



Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: Media reporting of women in parliament, HC 89

Wednesday 25 May 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 25 May 2022.

Parliamentlive.tv - Women and Equalities Committee

Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Jackie Doyle-Price; Carolyn Harris; Kim Johnson and Bell Ribeiro-Addy.

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Witnesses

I: Katy Searle, Interim Senior Controller, News Programmes and Commissioning at the BBC; Caroline Wheeler, Political Editor at *The Sunday Times*; and Cristina Nicolotti Squires, Director of Content at Sky News.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Katy Searle, Caroline Wheeler and Cristina Nicolotti Squires.

Q1 Chair: Good afternoon and welcome to this session of the Women and Equalities Select Committee. It was going to be a one-off session into media reporting of women in Parliament, but we might now be headed for two sessions. I thank the witnesses for coming along to give evidence; it is hugely appreciated.

Before I ask the witnesses to introduce themselves, I would like to note that the impetus for today's session was a story that appeared in the *Mail on Sunday*. We have been in discussions with the Mail Group about attending this session, and although they were unable to attend today and do have some reservations about doing so, they have indicated that they will attend on a future , in order to respect the Select Committee process, so we will hear from them in due course.

This afternoon we have as witnesses Cristina Nicoletti Squires from Sky, Katy Searle from the BBC and Caroline Wheeler from *The Sunday Times*, but also chair of the Women's Lobby. I will start and each of the Committee members will come to you in turn, but could I first ask you very briefly to introduce yourselves. Cristina, I will start with you. Are you happy for me to use your Christian name?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Yes, absolutely, and thank you very much for asking. I am Cristina Nicolotti Squires, the director of content at Sky News. I am in charge of the production of our content online, television, the radio services we do for the independent radio stations and for other content we create.

Katy Searle: I am Katy Searle, the interim senior controller for news programmes and commissioning for the BBC, which covers all English language news and current affairs programmes. But more recently I have been head of Westminster, for the last eight years, which is perhaps more relevant for this session.

Caroline Wheeler: I am Caroline Wheeler, the political editor of *The Sunday Times*. As you were saying, Caroline, I was co-chair of the Women's Lobby with Laura Kuenssberg, who is no longer with us in that role. The Women's Lobby was established many years ago to try and give female journalists more of a voice in the Lobby. My day job at *The Sunday Times* is basically to lead our political coverage, running a team of four other journalists to present political stories to the editor and begin that process of them going into the newspaper, and also working across the other news UK platforms, including Times Radio and TalkTV.

Q2 Chair: Thank you. You will be conscious of the background to this story. Can I just start by asking each of you in turn, with political stories like this that come from anonymous sources and briefings, what process do they have to go through before they make it either on to broadcast or into a paper? As this was a paper, can I start with you please, Caroline?



Caroline Wheeler: Yes, of course. Obviously, many stories, particularly in Westminster, tend to come from unnamed sources, largely those stories where people want to whistleblow, in effect, and talk about wrongdoing that they perceive. People obviously do not want to be named, because there is a power dynamic here. You are aware of the whipping system, and often MPs, in particular, do not want to be named in pieces where, in effect, they are naming other MPs or even members of staff, members of the Cabinet and so on.

In those circumstances, where you have a particularly controversial story, we would normally adopt a policy whereby we would not even begin the process of investigating a story unless there were two solid sources corroborating evidence to us, effectively suggesting that the same thing had been said, or reported to have been said, to different people. We would also try to make sure that information was not triangulated, meaning that you are not just in an echo chamber; that effectively the source is one person who has told another person, so that it is single-sourced. We go through very rigorous processes to make sure that we do that, obviously with line managers in the presence of a news editor, who sits above us and who we report all our stories to. Then above them sits both the editor, deputy editor and then we have subs as well.

During all the processes we go through in order to get a story into a newspaper, those people will be probing us about who our sources are. In many cases it is appropriate to talk to our line managers about those, because obviously they want to know about the veracity of the story—for example, whether it has come from somebody who has an axe to grind, and whether the sourcing has any question marks hanging over it.

Obviously, there are a limited number of situations where you would not divulge your sourcing—for example, if it was for national security—even to your bosses, and they would have to rely upon your integrity as a journalist and your track record in order to ascertain whether it was a story that they would want to run.

That is largely how our process works, so if somebody said something to me, I would then investigate whether anybody else had experience of the same story, make sure that there was no triangulation, try and speak to other sources who may have also been witness to or party to an incident or event. Then we would start the process of talking to the senior people in the news gathering operation about the treatment of the story and also the sourcing around it.

Q3 **Chair:** When you say, “treatment of the story”, do you try to make sure that your reporting is balanced, fair and sensitive? At the beginning of your response you used a phrase about where there has been wrongdoing or an incident of whistleblowing. Did anything about this story really indicate that there had been wrongdoing?

Caroline Wheeler: I do not know the processes by which this particular story went through the news desk as it is a different publication, so I



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cannot comment on their processes and what they did. Where we have these kinds of stories that are reliant on third parties who do not want to be named, as I said before, we would consider very carefully the angles around someone has an axe to grind, for example, to try to ensure that we were reporting as fairly and accurately as possible.

We will also have in mind our obligations to maintain professional standards. Whether in broadcast or print, different professional standards are set that instil in us the need to be fair, balanced and accurate. Both the senior editorial team and, indeed, the journalists in our team would be mindful of making sure that those processes were adhered to at every stage of a story going through. Questions will regularly be asked, whether it is with the news desk or in instances where stories are litigious—those questions are certainly asked by lawyers, who are very mindful of the fact that we need to be fair, proportionate, balanced and accurate.

Q4 Chair: In the editorial processes that scrutinises it, do you as a matter of course make sure that there is gender balance in the number of people who look at it—the editorial team, the lawyers, those on the picture desk who pick the photographs that go alongside it? Are your teams gender-balanced?

Caroline Wheeler: There is no stipulation for our teams to be gender-balanced—that is not something we are mandated to do—although obviously as a big news organisation we are mindful of gender balance and gender pay and all of those things. However, on *The Sunday Times* we do have a female editor, an all-female news desk and a female political editor, which is quite rare in this day and age.

I can only speak in terms of my own publication, but I am very confident that our political reporting system has, if anything, a slight balance favouring women and women's points of view over men, simply because of the make-up of the editorial team. If I may say so, that has changed dramatically since I joined *The Sunday Times* five years ago, when I was one of only two permanent members of staff who were female. Now most of our section editors are women, and certainly the gender balance is much better than it has ever been. In terms of our political coverage, as I say, I am one of very few female political editors—a role still abundantly and predominantly held by men.

Q5 Chair: Thank you. Katy, can you outline the BBC's processes for deciding whether something makes it to broadcast?

Katy Searle: Although the processes are slightly different, there are some similarities. Just to go back to your original question about looking at a newspaper article, every day we look at the papers and think about which stories we want to move on and which we want to develop? As Caroline has described, our judgment is that, alongside our editorial standards, which we firmly commit to, we will always go with two firm sources in order to, as we call it, "stand up a story." From that point you



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are looking at whether it is something you want to report on, and in fact I would probably say it is the other way around: you would look at it and think, "Is this a story for the BBC?" Then you would decide whether to stand it up, and then you would pursue those sources.

To answer the first part, what is a story for the BBC? It is around public interest. What does it say for the audience? What are we trying to do by covering this story? How does it fit within our guidelines around public interest broadcasting?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: We have pretty similar processes at Sky. It is probably quite industry-wide these days to make sure you have at least two sources to "stand up a story", as you said. With contentious stories that might have some kind of reputational or legal implications, or that might be viewed as discriminatory, we have a weekly discussion about stories that are on that list, which need further investigation or careful consideration, which is discussed at a very high level—not just by the heads of department but by the editor and myself and my other senior colleagues. Stories do not get published if they have a bit of a nuance around them, so there is a pretty rigorous process in place.

Q6 **Chair:** Can I ask you the same question I asked Caroline—I will come back to Katy and ask her too? What is the gender balance in the teams that will consider whether something is worth publishing or worth broadcasting for Sky?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: We actually have 50:50 in terms of our staff on screen, and off screen it is 43% women and 57% men, which is a pretty good balance. With regard to the structure at Sky News, there is the editor and then myself and Jonathan Levy, so I am a senior person. A large number of our political reporting team happen to be women. There is Beth Rigby, obviously, and we have had three new people joining us—Liz Bates, Mhari Aurora from *The Times* and Amanda Akass—and of course we have Sophy Ridge, so there are lots of women involved in political reporting. In the decision making, the people who decide what goes on their programmes or appears on our website are a very mixed bunch in terms of gender.

Katy Searle: It is a similar tale for me, actually. Our figures are 51:49 male to female. I have to say, when I first started at Westminster, that was not the case. Like colleagues here, we have seen a significant change in that ratio. Obviously, Laura has now moved on but will remain on screen in a very prominent role on Sunday mornings. We still have colleagues Jo Coburn, Vicky Young and others. In fact, we have quite a senior roll of females in the Westminster team as well. My deputy on the news desk, to whom the decisions now go, is also female.

Q7 **Chair:** Katy and Caroline, you both mentioned the changes that you have seen in the gender balance. Has that made a difference in how things are reported?



Caroline Wheeler: That is a really interesting question. I come from the view that women do report things differently—we have different interests naturally. It does not necessarily change the processes by which stories are treated by the paper, so there has always been a standard process, which we have all outlined, about there being the necessity for two sources, and that it goes through all the checks and balances that we apply to it, including our own professional standards that we all adhere to. However, naturally as a woman I probably have different interests in politics from my male colleagues, and that is sometimes reflected in the interests that we pursue.

Just to briefly talk about the Women's Lobby, it has now been going for more than 20 years, and over that time it has been more or less prominent and has had new blood and old blood. But the original reason it was set up was because there were a lot of young women in particular who joined the Lobby, and one of the issues we faced at the time was that we would come into the Lobby, get married and have babies, but then could not do the same kind of networking and socialising as the men journalists in the building, who would often be doing their business on both the golf course and late at night in the bars. We wanted to redress some of that to try to make sure that we had our own network and access to Ministers, so that while still being mothers, wives and so on we could compete in performing those duties without having basically to man the bars late at night, as some journalists do in order to get the best stories.

Katy Searle: Actually, having attended quite a few of Caroline and Laura's events, I can speak to that, and it has been a really successful thing to do. As Caroline said, the processes around a story are the same, as they absolutely should be. Do women approach stories in slightly different ways? Well maybe they do, but that is true of all things in life, so there is always that difference in sensitivities around it, but the absolute process of the journalism would be the same.

Q8 **Chair:** Way back in 2007, Jacqui Smith, as Home Secretary, suffered some adverse comments about her appearance at the Dispatch Box. I can think much more recently of comments about Theresa May and Nicola Sturgeon's legs. Have any of you ever reported on those characteristics? We will start with Sky, Cristina.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: At Sky we are committed to covering all news topics in a really fair, impartial and sensitive manner where needed. Generally speaking, what women wear is not necessarily part of the news unless it makes the news. You could argue that Theresa May's leather trousers were a point of discussion because of their expense, but nobody at Sky News would be reporting on what somebody was wearing unless it was a part of a news story—a hat blew off or—

Katy Searle: I completely agree with that, and sorry, the leather trousers story makes me laugh because you are absolutely right. But it also makes me think about the shoes, and a discussion that I was



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involved in, and in fact leading, that we actively stepped away from making a thing about her shoes. Because I just think that it was something that we should just not comment on in our political reporting. It was not really an issue. She was the Prime Minister, or perhaps Home Secretary at the time, and we should not go there.

Caroline Wheeler: I completely concur with what the other two ladies on the panel have said; absolutely the same thing. If the wearing of the clothes was the story, as with the leather trousers, as it became kind of symbolic, then that is justifiable, but more generally it is something that we would not wish to do. I certainly remember doing some general elections, where you typically interview reams of Ministers over a course of a number of weeks, and you would often see slipping into copy descriptions about what brand of clothing Liz Truss was wearing. I made it absolutely my mission to ask every male MP what he was wearing as well, in order to redress that balance, which is absolutely right, either you subject everybody you interview to the same critique of their clothing and their fashion sense, or you do not do it at all. That has certainly been the policy I have followed and would encourage my editorial team to take.

Q9 **Chair:** Have we seen progress in that respect?

Caroline Wheeler: We have seen progress in that respect. There are always times when you are trying to be descriptive. If you are doing a long-form interview, for example, where you are trying to set a scene and explain to somebody where you are at the time, you might write, "She was sitting there in a beautiful lavender suit, gazing out of the window." But I don't think you would do it in a way to objectify that person, or in any way to use what they were wearing as a comment on them as a person, for example.

Q10 **Chair:** I know that none of you are going to want to comment on things that have appeared previously in different publications. But I can think back to *Sun* headlines that spoke about the UK being run by a "Gay Mafia"—terminology that would be absolutely unthinkable for somebody to use today. But is there still a problem with it being okay to characterise women according to what they wear, their physical appearance, and how can we better tackle that? Both from a press perspective and indeed, as Parliamentarians ourselves, how can we push back against the use of female characteristics and appearance that, while you may not do it, I would argue that certain sectors of the press still do. I will start with Katy because I have not gone to you first yet.

Katy Searle: Obviously, I can only really talk about the BBC, and it is just something we would not do. We would actively look to avoid going there, as I mentioned with the shoes. We are in the business of political reporting, to serve the audience for what is in their needs and public interest and policy, not about what people are wearing.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: The same applies to us. In our editorial guidelines there is a whole section on portrayal, and we, and all our staff,



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are committed to reflecting all of the UK with no discrimination on any grounds, whether it is to do with gender, sexuality and so on. That kind of thing just would not be allowed at Sky News, frankly. I obviously cannot comment on other publications.

Q11 Chair: What about *The Sunday Times*? Do you have equivalent editorial guidelines about portrayal?

Caroline Wheeler: Yes, we do, that would be very much in the mind's eye about that. In particular, what we have to differentiate here is that there are different types of journalism in print. There are comment pieces, news pieces, features and interviews, and each of them has a different hue in terms of how people report.

As a news story, I would not expect to see any description or judgment or any opinion inserted into it whatsoever, which is very much how we were trained as journalists; to expect that news is very neutral and not supposed to include any of your opinion whatsoever. That is not so of opinion pieces and comment pieces, for example, or some features that you will see where the writer will inject something of themselves into it. When that occurs, that is when you tend to see some of the things that you are talking about more often.

For example, in this world you would be talking about sketch writers particularly, who are really trying to paint a picture for the audience about the characters who live in our particular world. For that reason, sometimes they do start describing people's looks, characteristics, what they are wearing, to try and paint that picture using words, trying to bring people into the room.

But we all need to be mindful that we should not be using those descriptions to cast an opinion on somebody in any way. It is very fine to be descriptive, but sometimes things can stray into something that does objectify women, and you have alluded to examples of that.

Q12 Chair: Is it fair game for sketch writers to comment on appearance—perhaps nail varnish colour?

Caroline Wheeler: Not being a sketch writer, it is very hard for me to comment on how they weigh up what they are going to include in a sketch. One would hope that their main focus is going to be the narrative and the discussion that they are focusing on. But I would imagine that there are moments when they sometimes want to talk about these colourful characters who occupy our world, in order to show people that it is not monochrome out there; that there are women, men, colourful characters. They will use descriptions of what people are wearing in order to do that. But, as I say, that is different from how we as news journalists approach things, so perhaps it would be useful for your Committee to ask one of the sketch writers to come and talk to you about how they make their judgments, because it is not something I have ever been very good at, and nor is it something I would ever want to do.



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Q13 Kim Johnson: Good afternoon, panel. My first question is about the Women's Lobby, which has been in its current iteration for nearly seven years. I just want to know, from your point of view, how ethnically diverse it is. If it is not diverse, what more needs to be done to increase representation? I will start with Caroline first, please.

Caroline Wheeler: That is a really good question, and actually it is something we are very conscious of. We had discussions about this only last week, and it is not just ethnicity that we are interested in terms of diversity; it is also about access. We still have a Lobby that is predominantly privately educated, Oxbridge journalists, which is reflected in the Women's Lobby, but we do not have a very ethnically diverse Lobby in general, or Women's Lobby either. We want to improve access on all levels, because one of the reasons we set up the Women's Lobby is that, having come into this world nearly 20 years ago now, I can remember how daunting and completely intimidating it was to come here and having the most terrible feeling of imposter syndrome. One of the main impetuses of the Women's Lobby is to try and create a supportive network for women of all backgrounds and ethnic diversity to come into and to be able to take part and work in the Lobby.

We are going to be holding a number of events that look specifically at access, because that is something that we are very much aware of which has not been given enough focus as yet. But we still have a major problem in terms of just equality, and the ratio of male to female journalists here is still 2:1 at best. In some papers there are still all-male teams. In the heyday we had seven female political editors, but we have subsequently lost two of them, and of course Pippa is moving on. Although Heather is gone, we are not replacing like for like unless *The Mirror* gets a new female political editor, so we are still striving on all fronts to make sure that the Lobby is as equal as it possibly can be, but we face challenges on every front, right from representation of women to men right through to access and diversity.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Thank you very much for asking the question. Making sure that we reflect our audiences is really important, not just morally but also from a sheer business point of view—women are 50% of the population. They are our audience, they are our people, and people from different backgrounds, so we need to make sure that we are catering for everybody.

We have a target at the whole of Sky, including Sky News, of increasing our ethnic make-up of people to 20% by 2025, which is a long way to go. I do not ever want to employ somebody because of the colour of their skin, as that should never come into it. I am very proud that we have Mhari Aurora from News UK coming to join us as a political correspondent, which is great. Faisal was our political editor before Beth, of course, so we are very committed to making sure we are reflecting people from all backgrounds, whether it is different social backgrounds,



gender or ethnicity. But this is something that the industry recognises it still needs to work hard on.

Katy Searle: Just to add to that, similar to Sky, the BBC actually has a firm target of reaching 20% of ethnic diversity over the next three to five years, alongside the 50:50 commitment on male and female employment and the 12% target of disabled employees. Also, as Cristina says, it is really about reflecting the audience, and we take socioeconomic background as a really important target as well.

Q14 **Kim Johnson:** What role and responsibility do you think the media has in making politics a place that women want and can be in? Cristina.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Great question. At the end of the day, our job is to report what goes on, not necessarily to shape policy or shape society. We can reflect society, but our job is to report the news, not to shape it. Having more women in senior positions, which is something I am personally really passionate about, ensures that there is a range of voices at the table when it comes to making decisions. In terms of our employees who work in politics, I have never had anyone come to me with any particular—

Chair: I am sorry, but I am going to have to suspend the meeting for a Division in the House. Apologies. We all have to go and vote apart from me, because I chaired the Public Bill Committee when this Bill was in Committee.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

On resuming—

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: As I was saying, we can only report what goes on in politics and in this country. How women make politics work as a profession for them is obviously a question for female politicians, but I do accept that it is a tough environment for women. I can imagine it makes life quite hard, in terms of the hours and so on. In terms of the way that women are treated, I work for a news organisation that I strongly believe does treat women fairly and does not describe them in a different way from male colleagues. But I accept that it must be a tough profession to be in.

Kim Johnson: Thanks, Cristina. Yes, it can be quite toxic, and you mentioned before about reporting of women. We know how Tracy Brabin was treated when she deigned to come into the Chamber wearing an off-the-shoulder dress and how the media took that and blew it up, but it did raise some money for charities, which was a positive thing. Katy, do you want me to read the question out again?

Katy Searle: Yes please.

Q15 **Kim Johnson:** What role and responsibility do you think the media has in making politics a place that women can and want to be in?



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Katy Searle: Okay, I am actually going to answer this from an audience perspective, because there are two ways to look at this. I am happy to go back to the broader sense of it, but one of the things to consider when thinking about our coverage is this. I always describe our political reporting in two sections. One is what I would call kind of Green Bench, so it is the straightforward political knockabout, the serious end of party politics, and then there is the policy end. What I have tried to do during my time at Westminster is really think about ways that we can get to the policy end, which I think connects to women much more, which goes back to what we were talking about previously in terms of women having perhaps a different kind of eyesight on stories, and particularly politics.

We have made quite a lot of changes not only just at the BBC but with colleagues at this table around approaching stories that are policy-based, and actually writing them in a much more accessible manner so that women are more likely to read and listen to them, turn them up. Because in the end, politics is about people and what matters to people and to our audience, and that is a really important line to connect.

Caroline Wheeler: I would agree broadly with what everyone is saying. For us, it does not affect how we treat news—news is news, and we are here to report what is happening here, the policy debates and the knockabouts and all of those things. One of the things that News UK is very passionate about that we are using very much to our own advantage, and the broadcast side also have similar metrics, is that we use data a lot more to tell us about who our audiences are and what they are interested in.

We know what our dwell times are, so we can look at a piece and see who is looking at it, whether it is women or men, and how long they are spending looking at which article, which does help us to reflect how we treat our content. For example, one of the things we do a lot more of now is long form. Instead of doing a short, pithy news piece, we will put up the read instead, because actually we find the audience engagement is better for longer-form bits of journalism about those often political, big, meaty subjects, which is why Tim Shipman's read has become a staple of *The Sunday Times*, and which we find our audiences want more of.

As much as we can, we try to be responsive to our audience, and virtually every day we get emails telling us what our women readers are reading most of, in order to make sure that we keep that at the forefront of our minds. At the end of the day, we are only here to serve the people who are reading our website and our news, and indeed listening to the radio and television programmes that we make. It definitely is a key priority for everybody at News UK and is something that people are mindful of on a daily if not hourly basis.

Q16 **Kim Johnson:** Thanks, Caroline. Katy, why do you think the media, or parts of the media, represent women in such a different way from male politicians?



Katy Searle: I am not sure that I agree with the concept of the question, actually. I know what you mean, but as a broadcaster I try to see no difference. That is not to say that I am blind to the difference, of course, particularly being a woman, but, as we touched on before, when we come to reporting our politics, do we treat the stories differently? We really should not do that, because in the end it is not really about the person's gender; it is about the politics and what is being done about it.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I think the same really. I can only speak for where I work and we do not treat men and women any differently in terms of reporting on our political news or any news, frankly. We and the BBC are both regulated by Ofcom, which can be quite a protection against anyone wanting to do that anyway.

That does sometimes happen in the wider press, but we were just talking earlier about the portrayal of women and MPs and what they are wearing. Some sketch writers sometimes have quite a good go at some of the men about their appearance, but obviously in a more jovial way than they might with women, but at Sky News it is just not part of our reporting, I am proud to say.

Caroline Wheeler: It should not be treated any differently, but there are issues where you do want to have more female voices in them. For example, there are often stories. I can think of one recently around what has been happening in Downing Street, and there have been some complaints from young women who feel they have been treated disproportionately harshly compared with their male colleagues. In the reporting of those stories, it is actually important that you talk to more of the women involved than necessarily the men, if you are trying to make sure you move your argument along.

In some of the stories that we have covered recently regarding the sexual misconduct scandal, a large group of women were brought together with the Chief Whip to talk about the issue. It would have been silly for us to look at gender balance, for example, in doing that particular story, because of course it was the women who were involved in that meeting. While we do try and balance our reporting and make sure that if we are looking at particular issues, we speak to both male and female MPs so that there is gender balancing in our copy, there are times when it is inappropriate to do so, and obviously for the narrative reasons we do that.

Kim Johnson: Thank you for those responses to my questions, panel.

Chair: Bell, do you have a follow-up question on that section?

Q17 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Yes. The Committee on Standards in Public Life published a report in 2017 on the abuse and intimidation experienced by parliamentary candidates. The report concluded that "Print and broadcast media also contribute to a culture in which elected public officials can become targets of threats and abuse."



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That same year, another study found that Diane Abbott, the first black woman elected to Parliament, received more than half of all of the abuse aimed at female politicians online generally. I worked for Diane for a number of years, and we would actually receive most of the death threats and abuse by email and post following the publication of certain headlines. These headlines were often worded incorrectly, and we would even be able to challenge outlets to say that they should change them. But by then it was already out, or if it was something on TV, it had already been aired.

I want to ask, what role, if any, do you think your respective news outlets can play in the abuse of elected officials, in particular black women? We will start with Caroline.

Caroline Wheeler: A lot of those decisions are taken above my pay grade, as it were. Headlines and the treatment of stories, in particular, is something that gets done by sub-editors, editors and deputy editors. But I do not shy away from your question, in that it is incumbent on all of us to think about that. I have been here for long enough to have seen friends and colleagues experience the kind of abuse that you are talking about, and it is not something that us as female journalists are immune to either.

We do need to think about content very seriously. I will give you one way in which we can do that. We did think about this very carefully with the treatment of Nusrat Ghani when she came to us earlier this year to talk about her own experiences of what she perceived to be racism within the ministerial ranks, when she effectively said that she had been sacked as a junior Minister for being "too Muslim". She was very concerned about the way in which we would treat that particular story, because she thought it would be a lightning rod for abuse. She has a young family and obviously Twitter can be a particularly horrible place for women, and particularly for women from an ethnic minority background.

We talked to her extensively about how she would like us to do the story, and one of the things she said was that she did not want a photograph of herself on the front page, which we adhered to, as she thought that would make her more of a target. We also talked to her about whether or not we would have comments online. Obviously, we can turn comments off stories, as those can often be particularly upsetting and give rise to further debate on social media, for example.

It is important for both us and you as politicians to be aware that there are tools at our disposal that can help limit and mitigate those kinds of things, but also do not be afraid to complain. I take on board what you say very seriously, but often it is too late by the time that something has come to attention. I am very rarely off duty; I get phone calls very late into the night and often throughout Saturday night and early in the morning. If somebody comes to me and says, "Look, there is a genuine problem here that we could fix quite easily, which has just become a kind of lightning rod, please can you change it?", I would always run that past



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my line manager and on-call team very quickly and make sure that any changes were done to rectify that. It is important to us and, certainly working in this industry, it is something that I and the rest of the team are pretty alive to these days.

Katy Searle: I would just like to answer in general terms if it is okay, because I am not sure of the specific points you are talking about. The first thing is to say that you really want to get it right in the first place. As you say, we absolutely strive every day, hour and minute to write something that is correct, and we think about that very seriously, quite rightly of course.

As Caroline says, in terms of any complaints, there are very clear complaint rules and guidelines for the BBC. Likewise, if mistakes are made, then we endeavour to correct them very quickly indeed. In my former role, as you were late at night, I was very early, so my phone would start at 6 am, and if there was an issue then you would consider it. Sometimes you would disagree, and that is obviously the right thing to do as an independent broadcaster. But if there was a mistake, then the key was to swiftly look at that.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: We have similar procedures in place to deal with complaints, but I think you are probably not talking so much about complaints per se, but more abuse that arises from coverage. I and my senior editorial colleagues are very mindful when reporting on a story of what the effect of that might be. Sometimes we can help mitigate against that, and at other times we cannot. Obviously, we cannot control what is said on social media.

I would like to reiterate my personal view that nobody should suffer any kind of abuse—racist, sexist or anything “ist”—as part of their job. Sadly, women seem to be a bit of a soft target amongst the anonymous people on the Twittersphere. But, as I said, we spend a lot of time making sure that what we are doing does not encourage any of that. When there are serious issues that people come up and talk about, we do report them, and maybe being open about the abuse one is getting can actually sometimes show a light to society and say, “This isn’t on.”

Katy Searle: If I may just add to that, your point about online abuse is really key. If you think about the last few years, certainly when I joined Westminster in 2014, it just exploded really, and we have been through this extraordinary arc. The noise outside this place was reflected by the noise online, which for me has really made the connection very difficult.

Q18 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Cristina, you made a point about being a target following online abuse, but what about when it perhaps gets to a point when a woman in public life may feel she is a target of the media? I will use the same example of Diane Abbott, when for a week or two during that particular election the media as a whole—print and broadcast—focused specifically on her making a mistake with a number. During that same election it was pointed out that a number of other politicians made



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mistakes, and none of them was given the same level of coverage. The excuse given for that was that this was more of a story. How can it be right, and, when politicians are doing the same thing, how do you usually judge whether or not you focus on one more than the other, especially when it appears that women are targeted more in a certain way?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I cannot remember the exact specifics of that. I remember the story, but I cannot remember where I was working at the time, to tell you the truth. At the end of the day, we are committed to being impartial and fair. Fairness is very important to me personally and also to our news organisation. If I feel that we are going down a route that is not fair, then I would be very vocal about that and challenge it.

As I said, we are regulated by Ofcom and complaints can be made, and I am not aware of any complaints upheld by Ofcom, certainly in the time that I have been at Sky News. Fairness is kind of ingrained in where I work, but whether it is in other news organisations I cannot really comment.

Katy Searle: I have a very similar answer. We just strive to look out for any imbalance in our reporting. We will always start the day with following our standards, which are impartial and balanced reporting in the public interest.

Caroline Wheeler: Exactly the same thing, really. We also have editorial standards and a system whereby people can report articles that they are not happy with. No journalist that I know welcomes those complaints when they come in. They are treated extremely seriously, and within a news organisation it can be reputationally damaging for that particular journalist to become the target of multiple complaints. I genuinely believe that most journalists I am aware of, certainly within our news organisation and definitely within my team, would always be mindful of that.

One of the steps and processes, in terms of looking at a story and working out whether or not you are going to run it in the first place, would be asking yourself, "Is this going to attract a complaint for any of the reasons that we were set out, whether fairness, balance or accuracy?" As a journalist you should be asking yourself those questions every time you commit any article to paper, no matter what it is.

Q19 **Chair:** All of you allow comments in your online news pages. Do you have any set threshold for the level of abuse and comments, vitriol that is spewed at whoever the subject of the article is, before you will turn them off? I will start with Caroline.

Caroline Wheeler: Yes, we do. All of our comments are moderated, and so we do—

Chair: In advance?



Caroline Wheeler: Well, we do have a certain system, so if we see a particular story that we think is likely to attract people, there are certain subject areas that can be very volatile for our audiences. For example, discussions about transgender issues typically attract a lot of debate. There is a kind of media plan thought of in advance about publishing a story. We do not shy away from publishing those stories, particularly when they are in the public interest, which is the overriding reason that we publish stories in the first place. But yes, there is always a media plan about whether or not you have moderated, whether you have pre-moderated and indeed whether you have comments at all.

There are articles that you will see on the *Times* online website where there are no comments allowed whatsoever. The other thing that we are encouraged to do is to moderate ourselves, and there are certainly journalists I know that will be sitting there looking at their own stories for many hours a day, and if they see something that they think reaches that threshold, they will self-police and report it to the building themselves, and also will intervene in debates to try and calm things down or moderate.

But in answer to your question, yes, there is both a media plan and also there are journalists who are so diligent in making sure that this does not become an issue that they police their own stories.

Katy Searle: On the digital, I am not aware that we have comments actually, but I will double-check that and come back to you, because that is not within my current remit. I can talk about the obviously wide-ranging scale of programmes, where if any abuse comes in from audience members or phone-ins for example, which is a radio version, then absolutely there are procedures for whether you are going to put someone on air, and of course the presenters and editors are trained in what to do if people go over the top.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I am pretty certain that we do not have comments on our website, but I will double-check that for you. Picking up on what Katy said, we often do have panels of people and shows with audiences, and it is a very important job of the person presenting that show to make sure comments that are wildly off-beam are picked up on. But I believe a decision was made to turn off comments a while before I joined at Sky, because obviously it is something you do not have as much control over as the words that you put out yourselves.

Q20 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Before I go on to my questions about the Lobby, I just want to ask Katy something. You set off a whole train of thought in my mind when you referred to the Green Bench side of politics and the policy end, and you said that women tend to get more engaged with the policy end of it. That leads me to ask a kind of philosophical question, because the whole rules of the game at Westminster are basically written around the behaviours of men. They are combative, and increasingly I find myself sitting at Prime Minister's questions thinking, "God, this is



awful." Just as an aside, I wonder whether you have done any analysis of whether women are turned off by that side of politics, and to what extent?

Katy Searle: Yes, we have. Caroline mentioned some of the data that *The Sunday Times* uses. As I am sure you are aware, the BBC has very developed data on audiences, which in relative terms is fairly new, really quite sophisticated and very useful as tools to look at where you are attracting and not attracting some areas of the audience. Yes, we have metrics on that, and there is research to show, if I can put it this way, that the more heat in the Chamber is not something that women are necessarily attracted to. I do not know that I should talk for all women, because actually I quite enjoy watching it myself, but I think there is a sense of the noise, and that perhaps the sometimes more shouty nature of the Chamber does put women off.

But I also meant in my answer that actually I do think there is a responsibility, and the BBC has done this for many years, as we all have, but there is a responsibility to say, "Hang on a minute, have you realised that everything is political?", so when you take your child to your primary school or you go to your GP, that is actually politics. When I talk to people and friends or family who say, "Oh well, I'm not really that interested in politics," I always say, "Well, everything is political, and that's why you should care, because it is about your life."

Q21 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Manufactured heat is a turn-off, but I am always struck, and colleagues will endorse this, that every time we go out knocking on doors, someone will always say, "Why can't you all work together?", to which I always say, "Well, actually, we do." But there is no sexiness in the reporting of those sorts of things really, is there?

Katy Searle: Well, we do have stories when there are successful alliances. I can think of a few that we have done over the years when there are successes. Actually, to go back to my point about policy, because it is really good and we should go out of our way to say "Actually, there has been an alliance here." The shouty end of it—we all know what we are talking about here—the PMQs, the Brexit debate; it is the high end of drama. You will know more about this than me, but it feels to me that although it is very loud, actually it is a fairly small percentage of what you guys really do.

Q22 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Yes, the drama actually is a small part, but it is increasingly what people see, and actually those who are interested in delivering good outcomes, we can stand up in the House of Commons and no one pays a blind bit of attention to what we are saying, but there we are—we digress.

Caroline, talking about the parliamentary Lobby specifically, do you think that having a parliamentary pass confers particular responsibilities on journalists in terms of how they report what goes on here?



Caroline Wheeler: Yes, there are very obvious responsibilities that come with having a pass, and that can be demonstrated by the fact that there have been journalists who have lost their passes, and we know that that has happened relatively recently. We all work together in a space where we interact with each other in social spaces, for example, and I am sure there are often temptations for journalists to take pictures of MPs behaving inappropriately, potentially on the Terrace. But we are very definitely told that that is something that we are not allowed to do, and we do not do it.

But we do have a Lobby system whereby we have a relationship with the Commons authorities, who have frank conversations with the Lobby about what is and what is not acceptable in terms of our conduct on the Estate. But in terms of editorial guidelines, it is not something that would be welcomed—that there would be stipulations on what can or cannot be written about in terms of what goes on here and policies, because we do have a free press and we are regulated by our professional standards. It is really those professional standards that have to be held across all journalists, no matter where they work, that we adhere to.

Yes, there are certain things that we adhere to because it is about where we work and the very particular nature of where we work, hence the example of photographs. But if you are asking whether there should be rules about what we are allowed to report, which of course there are around national security, and we got emails from Black Rod saying, “You can't report X, Y, Z” when there was a terrorist attack in the vicinity, for example. We were all very mindful that we were not going to do anything that was going to endanger life.

But if you are talking more generally about whether or not we should be reporting the types of things that we have referred to, for sketch writers and so on, those professional standards and conduct guidelines that we already have should really be the catch-all that basically makes sure that journalists uphold all of those very key principles that we have referred to many times today, such as making sure that reporting is fair, accurate and balanced, and also that we are subject to a complaints process anybody is able to use.

Q23 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** In terms of conduct within the estate, there are very clear obligations that are imposed by the House authorities. But actually, the content is very much an editorial matter. But in terms of the organisations that have access to the Lobby, we have here three very professional ones with very high standards, but that is not true of all the organisations that have access to the Lobby.

Caroline Wheeler: They are all covered. I cannot think of an organisation that is not covered by those professional standards. Whether it be Ofcom or IPSO, we have the same coverage. Whether or not they uphold those professional standards is very much something that those organisations need to be overseeing. Where an organisation is found



wanting, that needs to be challenged through the complaints processes, which is what it is there for.

Q24 Jackie Doyle-Price: Do you think that, by and large, members of the Lobby do maintain a high degree of professional standards? I ask that question really because I think probably a lot of the more tittle-tattley abusive pieces are not necessarily always from people from the Lobby. Have you any observations on that?

Caroline Wheeler: It is difficult to comment on other people's behaviour, really. I know what my standards are here, and I am very much aware that I have a parliamentary pass, which is my meal ticket, basically—without it I cannot do my job. Therefore, I am very mindful of making sure that I do not abuse the privileges that are given to me. The Lobby system is a reminder of how we behave, and we do talk to colleagues about our professional conduct, and nobody would want to be the journalist who breaks the embargo or breaks the confidential email that comes from House of Common security, for example.

If you are asking me more broadly about professional conduct, most journalists are mindful of the professional standards that are required of them. Where they do not adhere to them, many of them are pulled up pretty quickly for it, in my own personal experience. I have seen that happen when complaints have been made, and the consequences of them. Not just as a Lobby correspondent, but as a journalist per se, broadly speaking what I have witnessed shows me that the system we have works, by and large. As in every walk of life there is going to be the occasional bad apple, or somebody that does not quite understand what is required of them, but in my experience that has been a very rare occurrence.

Q25 Jackie Doyle-Price: Do members of the Lobby respect that this is a very privileged position? Because now we have so many channels of communication and so on, and this place is fairly accessible, the Lobby was born from a time when this place did not like anyone reporting anything, and therefore it was all tightly controlled. Now we cannot get enough PR, can we? But we still have this Lobby system. How would members of the Lobby feel if we suddenly decided—perhaps we could recommend from this Committee, Madam Chairman—that actually the Lobby should be rescinded?

Caroline Wheeler: Well, that did happen. Dominic Cummings—the Prime Minister's chief adviser, as was—did try to effectively dismantle the Lobby system, and equally there was an attempt to prioritise outlets that were going to be more favourable towards reporting the actions of the Government. As I remember, there was a mass revolt led by Laura, who was probably one of the lucky ones who was going to continue to get access, and she made a principled stand with everybody else and said, actually—

Jackie Doyle-Price: A woman, you see.



Caroline Wheeler: Of course, but a principled stand was made to say, "Actually no, we do value this system and access is important to us." In my view, it is still an extremely privileged role to hold, and one that everybody who gets that opportunity would be proud to hold. But people are aware that without that access, without our parliamentary pass, we simply could not do our job. On that basis, people are mindful of their behaviour, because they do not want to lose that access.

Q26 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** It is part of the pattern of accountability, if you like, that we have a properly functioning system, which of course requires everyone to behave. In terms of becoming part of the Lobby, to what extent do your news organisations train people to do that? What is the process for achieving that Lobby status?

Caroline Wheeler: For me it was largely being thrown in at the deep end. Carolyn will know this because I started my life as the *Swansea Evening Post* lobby correspondent, with absolutely no experience of covering politics, other than the fact that I had desperately wanted to do it and had taken an interest in politics. It is still very much about learning your trade on the job, and generally people who want to come into the Lobby used to come through a regional paper. There used to be a lot of people who came through the regional routes, which was actually really good for women because there were a lot more women on regional papers at the time.

When I started we had a very vibrant, predominantly female regional Lobby. Pippa Crerar was in it with me and Kirsty Buchanan, who ended up going into No. 10. There are a countless number of other women. Kitty Donaldson, another one of the female political editors, was in it. We had a regional Lobby where we all bounced off each other and learnt the tricks of the trade, as it were.

I do not think anything has radically changed since then, even those people coming in from the nationals. It is something where you hit the ground and you start learning. As a Lobby correspondent of course the most important tool is your contacts, and you cannot make contacts without really being here in the same way. I cannot point to any particular training courses that you would do, other than local government and central Government courses, which you do as part of your NCTJ exams, which is it is pretty much how it begins.

Q27 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** That is interesting though, because I would suggest that perhaps there is less of an old-boy network and public schools in the regional media than there is the national.

Caroline Wheeler: Which is why we had more women. But nobody tells you how to do it, and that adds to the kind of imposter syndrome when you get here really, because it is absolutely terrifying. I can remember arriving here and spending at least the first year completely exhausted, shattered, bemused, bewildered, terrified, scared, and slowly but surely it has improved.



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Q28 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Yes, you never stop being scared and exhausted though. The Lobby pass is given to the organisation, rather than the individual, is that correct?

Caroline Wheeler: There is an allocation given to the organisation and those allocations go up and down depending on various factors. For example, there is more digital presence here now, so a lot of the past allocations have gone up recently. But *The Sunday Times* has four passes, I believe, and those have been held predominantly by people in the Lobby, but occasionally a deputy editor has held one, or somebody else who was writing columns and feels they need access here. But it all goes through the standard processes, so it is a decision for Black Rod, and we go through exactly the same vetting process as MPs in order to get that pass.

Q29 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Katy, how do you decide who becomes part of the Lobby for the BBC?

Katy Searle: I hold this very proudly and I want to say the word democracy back to you if you are talking about closing the Lobby. That would cause great concern, because I genuinely think that if you want to get a fair representation of what you do in this place, we absolutely need access to the Houses. It could not be more important that I, or really my reporting team, come and see you and talk to you and really understand the story, as well as get stories, so we can talk to our audiences.

In terms of the allocation, it is very similar to what Caroline says. We will have a number, and in my role in Westminster I have to hand them out, which makes me very popular.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I was going to say, you have power.

Katy Searle: Or unpopular, yes.

Q30 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** What informs your thought process as you are handing them out?

Katy Searle: A couple of things. There are the primary people who are on air who are going to have to have them. Then, in the practical sense, our producers who are going to news gather, come into this place, do the pictures and make things happen for TV, radio and online. For me, I have one so that I can meet people who have concerns about the BBC or want to raise particular issues and talk about our coverage overall.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I am jealous, because I do not have one. It is only on an occasion like this that I get the chance to actually meet you all, or on social occasions. I have to admit, I do not really know how the passes are allocated at Sky. I am sure that, as with all the other organisations, we have a set number, and we give them to people who need them. But it is really interesting, you talked earlier about politics being so much more than the bear pit of PMQs. I remember the first time coming here to this House as a politics student and being actually quite



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shocked by the confrontational nature of it and the noise. If we want to show Britain and the world what goes on in politics, then Lobby passes are needed to make sure that we are reporting what is going on in this House and not just what the cameras are showing in PMQs.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes, because actually you could do an interesting piece to camera about some of the issues we are talking about here. But frankly, you would not want to show the film of this meeting particularly, because it is a bit dry.

Chair: I do not know what you are trying to say, Jackie.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: It has been quite interesting.

Q31 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** You need to be able to distil things into three minutes, and the beauty of PMQs is that there are enough short clips to do that, which makes it easy news broadcasting to be truthful. I am not doing myself any favours here am I really, now I am accusing them of being lazy.

Katy Searle: Can I just add to that for the BBC, because we are a big broadcaster, and we absolutely endeavour to get beyond just that noise. If you think about "Yesterday in Parliament" and "Today in Parliament", for example, you will get a very comprehensive, well-explained analytical piece about what happened in the House, and I often listen to it the following day, and think, "Ah, I hadn't seen the whole context of that from the immediacy of the news coverage."

Q32 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** How many people hear that?

Katy Searle: I do not have the figures to hand.

Jackie Doyle-Price: But whenever people do, they always comment on it to me, which is interesting. Again, on user preferences, radio seems to be having a resurgence as a medium, and perhaps we all need to think about how we do that better.

Katy Searle: To answer your point a little bit, it has a regular slot within the "Today" programme, which has very high audience figures across the week.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Yes, but of course now everyone is working from home they do not have to get up as early, so they are not hearing it—just saying.

Katy Searle: Thank you.

Q33 **Chair:** Is the Lobby itself a welcoming place for women?

Caroline Wheeler: Gosh, that is a big question. I found the whole experience of joining the Lobby so absolutely terrifying. I was very lucky because I came in from the regional press and so there were a lot of women in a similar position to me at the time. The reason for setting up



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the Women's Lobby was that it can be a very daunting place for everybody, but in particular for women.

It definitely felt like a bit of a boys' club that I was coming into when I first joined, and I really appreciated having more women around me to help smooth that journey. Certainly, one of the reasons why we wanted the Women's Lobby there was to make sure that women did not feel intimidated coming into this world, so that they would see it as being very much an environment that was there just as much for them as it was for male reporters.

Our ambition, as part of the Women's Lobby, was to have a big network so that you can feel comfortable with us as well, which was another part of it, making sure that MPs, and particularly female MPs, did not feel intimidated about talking to journalists. We wanted to provide a kind of welcome open arms to you guys too, to say, "Come and talk to us, we are not going to bite—well, not always."

It is better than it was, and I am really glad that we do have a Women's Lobby there. I feel that we have signposted it to female journalists now, and if they do need any support and help, they know there are senior female journalists there who will give them that kind of ear and shoulder to cry on. Certainly, throughout my career I have had journalists come to me and just say, "Can I have a cup of tea?", "Can I have a cup of coffee?" if they want to talk about a particular issue. Maybe they are not enjoying a certain aspect of their work, or they want advice on career progression—all of those things. We have now created an environment where they do not feel as intimidated as perhaps some of us did many moons ago when we first arrived here.

Chair: Thank you. Katy, do you have anything to add to that?

Katy Searle: Just to say that within BBC Westminster I always encouraged a buddy system, so if I had someone new coming into the unit, we would buddy up with Vicky, Laura or one of my more experienced female journalists to take them across to the House and introduce to MPs.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I don't really have anything to add.

Q34 **Carolyn Harris:** You have answered quite a few of my questions already, with excellent responses. Do you think that female journalists and editors treat stories about women in public life differently? Caroline.

Caroline Wheeler: It gets to the heart of what we said before: a story is a story. As I alluded to earlier, I am aware that if I am interviewing a male politician, I am unlikely to start talking about what they are wearing in the way that a male journalist will typically do—start talking about Liz's clothes, or whatever. I am perhaps more mindful of presenting what I am reporting in a way that considers that kind of equality issue more thoroughly. In some senses these are the kinds of issues that maybe a



male journalist simply would not think about. You almost become conditioned that when you go and do an interview with leading female politician, you ask them about what shoes or clothes they are wearing, whereas a woman just instinctively would not do that.

I then instinctively try to make it my kind of schtick that if that was what male journalists were going to do, then I was going to do the same to the men that I interviewed. But I do not think it is necessarily something male journalists are conscious of in the way that I think women journalists would be when doing the same thing.

Katy Searle: Just to repeat what I said before, I was going to say that we leave our gender at the door, which of course is not true, but as much as we can as journalists we approach stories as journalists, not as women or men.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I echo the point that a story is a story, but it is really important to have a mix of people making editorial decisions that reflects the audiences you are serving, because men and women sometimes have a different take on things and a different interest in things. Whether it is true that women are more interested in education, I do not know—plenty of men are as well. But quite often in editorial conferences I may raise things that perhaps my male colleagues would not have done, because I have just got into work from dropping the kids off at school or whatever and they probably have not. I do not want to be stereotypical against men, as I am sure there are plenty of men that take their children to school. But it goes back to what I said before about making sure that we are representing the people we are broadcasting or writing for, and if you have a range of voices making the decisions about what is and is not a story, that to me is what we call a healthy press and a healthy society.

Q35 **Carolyn Harris:** I have had conversations with or heard of stories where young women staffers have felt uncomfortable, or maybe had communications from older, more powerful men in this place, and I have done nothing about it. We can advise them where they should go, but for fear of recriminations, losing their job, being accused of being provocative, for all those reasons, they choose not to take it any further. We know that Isabel Hardman, Cathy Newman and Charlotte Evans have all spoken about similar things, and I have certainly heard about male colleagues and their attitude to women. Do female journalists feel comfortable about making complaints and actually going through a grievance procedure, or are they reluctant to do so because of the potential damage to their careers?

Caroline Wheeler: It is hard to comment on that because I do not know what they are thinking. I certainly have never spoken to a female journalist who has wanted to raise concerns but felt unable to do so. Certainly, this House has got better at recognising the issue in terms of sexual misconduct, and we now have the ICGS which has been created and is highlighted a lot. This is a broader issue, which would not be



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exclusive to female journalists, nor indeed to female MPs. Most people in this place find it very difficult to make complaints of that nature if they are at the junior end of things, largely because it can have an impact on their futures, which is something that the authorities are also aware of.

Even for MPs there is a disincentive to do it sometimes because it is seen as creating ructions for a party, as rocking the boat and all of those things, but I do not think any of those issues are exclusive to the press, and in particular to female journalists. But I am sure many of the attitudes that permeate around this building, whether you are a staff member, an MP or an official, will be pretty similar.

Katy Searle: There are obviously well reported examples in Parliament, and we all know that we have been discussing them for some time now. From a journalistic perspective for the BBC, to answer your question directly I would say that no journalist should fear for anything to do with their career if they have a potential cut-and-dried grievance. We have very strong HR procedures to follow along that, and that it should be a concern would quite simply not even come into my mind. As a manager of people, I feel very strongly about that.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: I do not have much to add to what the others have said. No one should be working in any place, in politics or anywhere else, where they feel in fear of bringing up some inappropriate behaviour because they are worried about what that might do to their career. Not that they have, but if anyone ever came to me and said, "Look, this thing happened last night and I feel really uncomfortable about it," I would give them the support that I could and encourage them to seek redress or to report it, and like the BBC we have pretty strong HR procedures in place to do that.

We live in a society now where it is more likely that people will be open about stuff that happens to them than was perhaps the case in the past, and maybe slowly things change. But as I said, I would always support anybody who wanted to come forward but also understand why they would not.

Q36 **Carolyn Harris:** My understanding from conversations that I have had is that a lot of the women and young men who come forward now are coming forward with historical stories rather than contemporary stories. There must be something which is quite empowering at the moment which is giving people the courage to come forward and say these things. Are you experiencing this with your colleagues: that when they were younger maybe staff let go because they thought it was not in their interest to say anything, but now, as they have matured and become more confident in their jobs, they are coming forward and saying things that happened to them when they were younger?

Q37 **Caroline Wheeler:** I cannot comment on this one because actually all my colleagues are male, younger and newer to the profession than I am, so I have no experience of that. We do have a role to keep this in the



spotlight, and *The Sunday Times* has probably done more than most of the newspapers in shining a light on the sexual misconduct that sadly does go on in this building. When there is momentum like that because there is media attention on it, then inevitably it does empower people to come forward, but I do not have any personal experience of that.

Katy Searle: Likewise, I have no personal experience, but I am sure that we would all agree it is fair to say that attitudes across society have changed quite significantly in the last 10 or 20 years, which no doubt enables people to come forward.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: We tend to put up with less and do not just accept things as we get older—that is the glory that comes with age and confidence. But again, things have changed, and I would maybe encourage other people to come forward.

Q38 **Chair:** I am conscious that we are going to lose Caroline at 4 pm, so I am going to direct this to you very quickly. Things have changed, but have things changed enough in the Lobby itself? You referred to providing a shoulder to cry on, and Katy referred to a buddy system. How would you feel if younger women were complaining about sexual harassment and misconduct within the Lobby itself from older, more experienced and perhaps more powerful members of the Lobby?

Caroline Wheeler: Absolutely appalled. It is not something that I have come across, but there have been numerous but very rare incidences where there have been issues of the nature that you have described raised in the Lobby. I cannot think of that happening in the last five or six years, certainly. Again, speaking to your point about having a pass and adhering to what is expected of you and your behaviour on the Estate, people are generally mindful that conduct must be in keeping with what the Commons authorities require.

In answer to the question about whether things have got better, yes they are better, largely because there are more women here and our voice has got louder. The Women's Lobby has enabled that to happen to a certain extent. It is still not perfect; we are still outnumbered. I once made a very bad joke which went down like a lead balloon at one particular meeting, where I said that in the Sunday Lobby there were still more men with one eye than there were women—I did have the permission of the gentleman concerned to say this. But we are still not there, and it always ebbs and flows in terms of women coming in and out, because people leave to have children, go on maternity leave and do not come back.

Q39 **Chair:** Do you ever worry about the rapidity with which some young women move around organisations within the Lobby? Do you assume that it is just for their career purposes, or perhaps they are deliberately moving to get away from older senior male members?

Caroline Wheeler: I genuinely have never had another female journalist come to me and raise the concern that you are suggesting. Women do



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move around, and part of that is because we are still a minority. There is now a greater recognition on editorial Lobby teams in particular that they do need to have some female representation. As I say, it is better, but for many years there have been all male teams on some of the biggest national newspapers. Thankfully that is no longer the case, and there is better representation.

We are still not anywhere near parity, which is obviously what we need to be aiming towards. But generally there is appreciation of the fact that it is a good thing to have a woman on your team. I should add that it is not that they are being employed simply because they are women, but there is an understanding that it is a good thing to have a senior female member on your team, which is to be applauded and welcomed.

Q40 **Chair:** Thank you, and we will let you go at 4 pm. Sorry, I am going to keep Katy and Cristina. Katy, did you have anything to add about the buddy system?

Katy Searle: Thank you, Chair. I would just like to clarify what I meant by the buddy system, because it was not actually in relation to harassment but very much in relation to learning the job, and going back to Caroline's point about how she found it intimidating. To clear that up, I am not talking about intimidation, but really just about how do you help someone who is new to Westminster?

Caroline Wheeler: It is about how to navigate the culture and understand how it works.

Katy Searle: Exactly, and it is true for women and women, women and men, and men and men as well.

Q41 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** I want to ask some questions about your regulators. How does Ofcom's code help you to decide whether or not and how to report stories that are potentially sexist or misogynistic in content, and perhaps your own codes and standards as well? Cristina.

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: The Ofcom code is very detailed, and I do not have it all in front of me. I can always follow up with paragraphs that I can send to you. But we are basically not allowed to report anything that is discriminatory, and therefore Ofcom is quite a standard. I have found it. Section 3 says: "In applying generally accepted standards, broadcasters must ensure material which may cause offence is justified by its context... Such material may include, but is not limited to, offensive language, violence, sexual violence, violation of human rights" et cetera, so the code is quite clear, and there is a fairly established complaints procedure that people can complain to Ofcom. There is an Ofcom committee that will then decide whether there are grounds for that complaint. It is then thoroughly investigated, they can take all sorts of documents away from you, can have access to emails and so on. It provides us with a very clear code by which to write our editorial content.

Q42 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** To your knowledge—this is to each of you—has



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Ofcom ever sanctioned anyone for sexist or otherwise discriminatory reporting, or for perpetuating negative stereotypes in any of their programmes?

Cristina Nicolotti Squires: Not at Sky News in recent years.

Katy Searle: Not in my memory.

Q43 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Anyone else that you might have reported on?

Katy Searle: Not in my memory. Could I just add one more thing? It is to echo Cristina, but also to say the relationship is in a partnership. We begin really with the partnership of the editorial standards and guidelines for the BBC, which obviously has strict guidelines around this area. As Cristina says, overall we are regulated by Ofcom as part of that partnership.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Thank you. That is all from me, Chair.

Chair: Thank you. I think we had a follow-up question for Caroline about how *The Times* is regulated, but as she has had to leave us, we will leave it there. Can I take this opportunity to thank you for your answers, which have been really informative? If there is anything you want to add in writing afterwards, do please feel free. I will now draw the meeting to a close.



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