

Woman's Place UK—written evidence (FOJ0015)

Response to the Communications and Digital Committee inquiry: The Future of Journalism

About Woman's Place UK

Woman's Place UK (WPUK) was formed in September 2017 to ensure that women's voices were heard in the consultation on proposals to change the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) to simplify the process by which individuals could change their legal sex. Since then we have broadened the campaign to focus on improving women's rights in the UK. In the two-and-a-half years since we were launched, we have had the opportunity to see how the media reports both on the specific issue of the GRA and women's issues more generally. We have noted how often reporting has been distorted, misrepresenting both our specific campaign and wider issues relating to women.

How digital technologies are changing journalism

The committee has invited evidence on a number of questions. In this submission, we will focus on three:

- How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?
- Why has trust in journalists declined? How could it be improved?
- Why is the journalism profession not more representative of the population?

We will draw on our own direct experience and our observations of the reporting of women's issues in the media.

How have digital technologies changed the consumption of journalism?

Since the advent of the web, print sales of newspapers and magazines have fallen dramatically. National newspaper circulation [declined](#) from 22 million in 2010 to 10.4 million in 2018. Far more people read their news online: a [2019 survey](#) by Ofcom found that half the population accesses news from social media. Instead of going directly to a newspaper's site, people will click on individual stories from Facebook or Twitter, reducing loyalty to particular newspaper brands and potentially leading to a lack of discrimination between reputable news sources and those that are unreliable.

Originally, when newspapers began putting content online, they hoped to develop a business model based on advertising. This hope has been unfulfilled, however, because advertisers have turned away from newspapers: instead, approximately two-thirds of advertising spend online goes to Google and Facebook.

The consequence of this has been the growth of "clickbait": stories that, through the use of an enticing headline and photograph, encourage readers to click through and read. Newspapers have always tried to draw readers in through the use of exaggeration and simplification, and the internet has exacerbated this trend.

Why has trust in journalists declined? How could it be improved?

The loss of advertising revenue and income from print sales means that profit margins have narrowed. The number of journalists has declined, and expensive posts (such as foreign correspondents) have been axed. Costly investigative journalism is less profitable than gossipy stories about reality tv celebrities or the royal family. There is a heavy

reliance on press releases written by PR agencies, which are sometimes published unchanged. The number of subeditors – people whose role is to check and correct copy – has dropped. Some outlets no longer employ subeditors at all: Mail Online, the world's biggest news website, expects journalists to check their own copy. At the same time, the fast-moving nature of the web means that the pressure is on to be the first to break a story and publish it on the newspaper's website as quickly as possible. The result is that stories on some news websites no longer go through a rigorous (or indeed any) process of checking before publication.

This inevitably reduces public trust in journalists. The difficulty is compounded by social media's blurring of lines between reputable outlets that require double-sourcing of stories and that employ subeditors, and those more concerned with rushing to publish.

The problem is compounded by the use of Twitter by journalists to break stories, or to comment on them. Even the BBC seems to allow its journalists to take a more lax approach to reporting stories on Twitter than is required for its news outlets. See, for example, the case of the BBC's political editor using Twitter to repeat a [false allegation](#) that a Tory minister's aide had been punched by a Labour activist.

Because journalists rely so heavily on press releases, with many rarely or never leaving the office, they are particularly susceptible to influence from lobby groups. One of our concerns is that charities such as Mermaids and Stonewall have had undue influence on the media, which has often used them uncritically as sources for reporting on trans issues.

Mermaids, for example, is an organisation that advocates for surgical and drug interventions for children displaying unease with their biological sex. There are many experts who disagree with Mermaids' approach, but Mermaids has long been presented as an authoritative voice in stories about trans children, something that is only now beginning to change. This [BBC story](#), 'Transgender children: Buying time by delaying puberty' is a typical example. It reports on children using puberty blockers to delay puberty, but doesn't include any voices questioning whether this is a good idea. All the organisations listed at the end for information and support are ones that buy into the central narrative that the use of puberty blockers is reasonable and acceptable. In fact, puberty blockers don't simply allow a period of reflection which might result in the young person rejecting a medical pathway. They [lead](#), in most instances, towards cross-sex hormones. Yet this claim about blockers is repeated in the majority of news reports about transgender children, reflecting journalists' dependence on trans lobby groups.

We note also that some trans lobby groups and trans activists use social media in particular to aggressively question any deviation from the trans activist narrative, often targeting individual journalists. We suspect that this makes journalists more reluctant to report critically on these issues and perhaps leads newspapers to believe that the lobby groups represent a more mainstream view than is the case.

A further concern when it comes to trust is the extraordinary influence trans lobby groups have had over the language used by the media in reporting trans issues. Here are four areas where we believe that the media has adopted language that is confusing or unhelpful:

Identifying someone by their preferred gender identity

Most newspapers now refer to individuals by their preferred gender identity rather than their biological sex. Our view is that newspapers should be able to identify someone by their biological sex in stories where not do so should would be nonsensical or confusing to the reader. This is particularly the case in stories involving male-to-female

transgender criminals. Some examples of stories where the use of a pronoun matching someone's self-identified gender has been inappropriate:

[MISSING: Woman dressed as man seen in Dronfield](#)

In this story, a male criminal who identifies as a woman is referred to in the article as a woman dressed as a man. Not only is it confusing for readers, it could undermine efforts of the police to catch the criminal.

[Transgender inmate charged with raping a woman sexually assaulted four fellow prisoners days after being remanded to an all-female jail](#)

This story about the convicted rapist Karen White (originally Stephen Wood) begins: "A transgender prisoner charged with raping a woman was remanded to a female prison where she indecently assaulted four inmates, a court heard. Karen White, 52, was sent to the jail despite the fact that she was a convicted sex offender and paedophile." We believe it is inappropriate to refer to a male sex offender as "she".

A lack of clarity in terminology

We believe that terms such as "transgender woman," "trans woman" or "trans man" should be explained to the reader. A number of people aren't aware that a "transgender woman" or a "trans woman" is a man who identifies as a woman. It's not unusual for people to assume that a "trans woman" must be a woman who identifies as male. Here's an example of a confusing story from the BBC:

[Transgender women in sport: Are they really a 'threat' to female sport?](#)

This story minimises the impact of allowing biological males to compete in women's sport. Take the first two paragraphs:

"Rachel McKinnon estimates she has received more than 100,000 hate messages on Twitter since she won her UCI Masters Track World Championship title in October.

"The 36-year-old Canadian's victory was controversial in some quarters because she is a transgender woman competing in female sport, albeit in the 35-44-year-old category."

The focus of the story is about how McKinnon is a victim of hate for wanting to fulfil her reasonable desire to compete as a woman. The phrase "transgender woman" should at least have an explanation in brackets such as "a biological man who identifies as female". (Try replacing the pronoun "she" with "he" and see how differently the story reads.)

We can provide many more examples.

Assignment at birth

We are concerned about some newspapers' use of the phrase "gender assigned at birth" to refer to an individual's biological sex. Babies aren't assigned a gender; their sex is observed. The implication that health professionals are randomly assigning gender identities to babies is false and misleading. Examples:

[Almost 100 students at top universities requested to change gender on records, first figures show](#)

[The transgender family where the father gave birth](#)

Suicide

Many transgender lobbying organisations repeatedly refer to a high risk of suicide amongst young transgender people. This is a narrative that has been uncritically adopted by much of the media. See, for example:

[Trans people already face a hostile world. Now the media is making it worse](#)

[5-year-old with gender dysphoria 'upset she won't be able to grow baby in belly'](#)

[Is Your Child Struggling With Their Gender, And Feeling Suicidal?](#)

Repeatedly stating that a particular group is at risk of suicide is not good journalistic practice. (See the [Samaritans Guidelines](#) on reporting suicide that warn against dramatizing or sensationalising the risk of suicide.) It is also inaccurate: the [study](#) most frequently cited in relation to suicide risk was based on a very small, self-selecting sample which did not take into account respondents' co-morbidities. The Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) says that suicide is extremely rare among young people with gender dysphoria. We find it disturbing that so many media organisations have repeated these assertions without investigating them further.

Why is the journalism profession not more representative of the population?

The opportunities for aspiring journalists to join a local or regional newspaper as a trainee and to work their way up have diminished considerably. Many local newspapers have closed or reduced in size and have few openings for beginners. Journalism is now a mostly-graduate profession, and many find their way into the profession through unpaid London-based internships. The result is that journalists come disproportionately from middle-class backgrounds and from inside the capital. As these journalists have no longer had the experience of working on a regional newspaper, which traditionally would involve going out into the community and talking to ordinary people, their experience and concerns are often limited to the people with whom they have mixed in school and university.

Another concern we have is the possible impact of digital technologies on the representation of women in the profession. A major impact of the switch from print to digital has been the ability to comment on stories and to target individual journalists. This has led to remarkable levels of hostility and abuse online. An [analysis](#) by the Guardian in 2016 of the 70m comments left on its site in the previous 10 years found that of the 10 most abused writers, eight were women. The two men were black. The Guardian no longer allows comments on pieces dealing with more contentious subjects, but the abuse continues elsewhere: on other newspaper sites, on Twitter and on Facebook (most newspapers don't employ any moderation on comments beneath links to their articles on their Facebook pages). Abuse directed towards female journalists is often of an explicitly violent and sexual nature. A [report](#) by the International Press Institute found:

"Although the numerous journalists, editors, managers and other experts who contributed to this study were given the possibility to speak about the problem of online harassment in both gender-neutral and gender-specific terms, there was almost complete agreement, across all countries and news organizations visited, not only that female journalists are more often targeted in online attacks, but also that the attacks experienced by women are especially vicious and often highly sexualized."

US-based [research](#) found that female journalists were more likely to experience abuse when they wrote about contentious issues such as "immigration, race, feminism or politics".

This phenomenon may lead to fewer women becoming journalists and a reluctance by female journalists to tackle controversial or difficult issues.

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