilst media coverage of their private lives is acknowledged, the majority of participants deny that the media impact negatively on their ability as politicians (Ross, 2002, p. 166). Male politicians are not included in her work, neither are male or female journalists. My research will fill this void.

Comprehensive research on how female politicians are represented in the media has been conducted through substantial assessment of newspaper and television coverage of female and male politicians. Some interviews with female politicians also feature. Research for the question I propose will enrich existing data with first hand, up to date opinion from professionals in both politics and media. It will provide information of how politicians view their own representation and whether their views concur with those of the journalists. By involving men, it will be possible to add a further dimension to existing research. Analysis of the interview responses will then enable me to offer insight into whether current media coverage could be a factor in the gender imbalance in Parliament.

Methodology

The literature detailed above draws conclusions on how female politicians are represented largely as a result of analysing newspaper articles and television output. A small number of studies carried out by conducting interviews with elites are the exception. In order to complement the wide range of content analysis already done on news items, I aim to carry out a piece of original research. To this end, I interviewed MPs, journalists and broadcasters to discover their opinions on how female politicians are represented in the British media, given that their professional lives are centred in this field. By including broadcast journalists, I seek to enrich the plethora of research carried out on work by newspaper journalists.

In order to gather the data to present such empirical findings, I wanted to ask my own set of questions in order to elicit examples from the participants which might not yet have been examined by scholars in the field of political communication. The result would establish a primary source of information. I set the parameters of my study to focus solely on the British media as I have a keen interest in political communication in Britain and I am aware of the key political journalists as well as who the politicians are. I considered I would be able to find sufficient elite contacts to carry out my research. I decided to concentrate on the traditional forms of the media, namely the written press, television and radio. I made this decision because these types of media only publish or broadcast reports that have been written by professional journalists, which generally suggests an informed, considered report is put forward. I wanted to exclude commentary from non-professional journalists, which would have been impossible with a study of social media as it allows for immediate commentary from anyone with access. As a consequence of this research, I now want to offer some empirical evidence to complement the research explored above.

“Elite interviews can and should also be used to provide much needed context or colour for our books and journal articles” (Goldstein, 2002, p. 669). It is this colour that I aspire to reflect in my

research, which is why I have chosen to pursue this type of research. Whilst content analysis enables research on what has been published and how frequently, there is no facility to ask the subject what they think of publications, unlike with interviews (Philo, 2007, p. 182). He further discusses some limitations of purely carrying out analysis of newspaper reports (ibid). He cites an example that when needing greater clarity on the background of a written report it is very useful to be able to speak to the journalist. In addition to this he (2007, p. 183) remarks that “political, economic and institutional factors” can influence the substance of a news report as can whether the media outlet is publicly or privately owned (ibid). He further reasons that balanced journalism could become stifled at the expense of appealing to an audience (ibid). It is therefore reasonable to surmise that interviews carried out with elites will provide far more revealing data than newspaper content can and the responses will significantly enhance this area of study. All participants have been guaranteed anonymity and this should equally ensure that responses are candid.

The people who have taken part are all high profile and I include a table below, which details the participants. Three work as Members of Parliament, one is a former Member of Parliament, three work for the BBC as a news presenter, political correspondent and a radio broadcaster and two are political commentators with newspaper columns as well as appearing as panellists on newspaper reviews and political debates across a range of news channels. As above, all have been guaranteed anonymity, although four participants were happy to be named. Four participants are women and the other five are men. I have not specified the age and length of time in their job role in order to protect the identity of those who requested anonymity. I have instead indicated whether their age is greater than 40 and if the length of time in their profession has been greater than 10 years in order to demonstrate the level of experience each individual has in their industry. I have deemed ten years to be reasonably experienced.

Table One

Name	Gender	Age greater than 40	Job Description	Length of time in Role greater than 10 Years
Female Journalist Number 1	F	Yes	BBC News Presenter	Yes
Female Journalist Number 2	F	Yes	BBC Business Correspondent	No
Ann Widdecombe	F	69	Former Conservative MP and Government Minister	23 years
Tracy Brabin, MP	F	55	Labour MP and Shadow Secretary for Early Years	10 months
Tim Iredale	M	45	BBC Political Editor for Yorkshire and Lincolnshire Region	12 years
Male Journalist Number 1	M	Yes	Political Commentator	Yes
Male Journalist Number 2	M	No	Political Commentator	Yes
Philip Davies, MP	M	45	Conservative MP	12 years
Male Journalist Number 3	M	Yes	Presenter at BBC Regional Radio	Yes

In order to research this study, I approached a total of 44 MPs, newspaper journalists and television and radio broadcasters, whose input I would value as a contribution to my study. I was successful in securing interviews with 20 % of those asked. Interviewees were chosen from a range of media outlets as well as freelance journalists. They are from both ends of the political spectrum in order to achieve the most balanced, unbiased approach possible within the parameters of this study. In terms of MPs, those from the Conservative Party have been more willing to respond to emails and to participate. I have, moreover, tried to approach the same number of men and women in order to achieve gender balance. I think that it is equally important

to learn how men view the issue of the representation of female politicians in the media as well as how women view it in order to put forward balanced, thorough research. I asked a total of 16 identical questions to all participants - please see appendices - although the focus of Question 11 was changed to reflect whether the participant was a politician, journalist or political commentator. In view of the elite nature of the respondents, I was not able to carry out a trial to ensure that there were no issues with how the questions were formulated. This is a potential limitation to this type of empirical research, although only one of my participants has raised a query about the clarity of question 7, which he has not answered. Please refer the section on Findings and Analysis.

There have been limitations in terms of the subjects I have chosen, which is understandable given their work commitments and positions in public life. This has evidently provided certain challenges in so far as they are “élite” (Goldstein, 2002, p. 669) participants. It has consequently been difficult sometimes to source a base of interviewees as a number agreed to participate and then had to renege. In addition to this, there was also an added complication following the announcement of the General Election and dissolution of Parliament in May 2017. In view of this, there was a period of 8 weeks of extremely heavy campaigning, which took the majority of the time of both the journalists and politicians and prevented me from interviewing during this time. I had hoped to interview 15 people, but was only able to gain the cooperation of nine interviewees.

A further limitation of the research is the sample size. It is likely that a longer time frame would enable a larger sample size, which would offer a more concrete conclusion to the question. However, I consider that the breadth of expertise across both the spheres of media and politics does provide well grounded empirical evidence and a sound basis for further research. In addition to this, I initially envisaged interviewing all participants face to face, but in view of their demanding work engagements and also location, this has not been possible in all cases. Three participants completed their answers in writing, two carried out the interview over the phone and the others were done in person, three of which were recorded. Receiving responses in writing has not been

problematic as there has always been the option to revert to my participant via email and seek clarification if required.

Leech (2002, p. 665) discusses the importance of gaining rapport with an interviewee in order to obtain the most successful outcome. She cites that “listening” (ibid, p. 665-666) can build rapport. I found that my interest in politics and media assisted here and I was able to conduct the interviews with relative ease. Further to this, I embraced building a good relationship with my interviewees by being approachable. The positive outcome can be demonstrated in two cases, where participants have suggested colleagues to interview for my research and have additionally requested to read my dissertation upon completion. I believe that I have shown courage and initiative in approaching and interviewing these people in order to be able to provide a first hand view of some élite professionals from the media and political industries. A good relationship with my interviewees has equally allowed me to gather a comprehensive set of responses by enabling the conversation to probe for the fullest answers possible. I have enjoyed the process of securing interviews and, equally, being able to discuss my research with people of this calibre.

As Leech (2002, p. 665) states, researchers carrying out interviews with élites generally pose open ended questions, which is what I have tried to do as per the interview questions. Where this has not been easy to do, I have used “example questions” (Leech, 2002, p. 667) which have asked participants to support their answers. Both have enabled “detail, depth and an insider’s perspective” (ibid, p. 665) which were my main requirements. The research uses a “qualitative” approach (Creswell, 2009, p. 4) as I want to establish how a set of participants from the worlds of journalism and politics view a social issue (ibid). Open ended questions are usually part of a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2009, p. 3 and 18) to obtaining information from interviewees as they elicit as much information about a topic as possible. Structured interviews with closed ended questions (Leech, 2002, p. 665) would not be appropriate for the type of research I seek to provide as I am not trying to group participants into types of responses (ibid) or assess a survey (Creswell, 2009, p. 12). The style of qualitative questions that I have used has enabled me to gain a

substantial amount of data as this approach has allowed me to have a conversation with the participants and request any clarification if required. Goldstein (2002, p. 669) refers to the thorough preparation required prior to carrying out interviews with elites. I took my inspiration from existing literature referred to in the literature review as well as from recent newspaper reports, which focus on the appearance and abuse of female politicians. Two broadcasters from the BBC commented that my questions were “excellent”.

Ethics

All participants were offered anonymity prior to commencing the interviews. Five of the nine participants requested anonymity. I have grouped the age and length of time in role columns in order to protect the identity of these participants. I have equally not included consent forms for these individuals as appendices. Transcripts of the interviews have similarly been omitted because I believe that the participants could be identified from some of the commentary.

Findings and Analysis

The interviews are presented and analysed in this section in order to answer the research question: *How do journalists and MPs perceive female politicians to be represented in the British media in 2017 and could these perceptions help to explain why fewer Members of Parliament are women?* All responses encompass both the written and broadcast media unless specifically stated.

The wealth and variety of material I have collected from my participants offers a wide range of views in assessment of the research question. They are grouped as a discussion of the key themes already highlighted.

Appearance

In view of the disproportionate media focus on the appearance of female politicians (O'Neill et al., 2016; Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015; Meeks, 2012; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012), the concept of appearance was a recurring theme in my interview questions. I wanted to learn what focus politicians and media professionals in 2017 would attribute to it in the context of the representation of female politicians in the British media. I hypothesised that participants of both genders would perceive the appearance as the dominant element in media coverage of female politicians. The following indications support my theory and the outcomes of the various studies documented. "The focus on appearance is still something that rankles with me. Appearance is the first thing politicians are judged on" (female journalist 2) and "the press should be more concerned with the quality of politicians' ideas" (female journalist 1), which is supported by male journalist 2: "I think that the media should focus more on all politicians' ideas and less on their appearance".

It would seem that appearance remains an important theme for some participants when considering how politicians are currently represented. However, their commentary applies to both genders, not just women, which provides a new dimension to the existing literature. It is interesting that both male and female participants have made these observations. Moreover, journalists rather than politicians have highlighted a change to be addressed by their own profession.

There is agreement amongst some of the participants that women politicians are treated differently from the male politicians, particularly in the written press, which on occasions, focuses on their appearance:

“The British press dissects the outfits and appearance of female politicians more than men” (male journalist 2) and “there is no question that women are depicted and discussed in more sexual terms in the British press than men. Political cartoons especially sexualise British female politicians in extreme ways” (ibid). “In the press there is always commentary on the way female politicians dress as well as their hair and clothes and how well groomed they are” (female journalist 1). Moreover, the fact that a male journalist expresses such an opinion reinforces existing findings.

When speaking of Theresa May’s pink dress featured in the Guardian Editorial and other papers, (The Guardian, 2017, The Telegraph 2017), Tracy Brabin, MP argues that such comments are “diminishing”. I have established that fashion and appearance do matter to the press (O’Neill et al., 2016, Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012). The focus of The Guardian and The Telegraph on both image and content of the reports corroborate the conclusions already put forward. Tracy Brabin’s choice of word implies the coverage of appearance as superfluous to politics and a distraction from policy. Perhaps Fury (2015) is correct that fashion could dominate politics. Previous studies document that the written press and television (Vos, 2013, Adcock, 2010) prefer appearance over policies in relation to female politicians. Maybe this is the real problem for democracy. One way to protect democracy would be to scrutinise policy more rigorously in order

to create increased quality in the House of Commons. A gender balance in Parliament as claimed by (O'Neill et al., 2016) might therefore not be the answer to fostering democratic values.

The uniform suit of men (Sanghvi and Hodges, 2015) was also reflected in my research. Tracy Brabin, MP discusses the notion that suits render dressing for male politicians cheaper and easier. Women on the other hand “can’t wear the same outfit”. She explains the reason for this is when constituents view photos in the media, they might not appreciate they have been taken on different days and could perceive that their MP is not busy. Tracy Brabin’s explanation suggests that she is conscious of the different perceptions that exist amongst the readership of the press in relation to women and men politicians and she is responding to overcome these. Reduced media focus on appearance could resolve this. However, by developing the theme further, there is an argument that the audience could be responsible for media focus on appearance:

The uniform makes it very hard for men to get it wrong. Women have more pitfalls but also more freedom to express themselves. Until as a species we stop making judgements with our eyes the media can’t ignore appearance (female journalist 2).

Whilst acknowledging the perceptions articulated by some journalists, there are a number of contrasting opinions. They suggest that current media reports are not focussed on the appearance of female politicians and that neither gender bias nor inequality prevail across the media. Ann Widdecombe notes: “there is emphasis on appearance, but the same can be said for the men”. Male Journalist Number 3 also adds: “ I am not that aware that the media does focus a lot on female politicians’ appearance” and summarises that fashion is not more of a focus for the media unless it is particularly distracting. These perceptions directly contradict the conclusions arrived at by O'Neill et al. (2016) and Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen (2012). It is noteworthy that both a man and a woman share this opinion and that the female is the politician, who clearly does not feel targeted by the media.

I argued previously that some female politicians might encourage media coverage of their appearance. It is an argument which is not lost on both male and female participants from both industries:

Theresa May did feature in a big piece in Vogue, therefore, there is a bit of a dichotomy isn't there as you can't throw stones at the media if you are going to appear in the world's leading fashion magazine (male journalist 3).

Theresa May has courted the image around her shoes, she uses them as a trademark. If you don't want people to comment on them, then don't wear expensive show off shoes (Tim Iredale).

Ann Widdecombe similarly remarks that if politicians wear business like dress, then this will not attract media commentary and that female politicians should stop trying to be "fashion icons". Tracy Brabin, MP also states: "there is no need for cleavage. We must be aware that people will want to talk about it". She adds that MPs should not dress in a sexual manner or this will invite media coverage. Therefore female MPs must take some responsibility for how the media portray them.

The perceptions, which imply that media attention can be coveted, are intriguing. They provide a new angle to studies of media coverage of female politicians. It appears that little has been explored from this point of view.

Whilst it is established by Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, (2012); Adcock, (2010) and by some participants that the media hone in on appearance rather than policy in relation to female politicians, there is an argument that the current media do not deter women from entering politics. Philip Davies, MP believes that the lifestyle of an MP is far more discouraging than anything that the media can say given the location of most constituencies in relation to London. He upholds Cowley and Campbell's (2014) findings and adds that the difficulty of combining Parliament with family life results in more men than women choosing to become MPs. Female journalist 2 equally views that media representation of female politicians is not the dominant factor in influencing choices about becoming a politician. She states that "media and social media certainly makes the situation worse but most people who decide to become politicians have far more pressing concerns to deal with from the outset". Therefore the implication is that media representation is not so significant that it will stop someone from entering politics if they are motivated enough to make a difference through politics. I contend that precisely these points of view explain why Margaret Thatcher should be a "benchmark" for female politicians as expressed by male journalist 3 below.

Norm-Breaker

"Maggie [Thatcher] did set a strange benchmark for every woman to follow in politics" (male journalist 3).

The statement was made in relation to aspects of her policies as well as her appearance. Perhaps so unforeseen was her victory in becoming leader of the Conservative Party in 1979 (Robinson, 2011), she is still used as a comparison to other female politicians. The "norm-breaker" (Meeks, 2012, p. 188) element attributed to a successful female politician is evidenced within his statement. It can be argued that the achievements of a strong, female role model will survive decades. The observation reflects the thoughts expressed by Rasmussen (1981, p. 620, cited in Campbell and Childs, 2015, p. 150) and bolsters the argument for more female role models.

Some of the comments from my participants are reminiscent of the idea that serious politics is for men (O'Neill, 2016; Meeks, 2012; Adcock, 2010). For example:

Would Diane Abbot have had such a crushing time during the 2017 election if she hadn't been female? At a time when a number of the top jobs are held by women it almost feels like some sections of the media (and social media) have to counterbalance it by highlighting the femaleness of those figures (female journalist 2).

Tracy Brabin, MP comments further that media treatment of Diane Abbot, MP would deter her from a career in politics if she were a black woman. She further believes that "the media discourage women from going into politics" and that how she is treated in the media "diminishes her status" as Shadow Home Secretary.

This is an unambiguous view from a female journalist and a female politician that women politicians are the target of media attention more than males. The suggestion is equally that media coverage of female politicians can, in some cases, erode their credibility which reflects the studies detailed above. It is impossible to say if Diane Abbot would have been treated the same way if she were male, but these perceptions that several parts of the media are almost seeking to undermine the achievements of female politicians are important. Moreover, the comments present empirical evidence in support of the allegation that politics belong in a man's world (Ross et al., 2013, Harmer et al., 2016). The perceptions shared by these participants suggest that the media are seeking to discourage rather than support women in politics and thus it could be argued that media representation of female politicians in 2017 is unbalanced. It could further be argued that this behaviour will perpetuate the gender imbalance in Parliament. The media are powerful in shaping public opinion (Ross et al., 2013). Her perception renders it plausible that the media may deter voters from electing a woman.

Some participants perceive that the extent of media focus on the appearance of female politicians will have a detrimental impact on the number of women choosing to pursue a career in politics:

“I think that a lot of women would think twice about going into politics because of how they would be treated in the press as well as childcare” and “It must make them feel they are fighting a losing battle. Women have other hurdles to get over before they can talk about their ideas. Men don't have this” (female journalist 1).

Childcare has previously been established as a possible barrier to women seeking a political career (Holtz-Bacha, 2013). Her view equally corroborates research done by O'Neill et al. (2016) that determined how the printed press focus on appearance at the expense of policies.

The issue of a 'double-bind' (Holtz-Bacha, 2013) is recognised by participants from the broadcast media in the same way that existing literature observes its presence in the press. The following comments from the interviewees reflect perceptions of the 'double-bind' in 2017:

Traits will be picked up in a woman politician that are seen as masculine and will be commented on. The implication is that by doing her job, she lacks femininity. I try desperately not to do it when I interview female politicians (male journalist 3).

It is positive that a male journalist has recognised that female politicians deserve to be judged on their own merit and independently of men. It is equally positive that he displays an awareness of breaking down gender stereotypes.

“I think Theresa May has been given a harder time than a male Prime Minister would for apparently lacking empathy and warmth. Not much harder, but a bit” (male journalist 1). The comment implies that the media expect Theresa May to show greater compassion towards citizens than if she were a male Prime Minister. The fact that male journalists are conscious that such representation can exist underlines the disparity in the representation of men and women politicians, which supports research carried out by Meeks (2012).

Motherhood combined with a career in politics is a key theme in the media (Holtz-Bacha, 2013; Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012). There is an acknowledgement amongst some of the journalists I interviewed that this still features currently:

Would I highlight that a male MP has two children, I probably wouldn't. I have been very careful not to describe them [female MPs] as working Mums (Tim Iredale).

Comments on motherhood during the [Conservative Party] leadership race in 2016 might have passed by as an interesting comment to be mulled over if they had been dressed as fatherhood but somehow the “female” button, once pushed, takes over (female journalist 2).

The comments directly support the conclusions of existing literature where motherhood and pregnancy receive keen media focus, particularly in the case of senior female politicians (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012). However, comments from Tim Iredale point to a conscious shift away from stereotypical questions. Perhaps the fact that he is a male journalist is also telling.

Journalistic Practices

There are more male journalists than female in the United Kingdom (Howell 2014; Thurman et al., 2016). Politics is reported as understood by men (Ross, 2002; Ross and Carter, 2011; Ross et al., 2013). Tim Iredale claims it is possible that in the past that the “media has portrayed Westminster politics as a male dominated environment” in view of the number of male journalists talking to mainly male MPs, but considers it is no longer the case in view of the increase in female MPs. Tracy Brabin contradicts his perception and argues that the “media tend to want male voices because the lobby is mostly young men”, which confirms that male journalists report male voices. She specifically cites the significance to democracy of ensuring that women politicians are represented in the media as Adcock (2010). Howell (2014); Adcock (2010) and Miller (1996) have demonstrated that there is work to do in bolstering both the number of female journalists and presenters as well as guests on news programmes. It seems that Tracy Brabin agrees with their conclusions. She explains that it is important for women to be in senior journalist roles because otherwise “female MPs do not get heard”. She cites The Westminster Hour as a programme where an increased number of female journalists would be valuable in order to reflect the views of female MPs. The implication is that female MPs similarly prefer to speak to female journalists.

From the perspective of a male journalist, Tim Iredale suggests that the “vast majority of male political interviewers find it harder to ask aggressive questions of a woman than a man and I would include myself in that because it is a natural instinct not to be aggressive to women”. He continues that “male interviewers are more aggressive to male politicians than to female politicians”. Therefore if female politicians are treated differently at the interview stage, it seems logical that the media representation of them will also be different from that of their male counterparts. This is an important piece of information to the assessment of my research question as well as the field of study. As an audience member, I have never considered this as a potential difference, but it highlights the different relationship that male journalists have with male and female MPs in a similar way to the survey done by Aalberg and Strömbäck (2010). It also corresponds with Tracy

Brabin's earlier comments on needing female presenters and journalists to ensure female MPs are heard. If male journalists do not challenge female politicians robustly, then this could lead to their views being misrepresented in the media. When I probed Tim Iredale further about what his thoughts would be on a female journalist interviewing a female politician, he agreed that perhaps a female journalist would approach this differently and may not be so hesitant to challenge.

Gender imbalance in Parliament has been highlighted as a problem by Campbell and Cowley (2014), which can undermine democracy (O'Neill et al., 2016). Ann Widdecombe does not agree. She referenced her time in Parliament when there were far fewer women and highlights that those who were there, such as Margaret Thatcher, Barbara Castle and Shirley Williams, were taken seriously for their policies. I have referred earlier to some of the policies implemented by them. She deems that "what we need is quality" and wishes the media would focus on quality. Her view could imply that the discussion of quality in the media will better serve democracy rather than gender equality.

Vos (2013) and Ross et al. (2013) observe that female politicians received less air time and coverage than their male counterparts. Male journalist 2 contends that:

Women continue to receive more favourable treatment from hosts on TV and radio shows. Women are able to speak for longer in such forums without interruption, and are willing to accuse others (both participants and hosts) of sexism if interrupting or adopting a robust debating position towards them. This does not apply in the other direction of course.

His statement suggests that women benefit from an unfair gender advantage, certainly in the broadcast media. His perception contradicts the assertions that female presenters and guests are

marginalised (Howell 2014; Miller, 1996) though I accept that in the case of Miller the research is over twenty years old. In fact it is possible that the opposite is beginning to occur as he clarifies that “past discrimination against women is being overcompensated for by excessively favourable treatment in present media forums”.

An increase in female voices in the broadcast media in 2017 is further substantiated by Tim Iredale who is keen to ensure that the gender split in the population is reflected in the media. The perception of male journalist 2 is corroborated:

When I do my political programme, I always try to ensure we have a fair gender balance, but I would always try to get female politicians on to my programme, often at the expense of men (Tim Iredale).

Tim Iredale’s assertion is an example that women are consciously being invited to take part in a political debate and discuss their policies in order to appeal to the gender split in the population. There is no indication that women are being underrepresented in the broadcast media. Whilst this is only a perception and there are no concrete numbers available as evidence, it certainly opposes findings from the overwhelming body of literature that female politicians are being marginalised and obtaining reduced coverage. The opinions of both men add a different perspective thereby enriching work already done.

In addition to the above comments, an element of sympathy towards the media is expressed by some participants. This sentiment is new to existing research. Rather than suggesting that because fewer journalists are female as the reason why female voices are not reported as widely (Ross et al., 2013), Ann Widdecombe advances the idea that there is parity between media coverage of both genders and states “they cut us up equally, which is what they are supposed to

do". Furthermore, Philip Davies, MP adds in relation to media emphasis on the appearance of female politicians "the people to blame are the public, because if they weren't interested, they wouldn't print it as they are a commercial enterprise so there must be a market". This point of view is supported by male journalist number 3, who says that the media is part of the "entertainment business" and as such reports "must be able to attract and hold an audience". These views bring a different dimension to what has been studied previously. It could be advanced that, far from a powerful media influencing its audience (Ross et al., 2013), the audience is determining the media output.

Further to this, there is a sense amongst some participants that female politicians can present the media as a scapegoat for their failings as is illustrated by the comments of male journalist 1:

Whenever female politicians complain about sexism they're usually trying to deflect legitimate criticism of their shortcomings. Case in point: Hillary Clinton.

Ann Widdecombe similarly speaks about a culture of "whinge mongering" amongst female politicians.

Moreover, she does not consider that the presentation of female politicians in the media prevents them from doing their job. Instead she argues that "women pretend there is a barrier that they have to cross". Her point of view provides a contrasting stance from the studies that have shown gender inequality (O'Neill et al., 2016, Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012) and offers a new perspective to the study of how female politicians are covered in the media.

In addition to the Ann Widdecombe's comments, male journalist 3 contends that in some cases, women politicians fuel stereotypes of themselves:

Politicians are not innocent in this and just at the mercy of interviewers. A lot is radiated back by the person you are interviewing. A lot of women politicians will start their answer, well as a woman... so the politician then goes down a line that implies all the stereotypical images. It is coming from them not you.

It is possible that the female politician might not use this emphasis with a female interviewer. The rationale for an increased number of female journalists (Howell, 2014, Ross et al., 2013) is therefore understandable.

Existing studies reveal that the media do not treat both genders equally (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012; Meeks, 2012). In contrast, Philip Davies, MP states: "I don't see that the media pick on female MPs. If you are picked on, then it's probably not about being a woman". The opinions of Philip Davies, Ann Widdecombe and male journalist 3 imply that there is no difference between how male and female politicians are treated across the media spectrum addressed in this research. It does not appear either that there needs to be any change in how female politicians are represented. It is striking to note the perceptions of two male participants, which give a fresh view on the literature discussed.

There is equally a feeling amongst some male journalists that, in 2017, the media do not discriminate between male and female politicians:

Male journalists were more judgmental of female politicians 20 years ago, but now they are treated on merit for their views (Tim Iredale).

I am not that aware that the media does focus a lot on female politicians' appearance
(male journalist 3).

I think that the way that the media treats our politicians generally harms their ability to do
their jobs, by undermining public faith in them and systematising criticism and
encouraging a culture of cynicism about them, but not especially on gender grounds
(male journalist 2).

It is pertinent that nearly all the male journalists do not recognise gender discrimination. It is,
however, worth considering whether male journalist 2 is suggesting that the media have gone too
far in their portrayal of politicians and whether they have strayed beyond holding politicians to
account. Moreover, the perceptions of male journalist 2 are important in relation to democracy.
There may be a case to state for gender equality improving democracy (O'Neill et al., 2016), but
how will it be possible to achieve quality in Parliament if its members cannot do their jobs properly
because of media interference?

New ideas

Strömbäck (2008) noted the importance of media in established democracies. Male journalist 3
perceives that the media does not have a role to play with encouraging women to pursue a career
in politics: "most parts [of the media] are there to reflect back to society what is going on and
interpret it, not to alter who goes into Parliament". He consequently sees it as outside of the scope
of the media to try to influence a more gender balanced Parliament. He views the media as a
platform for other people's campaigns, but it must remain impartial. His stance implies that media
coverage of female politicians is irrelevant because the media do not have a democratic role to
play in this instance. His stance contrasts with the rationale for Adcock's (2010) research.

A new opinion is expressed in terms of media coverage actually assisting politicians of both genders in Parliament:

Unexpected attributes can be a valuable tool. I also believe, particularly in regional media, using personal experiences can endear politicians to the public in a way policies and sound bites can't (female journalist 2).

Her opinion is a valuable addition to existing research on regional media. It could equally be considered on a national level.

Female journalist 2 adds a further new dimension in her role as an interviewer:

As a female interviewer I feel I am often treated differently by older male interviewees. The younger generation tend to be more equitable. I personally don't feel I treat gender differently.

Existing literature has looked at the relationship between politician and journalist (Aalberg and Strömbäck, 2010), which shows that male politicians enjoy better relationships with journalists than female politicians do. It is equally suggested that female journalists reflect female voices (Ross et al., 2013). The perception of female journalist 2 is noteworthy, particularly given our understanding of the number of female journalists (Howell, 2014; Thurman, 2016). It is possible that they are discouraged from progressing in journalism if some male interviewees appear to discriminate between male and female journalists.

Differences in perceptions of the broadcast and printed media

A key factor that I want to assess in this research is whether there are any differences in the opinions held on the broadcast and the written media in order to add further empirical data to existing research.

There is general agreement that the written press is more merciless than the broadcast media, which are perceived to be fairer. The rules for broadcasting are likely to be a factor behind this perception. Ofcom's guidelines for television and radio broadcasting stipulate that "news, in whatever form, is reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality" (Ofcom, 2017). The BBC states that "impartiality lies at the heart of public service and is the core of the BBC's commitment to its audiences" (BBC, 2017b). Some opinion to evidence my assertion is:

Radio is the safest space as it is not about how she looks, but there could be commentary on whether she is shrill or high pitched. News programmes on television worry about appearance. The press is the worst, especially tabloid – they can be very vicious with how they write about women (female journalist 1).

She additionally considers that "the press is worse than the broadcast media for undermining female politicians' ability to do their jobs".

The broadcast media tend to be more fair in the way female politicians are portrayed on TV and to a lesser extent on radio, which isn't a visual medium, is generally fairly equal. I think there is still an argument to say that the newspapers, particularly tabloids newspapers, would perceive female politicians in a different way, for example, many sketch writers when they discuss what has happened in the House of Commons and

Prime Ministers question time will often talk about what Theresa May is wearing or her hair (Tim Iredale).

Broadcast media are perhaps fairer and less biased in their representation than the newspapers are. Certainly the tabloid press think they have leeway in the way they represent women. For example, Theresa May and the leather trousers. That is the difference (male journalist 3).

Male journalist 3 explains that if there is discussion in the broadcast media on aspects such as appearance of politicians, it is “only because they pick up on the press. People say to us from time to time why are you covering that story it’s nonsense it’s rubbish and the answer is it’s in the papers”.

Philip Davies, MP adds with reference to female politicians: “I am not aware they are treated any differently by the media apart from they are treated differently by newspapers based on their looks and appearance”. He adds that “you wouldn’t get that with a man”.

Three broadcasters and a politician believe that the newspapers perhaps represent female politicians more unfairly than their broadcaster counterparts. It would appear that the responsibility for any possible gender discrimination of politicians lies with the press. There is clearly a perception of gender discrimination from Philip Davies, MP. Where existing literature has ruled that newspapers have commented more frequently on the appearance of women than of men (Garcia-Blanco and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2012), there is now a comparison between perceptions of the written and the broadcast media. The comments by female journalist 1 allude to the press being responsible for discouraging women from entering a career in politics as it undermines their ability

to do their jobs. It can be assumed that press representation of female politicians in 2017 could therefore contribute to fewer women pursuing a career in politics.

Whilst outside the media spectrum of my research, the potential detrimental impact of social media is noteworthy. I include the comments as they reflect earlier discussion (Hinsliff, 2017). Some participants suggest that it is of far greater concern than reports published in the mainstream media:

“It has provided an instant device for attack and defence and has allowed even more extreme views to be aired and become news” (female journalist 2). Equally Philip Davies, MP believes: “social media is going to be a massive problem and will put lots of people off going into Parliament, both male and female. It is unbelievable what is on social media”.

Question 7

I designed this question – please see appendix – to elicit which concepts in relation to media coverage of female politicians were most important for the participants. The concepts are:

1. Their appearance
2. Their policies
3. That they are reflected in the same way as men are
4. Whichever of the above as long as the story attracts an audience

Please see the table below which reflects the results:

Table Two

Name	Numbers
Female Journalist Number 1	3 and 2 1 and 4
Female Journalist Number 2	4, 2, 3, 1
Ann Widdecombe	2 others not important
Tracy Brabin	3, 2, 4, 1
Tim Iredale	2, 3, 1, 4
Male Journalist Number 1	2, 4, 1, 3
Male Journalist Number 2	N/A
Philip Davies	2, 3, 4, 1
Male Journalist Number 3	4, 2, 1 and 3

I initially did not think that any of the participants would prioritise either option 1 or 4. It is therefore important to me as a researcher to note that two journalists elected option 4 at the top of their lists, demonstrating for them that the element of a story is a key factor. It is equally important to observe that one journalist was male and that the other was female, which suggests that the choice is not gender driven. They substantiated their answer with the reason that they are in the media business. It is, however, interesting that not all journalists consider option four as the most important given that their remit is not only to report facts, but to attract an audience.

All other participants except for Tracy Brabin, MP chose policies as the most important factor to be considered. The journalists referred to above put policies as second most important, as did Tracy Brabin, MP. It is understandable that two of the three politicians view policies as the most important factor and this is in line with my hypothesis prior to obtaining the results. Tracy Brabin,

MP is a member of the Women and Equalities Committee (House of Commons, 2016) in Parliament and it is thus equally understandable why she would regard this as the most important option.

It is remarkable that two male journalists placed fourth that women should be reflected in the same way as men and a female journalist placed this third, whereas Ann Widdecombe had no concerns in this area and only considers policies to be of any importance. I would have considered that a female journalist would view this particular option as higher up the scale and so her answer contradicts my hypothesis.

Appearance did not feature as important and received only third or fourth place. It is worth mentioning the dichotomy between the views of my participants on appearance and the number of newspaper articles I referred to earlier, which focus on what female politicians look like.

Gender

Apart from male journalist 2, the other male participants had no concerns regarding how female politicians are represented in the British media. They certainly do not identify with the findings of the studies discussed that media focus on the appearance of female politicians can be demeaning. All the female participants, apart from Ann Widdecombe, recognise that media coverage of the appearance of female politicians can be cruel. It is consequently conceivable to the women participants, apart from Ann Widdecombe, that this representation could deter women choosing to enter politics, whereas the male participants do not recognise this as an issue. Other than these stark differences, no other issue splits the male and female opinion. This does offer some insight into which issues are gender specific, but for the most part opinion is not divided according to gender.

CONCLUSION

I referred to the wealth and diversity of my findings at the outset. Each participant has given much thought to the questions I have posed in order to assist my research and I must once again acknowledge their detailed input. I developed an excellent working relationship with the participants and their desire to contribute to my study was evident throughout the process. As a result of this rapport, the interviews have enabled me to obtain fresh insight into the body of research in this field. They have correspondingly made it possible to present original opinion from a combination of both male and female journalists and Members of Parliament. I have found this refreshing and illuminating. Whilst conducting interviews on the telephone and over email has not been a barrier to my research, I would have preferred to meet all participants face to face as this method strengthens rapport between both parties. I think this is particularly true in cases where there is no prior relationship between interviewer and interviewee.

As expected, appearance was discussed at length. The hypothesis I put forward was only half substantiated as a number of participants, predominantly the men, are not conscious that the appearance of female politicians receives disproportionate attention in the media. Moreover, some of the male participants as well as Ann Widdecombe believe that both genders are treated in a similar way by the media. This assessment adds a new element to the research of politicians and the media. Furthermore, it can be argued that, in 2017, there is an impression that not all female politicians are the victim when it comes to ruthless media coverage of their appearance: some seem to court it. Some might even exaggerate the impact on their feelings.

A further aspect of particular interest is the perception of a male journalist that women political commentators dominate political programmes. Moreover, another male journalist actually seeks to ensure female politicians are represented on his programme, whilst another actively breaks down

typical gender barriers during interviews. The findings are a welcome new addition to existing research.

The sample size inhibits any grouping of the participants and consequently there are no concrete conclusions I can draw of how specific groups perceive female politicians to be represented in the current media. The participants are disparate in so far as the journalists work in different areas of the media and the politicians are from both ends of the political spectrum. In order to be able to answer my research question more definitively, I would have preferred to have secured the cooperation of a greater number of participants. However, the fact that I have interviewed both men and women gives valuable balance and reveals the views of both genders. As the majority of existing research focuses on analysis of newspaper or television reports, male views are sparsely documented in the literature I have read. This gap has been filled to some extent by the male views I have obtained which reveal a novel insight into how female politicians are covered in the media.

I was delighted with the depth of the responses. In recognition of this, it would be interesting extending the work to a larger group of participants to ascertain if there are any common themes identified in areas such as political affiliation, age and gender. In order to add substantially to the existing body of work, it would equally be beneficial to include a greater number of male journalists and politicians as they have provided useful contrast to female perceptions in some areas. I have briefly mentioned social media in my assessment. A study which includes perceptions of social media content and how it is viewed by media and political professionals would be a welcome addition to the field of research.

In view of the diversity of opinion, it is impossible to conclude categorically whether the representation of female politicians in today's media could explain why there are fewer female politicians than male. Some reasons for the imbalance are already documented in literature.

There is evidence from my interviews which suggests that the media do share some responsibility. Some female participants have commented on the media as an obstacle to women who pursue a career in politics. The fact that they perceive the media to be a problem means that it must be taken into account as a contributing factor to gender imbalance in Parliament.

However, it is significant that Britain is currently served by its second female Prime Minister. The last Conservative Party leadership race was also run between two women.

Both these facts should act as an inspiration to women who aspire to a career in politics. It is perhaps therefore true that those women who want to make a difference will find the confidence to go into politics irrespective of what the media say.

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Appendices

Dissertation Questionnaire - Journalists

1. How old are you?
2. Are you male or female?
3. What is your job title?
4. How long have you been doing your current job?

For the purposes of this interview, I would like to concentrate on the British press, television and radio, which form the basis of my dissertation. Please could you only consider these three types of media during this interview.

5. How do you think that female politicians are currently represented in the media outlined above compared to their male counterparts? Can you think of any specific examples to support your answer?
6. In your opinion what, if any, are the differences across the media spectrum detailed above in how you consider that female politicians are represented?
7. Please could you list the following four options in order of what you think is the most important in relation to female politicians:
 1. Their appearance.
 2. Their policies.
 3. That they are reflected in the same way as men are.
 4. Whichever of the above as long as the story attracts an audience.

Please could you explain why you have ordered the options in this way.

8. In your opinion, do you believe there is any correlation with how female politicians are represented in the media and the gender imbalance in Parliament? Why do you believe this?
9. Given the concern expressed in recent months by female politicians over their own representation in the media, do you consider that the way female politicians are represented as a whole in the media undermines their ability to do their job? What are the reasons for your answer?

10. In your opinion, should the media focus less on female politicians' appearance and more on their ideas? Please can you explain the rationale for your answer.

11. In your role as an interviewer, are you aware of any differences between how male and female politicians are approached by an interviewer? Are you able to give any reasons for your answer?

12. There has clearly been recent media focus on the appearance of female politicians. Do you think that female politicians should do anything differently so that there is not so much media focus on their appearance and what would this be?

13. In relation to the gender imbalance in Parliament, do you consider that there is a place for the media to assist with how female politicians are represented in the media in order to encourage more women to take up a career in politics? Please could you explain the reasons for your answer and, if you answered yes, how this could be done.

14. In the last decade, do you believe there has been any shift in how female politicians are represented in the media in either a positive or negative direction? Please can you give any examples for your answer?

15. A number of scholars have written about the role of an MP traditionally being filled by a man. This is also substantiated by figures obtained from the Houses of Parliament. Do you think that female politicians will always struggle to gain parity with their male counterparts regardless of media coverage given that historically the role of a politician has been fulfilled by a man? Why do you hold this view?

16. Do you have any additional opinions that you would like to add on how female politicians are represented in the media spectrum detailed above?

Dissertation Questionnaire – Political Commentator

1. How old are you?

2. Are you male or female?

3. What is your job title?

4. How long have you been doing your current job?

For the purposes of this interview, I would like to concentrate on the British press, television and radio, which form the basis of my dissertation. Please could you only consider these three types of media during this interview.

5. How do you think that female politicians are currently represented in the media outlined above compared to their male counterparts? Can you think of any specific examples to support your answer?

6. In your opinion what, if any, are the differences across the media spectrum detailed above in how you consider that female politicians are represented?

7. Please could you list the following four options in order of what you think is the most important in relation to female politicians:

1. Their appearance.
2. Their policies.
3. That they are reflected in the same way as men are.
4. Whichever of the above as long as the story attracts an audience.

Please could you explain why you have ordered the options in this way.

8. In your opinion, do you believe there is any correlation with how female politicians are represented in the media and the gender imbalance in Parliament? Why do you believe this?

9. Given the concern expressed in recent months by female politicians over their own representation in the media, do you consider that the way female politicians are represented as a whole in the media undermines their ability to do their job? What are the reasons for your answer?

10. In your opinion, should the media focus less on female politicians' appearance and more on their ideas? Please can you explain the rationale for your answer.

11. In your role as a panellist on political debate programmes, are you aware of any differences between how male and female politicians are approached by an interviewer? Are you able to give any reasons for your answer?

12. There has clearly been recent media focus on the appearance of female politicians. Do you think that female politicians should do anything differently so that there is not so much media focus on their appearance and what would this be?

13. In relation to the gender imbalance in Parliament, do you consider that there is a place for the media to assist with how female politicians are represented in the media in order to encourage more women to take up a career in politics? Please could you explain the reasons for your answer and, if you answered yes, how this could be done.

14. In the last decade, do you believe there has been any shift in how female politicians are represented in the media in either a positive or negative direction? Please can you give any examples for your answer?

15. A number of scholars have written about the role of an MP traditionally being filled by a man. This is also substantiated by figures obtained from the Houses of Parliament. Do you think that female politicians will always struggle to gain parity with their male counterparts regardless of media coverage given that historically the role of a politician has been fulfilled by a man? Why do you hold this view?

16. Do you have any additional opinions that you would like to add on how female politicians are represented in the media spectrum detailed above?

Dissertation Questionnaire - MP

1. How old are you?
2. Are you male or female?
3. What is your job title?
4. How long have you been doing your current job?

For the purposes of this interview, I would like to concentrate on the British press, television and radio, which form the basis of my dissertation. Please could you only consider these three types of media during this interview.

5. How do you think that female politicians are currently represented in the media outlined above compared to their male counterparts? Can you think of any specific examples to support your answer?
6. In your opinion what, if any, are the differences across the media spectrum detailed above in how you consider that female politicians are represented?
7. Please could you list the following four options in order of what you think is the most important in relation to female politicians:
 5. Their appearance.
 6. Their policies.
 7. That they are reflected in the same way as men are.
 8. Whichever of the above as long as the story attracts an audience.

Please could you explain why you have ordered the options in this way.

8. In your opinion, do you believe there is any correlation with how female politicians are represented in the media and the gender imbalance in Parliament? Why do you believe this?
9. Given the concern expressed in recent months by female politicians over their own representation in the media, do you consider that the way female politicians are represented as a whole in the media undermines their ability to do their job? What are the reasons for your answer?

10. In your opinion, should the media focus less on female politicians' appearance and more on their ideas? Please can you explain the rationale for your answer.

11. In your role as an MP and as someone who has been interviewed by the media, are you aware of any differences between how male and female politicians are approached by an interviewer? Are you able to give any reasons for your answer?

12. There has clearly been recent media focus on the appearance of female politicians. Do you think that female politicians should do anything differently so that there is not so much media focus on their appearance and what would this be?

13. In relation to the gender imbalance in Parliament, do you consider that there is a place for the media to assist with how female politicians are represented in the media in order to encourage more women to take up a career in politics? Please could you explain the reasons for your answer and, if you answered yes, how this could be done.

14. In the last decade, do you believe there has been any shift in how female politicians are represented in the media in either a positive or negative direction? Please can you give any examples for your answer?

15. A number of scholars have written about the role of an MP traditionally being filled by a man. This is also substantiated by figures obtained from the Houses of Parliament. Do you think that female politicians will always struggle to gain parity with their male counterparts regardless of media coverage given that historically the role of a politician has been fulfilled by a man? Why do you hold this view?

16. Do you have any additional opinions that you would like to add on how female politicians are represented in the media spectrum detailed above?