

The Maybanke Lecture 2013

From Suffragettes to CyberFems

Women journalists in a changing
media landscape

Adele Horin

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6 May 2013
Sydney Mechanics School of Arts

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Adele Horin for agreeing to give the Inaugural Maybanke Lecture; to Her Excellency, Professor Marie Bashir, AC, CVO, Governor of NSW and Patron of Sydney Community Foundation, for launching the Annual Maybanke Lecture Series; to the Board of Sydney Community Foundation and the many supporters and donors to The Maybanke Fund; to Jan Roberts and Beverly Kingston; to Penelope Rose Maybanke Stokes and Trinity Maybanke Brogden; and of course to Maybanke Selfe Wolstenholme Anderson.

Rosalind Maybanke Strong AM

The Maybanke Lecture

Maybanke Selfe Wolstenholme Anderson (1845 – 1927)

was once a household name to several generations of Australians, yet today her name is almost unknown. She was a woman who made things happen, courageously taking leadership on controversial issues when the times demanded it.

For more than 50 years, Maybanke actively promoted the rights of Sydney's women and children and was a leader in the women's suffrage movement.

On 6 May 1891, Maybanke gave her first public speech. Each year a public lecture will be held on or near this date to highlight Maybanke's life and work and to address Maybanke's causes in the context of contemporary Sydney.

The inaugural lecture, given by our guest of honour Adele Horin, was held in 2013 at the Sydney Mechanics School of Arts. In attendance were many proud supporters of the Sydney Community Foundation, as well as Her Excellency, Professor Marie Bashir, AC, CVO, Governor and Patron of Sydney Community Foundation, who launched the Annual Maybanke Lecture Series.

Introduction

In 2010, my husband Tony and I established The Maybanke Fund within the Sydney Community Foundation to honour my great, great aunt Maybanke Selfe Wolstenholme Anderson, the women's advocate and social reformer.

I am proud that Maybanke is my middle name and that I am Maybanke's great, great niece – my grandmother and mother called her Aunty May.

Maybanke Selfe came to Australia aged nine and grew up in Sydney to become a feminist and educationist, a woman who according to one of the many obituaries on her death in 1927, “*had a genius for initiating movements for education and social betterment.*” Maybanke played an active role in the promotion of the rights of women and children in Australia. She was a leader in the women's suffrage movement, and worked for Federation. She established the first free kindergarten in Australia to support the children of the inner city and their working mothers. She wrote extensively, and founded a newspaper *The Woman's Voice*.

The Maybanke Fund supports causes across the range of Maybanke's work and, through the Annual Maybanke Lecture, honours her life, and promotes public discussion of issues and

areas where she was active, and that are still current in Sydney some 100 years after her public work. Maybanke's great love was children, and she was proud to have founded the Kindergarten Union. Initially the Maybanke Fund is focusing on small grants, which will reduce inequalities in early childhood education. Maybanke Awards have been made in 2012 and 2013 to mature age students who have been working as Aboriginal Teacher Aides and are now undertaking the Bachelor of Teaching in Early Childhood Education at Macquarie University's Centre for Indigenous Education.

In 1894 Maybanke started publishing the fortnightly newspaper *The Woman's Voice*. The paper covered issues of women's rights and suffrage at the national and international level. It dealt with birth control, women's health, divorce law, women's control of their own finances and women's need to balance family and work. It is particularly special that Adele Horin, who was for 18 years, the social issues journalist with the *Sydney Morning Herald* is giving the Inaugural Maybanke Lecture.

Adele began her career on The West Australian newspaper, and later worked for the weekly The National Times in Sydney, New York and London. After a stint on the *Life Matters* program on ABC Radio National (celebrating its 21st birthday this week we note), Adele joined the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1994 as both a weekly columnist and news and features writer. She has had a

long-standing interest in issues affecting women and children, social justice and social change. In fact that's pretty much all she's written about for the past two decades. Adele won a Walkley Award for a series on Sex in Australia and has twice won the Australian Human Rights Commission award for metropolitan newspaper journalism. Now that she has left the Herald, her attention has turned to another matter of keen importance to women – and men - in the new demographic landscape – ageing and caring. She writes on these and related matters in a blog called *Coming of Age* at adelehorin.com.au

The Maybanke Fund and Sydney Community Foundation are proud to publish Adele's stimulating, important and entertaining speech.

Rosalind Maybanke Strong AM
Chair
Sydney Community Foundation

From Suffragettes to Cyberfems

Women journalists in a changing media landscape

By Adele Horin

It was when I was having chemotherapy for breast cancer sixteen years ago that I first came across Maybanke Anderson. Wendy McCarthy, a great, energetic feminist at the Herald, her attention has turned to another matter of keen importance to women – and men and was called *Maybanke Anderson: Sex, Suffrage and Social Reform*, by the historian, Jan Roberts. Gee, thanks Wendy. Just the sort of riveting read a girl needs when she's hooked up to a drip. But when Wendy gives you a book, you read it. And I'm so glad I did. I was blown away. Gender Studies wasn't on offer when I went to university, and I was shamefully ignorant of Australia's feminist history.

This woman's life turned out to be an inspiration. It would have been inspirational in any circumstance, but perhaps more so in the circumstance I found myself in at the time. Maybanke is a deserted wife and breadwinner for three surviving children. She rises to prominence in the 1890s, and is still outraging conservatives when she remarries at 54 a man 13 years her junior, and remains exerting influence until near her death in 1927 at the age of 82. Maybanke runs a girls' school that

becomes renowned for its modern teaching methods. She campaigns tirelessly for the women's vote and for the Federation. She starts the kindergarten movement. And she runs a newspaper, *The Woman's Voice*, where she champions causes like contraception and sex education. This woman is on the right side of history. I admired her and I liked her.

So how could I not accept and be honoured by Ros Strong's invitation to give the first Maybanke Anderson Lecture? It was titled *From Suffragettes to Cyberfems*, as I wanted to trace the connection between the suffragettes like Maybanke of the late 19th and 20th centuries, who used newspapers to influence the public agenda as it affected women and children, and the flourishing of women bloggers and online feminist writers today – me included. Today, women writers are trying to adapt to a changing media environment that is fragmented and challenging, but incredibly vibrant. For feminists, the times are exciting. Digital media has opened the communication channels to thousands of new feminist voices, many influential. In this resurgent feminism I see parallels with the suffragette writers and editors of yesteryear, who made the most of the small printing presses around at the time. On the other hand, for today's women journalists working in mainstream media, it's a more difficult time. Media is in an extraordinary period of transition.

So let's begin at the beginning, with a little of my own history as a woman in journalism.

Soon after I went to work on *The West Australian*, Perth's morning newspaper, in 1969, I was assigned to the women's pages. There are probably not many of us left in journalism who can claim such a dubious heritage. Within a few years, women's pages were gone from most major metropolitan newspapers. Women journalists were already getting agitated about being corralled at the back of the paper. They were already complaining about their 'eternal role as providers of pap' when Germaine Greer made one of her visits back to Australia (not making it to Perth, however). It was 1971 and in characteristic style, she fired up a meeting of about 50 women journalists. After that, the days of women's pages were numbered.

I must say, however, that in 1969, I wasn't unhappy to be assigned to the women's pages. For a start, it meant I no longer had to type out the weather page. This was an unbelievably boring, all-day task requiring scrupulous attention to detail. I once got the timing of the sunrise wrong and incurred the wrath of every Western Australian farmer, fisherman and Country Party MP who rang into the paper to complain. I'd never seen a sunrise myself and had no idea of how important this small detail was to the lives of so many and to the Western Australian

economy. Also, being assigned to the women's pages took me out of the clutches of Piers Akerman (yes, Piers Akerman), who, though only a few years older, had a role that included some supervision of cadets like me. I do not remember it fondly.

We are all familiar with the difficult plight newspapers are in today, as well as mainstream television. But some may be less aware of the explosion online of blogs and websites run by women. Many, like the wonderfully titled *The News With Nipples* and *Fat and Slutty*, are in-your-face feminist. Others, like Mia Freedman's website, *Mamamia*, and Wendy Harmer's website, *The Hoopla*, draw big female audiences because of their content, photos and illustrations, and pro-feminist stance. There is a site called *Women's Agenda* within the *Crikey* stable, which deals with politics, careers and opinion, and makes no bones about who its target audience is. There is also the *Sydney Morning Herald* online site called *Daily Life*, with its talented and strongly feminist blogger, Clementine Ford. The blokes who run the *Sydney Morning Herald* wanted to rename the site *Women's Perspective* in a recent restructure, but there was a rebellion by its editor, staff and social media, who saw the proposed title as a throwback to the 1950s women's pages. So the women won, and *Daily Life* it remained. Clearly, like *Women's Agenda* and the others, this is a site aimed squarely at smart women readers. Some have disparagingly called this new

crop of online writers, ‘Mummy Bloggers; clearly meant as a put down, given there are no Daddy Bloggers’ (or Daddy Anything-Else). But the disparagers use that term now at their peril, because the women bloggers have hit back, demanding to be taken seriously. “There are three people in the world who are allowed to call me ‘Mummy’, or Daddy Anything-Else”).

Then-Prime Minister Julia Gillard invited 20 of the women who blog or run digital publications to drinks in December 2012, and later gave an ‘exclusive’ video interview to one of the most popular of them, Eden Riley, whose blog *Edenland* attracts 20,000 visitors a month. Angela Priestley, who runs the *Women’s Agenda* site, said that between them, those 20 women had a combined audience estimated by Nielsen of three and a half million. The world is changing. Recently, I joined their esteemed ranks, starting my own blog, *Coming of Age*, where I write the equivalent of a weekly column about issues to do with ageing from a baby boomers’ perspective, and invite readers to make their contribution. Go Google it!

I was among about 80 at the *Sydney Morning Herald* who took advantage of a generous voluntary redundancy package to leave, and at the age of 61, I had to try in a modest way to reinvent myself. But have I come full circle? Am I ending my career as I started it – on a virtual women’s page – This time without a

salary? And with a smaller readership? Is this emblematic of what's happening to women in journalism? Because while there are many feminist-oriented bloggers and websites, some of the most popular sites (by women bloggers) have a whiff of the old women's page about them. There are lots of blogs about parenting, funny accounts of family life, the battle with head lice, PMT, home renovations, and so on. None, I think, written by journalists.

As an online writer, I have freedom. I have a voice. But is it still the all-male hierarchy in the editorial suite and on the board at the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other mainstream media outlets who retain the real power and big audiences, however diminished? Was Julia barking up the wrong tree when she thought that the assembled group of women bloggers and digital publishers had any real power?

Further, is the flowering of women online however dimmed for feminism a barking up the wrong tree when she thought that the assembled group of women bloggers and digital publication attitude to authority figures, and investigation – often backed by expensive defamation lawyers. It's not just the expression of opinion. Is this growth of women bloggers, in effect, a return to the marginalised terrain of the women's

pages? Or is it a fantastic development for journalism, women and readers generally?

Before I try to answer these questions, let me say that there is another way to look at this phenomenon. Today's bloggers and female led websites could be seen as being less in the tradition of the women's page, and more in the tradition of the 19th Century suffragettes and journalists like Maybanke Anderson and Louisa Lawson (Henry's mum, but more impressive), who used the printing presses to effect. It turns out there is quite a long tradition of women working in journalism in Australia, and here I owe a debt to social historian Barbara Lemon's account. Journalism was one of those professions, like teaching, open to educated women who needed to financially support themselves and their children, or to escape an unhappy home, or to indulge their passion for writing and to further their political vision. As a profession, however, it carried a certain social stigma – the whiff of loose morals, which was not entirely gone by the time I entered its hard-drinking culture.

It was back in 1839 in South Australia that Catherine Helen Spence started her 40-year career writing about the colonies, though sometimes under her brother's name. By the 1880s, Louisa Lawson was employing female writers on her famous, politically progressive newspaper, *Dawn: A Journal for*

Australian Women. There were other publications aimed at women too; *The Interpreter*, *The Spectator* and *The Australian Women's Magazine*. The suffragette Vida Goldstein ran two papers, *Women's Sphere* and *Woman Voter*, then our own Maybanke Anderson's intelligent and progressive *Woman's Voice*. Its motto was, "democratic but not revolutionary; womanly but not weak; fearless without effrontery; liberal without licence." I think that's terrific.

These small publications saw a niche that the big boys in the mainstream press had been blind to. They took up the important women's causes of the day, and they proved to be prescient on subjects that ranged from Federation to contraception. In these small publications, one can see parallels with today's feisty women bloggers. What allowed this diversity of women's voices to be heard in the 19th century was the ubiquity of small printing presses and the relative low cost of starting up; a bit like the web today, which has allowed a million flowers to bloom. Ironically, while the miracle of the web has contributed to the problems facing mainstream newspapers today, back in the 19th century, it was the emergence of 14 big metropolitan newspapers over the decades that hastened the demise of those small printing presses and the individual voices they carried. That, and the enormous pressure female editors

like Maybanke were under; doing so much with so few resources.

It soon strikes the mainstream newspapers and their advertisers that women readers are valuable. Hey, they control the family budget! The newspapers begin to cautiously target women. First, with a woman's column, and then mainstream news with the full-blown *Women's Page*, starting in the 1870s.

But in the hands of the mainstream press and the men who controlled it, the business of dishing up pap to women begins. It's not the feisty feminism of Maybanke's *Woman's Voice* and Louisa Lawson's *Dawn* that is found on these women's pages. The women's page becomes a velvet prison ybankeess and the men who controlled it, the busine

I cheered to see that when the *Sydney Morning Herald* began its weekly *Woman's Column* in 1888, it differed from the others. It ran essays on serious topics, rather than the usual domestic chitchat. And there were exceptions to the corralling of women journalists in the velvet prison. Jessie Litchfield, a Reuters' icorrespondent and mother of seven, became the first female editor of a metropolitan paper when she was appointed to run the *Northern Territory Times* in 1930 (if Darwin in the

1930s can be considered a metropolis). But mostly, this is where things stood until the Second World War: domestic chitchat.

In the war, as in so many other areas of life, women journalists had a chance to expand their horizons. Elizabeth Riddell opened the New York bureau of the *Daily Mirror*; Lorraine Stumm, an accredited war correspondent, reported on the attack of Rabaul, and there were many other firsts. But then came the 1950s – abandon hope all ye who enter this forsaken decade. Women’s pages were, in the words of historian Sharyn Pearce, “Mostly entrenched in a world of intimate, chatty escapism, varnished with a layer of social snobbery”. And don’t forget the obligatory obsequious coverage of royal tours. . Mary Marlowe left her job on *The Sun*’s women’s pages, because as she said, “I had a tiresome tendency to tell the world what women were doing, instead of what they were wearing.”

Even so, this is when the great Herald journalist, Margaret Jones, got her start in 1954. Her famous application to *The Sun Herald* read in part, “As you may see by my signature, I am a woman and I know that, even yet, a certain amount of prejudice still exists against women in journalism.” She later became the Herald’s first correspondent in Washington and then in Beijing. The formidable Catherine Martin (with whom I had the privilege of working) also got her start in the 1950s on *The West*

Australian. Her investigation into the health impact of asbestos mining later won her the coveted gold Walkley award.

So as you can see, by the time I started in 1969, I was part of a fairly long tradition of women journalists, and of a topsy-turvy struggle to be taken seriously. I began at *The West Australian* around the same time as Geraldine Doogue, as well as Helen Trinca, now a senior manager at *The Australian*. And all of us young female cadets were expressly forbidden by management from wearing pantsuits to work. At *The West Australian's* women's pages back then, we were at a pre-feminist stage of development. We dealt with serious issues like health and education, but not topics such as abortion or domestic violence. Our collective consciousness was a couple of years away from being raised. I will be forever grateful to the editor, Betty Sim, who had well and truly ditched coverage of weddings by then, and to my colleague Jackie Rees, who when assigned to cover Princess Margaret's garden party, wrote a wickedly satirical piece. It was unfortunately pulled at the last moment by The West's CEO, whose wife had attended the same garden party. Jackie later worked for *The Bulletin* in Canberra. Both these women were role models of serious, thoughtful journalism and taught me so much.

It was not all bad to get a start on such a woman's page. And so it wasn't their fault that when I went to interview the great Perth-based feminist, Irene Greenwood, who died in 1992 at 94 after half a century of campaigning for peace, social justice and women's causes ault that when I went to interview ther place in history. It might have been a Western Australian thing. Back then we West Australians had an inferiority complex, sort of the reverse of today's situation. We tended to think that nothing really first-rate could come out of Western Australia. I was not able to find the piece I wrote about Irene Greenwood as a 19 or 20-year-old, but I am sure I didn't do her justice.

It might seem that my personal history over the next decade, and the influx of women into journalism over the tumultuous 1970s, heralded a marvellous new era of equality. I was able to work in New York and in Washington as a correspondent for the wonderful long-defunct weekly newspaper, *The National Times*. Back in Sydney, the talented women working for that paper were truly amazing – Anne Summers, Marian Wilkinson, Wendy Bacon, the late Elisabeth Wynhausen, Deborah Smith (later science editor at the Herald) and Debra Jopson, who went on to be the Herald's indigenous and investigative reporter. Geraldine Brooks, later of *The Wall Street Journal* and Pulitzer-prize winning novelist, was over at the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

But the promise has not been fulfilled in mainstream media. In many ways, when you look at mainstream media today, women journalists and women's causes have gone backwards. It seemed possible back in the 1970s, with the emergence of so many talented women journalists, that the media could be the beacon of equality and enlightenment in the corporate landscape. It seemed possible that women would make it to positions of control and influence; on media company boards, as editors, as CEOs, with a strong presence on the influential opinion pages and on the front pages, and as high-profile presenters on commercial radio and television. This is not the case. Talented women are not reaching the senior echelons. Mainstream media is dominated by men at the high levels. For the very occasional woman who makes it, it can be lonely and tough. If you don't go along with the boys, it is easy to be labelled as difficult, and depending on the culture of the organisation, as a bitch.

In 1993, Michelle Grattan became the first woman to edit a major metropolitan daily (outside Darwin), but after two years, she was removed. In 2013, at the time of this lecture, not one woman edited a major daily newspaper (although the *Herald Sun* was edited by a woman, as were the *Saturday Herald* and *Saturday Australian*). In commercial radio, as Clementine Ford has pointed out, there are only two women solo announcers in all of Australia, and even when you throw in the Torvill-and-

Dean-type duets, there are 17 women's voices, compared to 123 men on the nation's eight biggest commercial radio stations. There is no female equivalent to Alan Jones (okay, we have been spared), but virtually no female presenter on commercial radio like ABC Radio's Linda Mottram. Quite a few women read the news on commercial television. But when *The Daily Telegraph* rounded up the most influential people in TV news for two separate photo shoots, there were 32 men and only 18 women. And of course, the women in television encounter the twin dragons of sexism and ageism. Among the men in the photo, I counted eight in their 50s or 60s, and not in the photo were Channel 9's Laurie Oakes (still going at 69), Ray Martin (68) and *Sixty Minute's* Charles Wooley (65). Among the women, only one, Lisa Wilkinson, was over 50. Admittedly, missing were Liz Hayes, Tracy Grimshaw and Jenny Brockie. It's hard to imagine the female equivalent of George Negus who was 69 before he left television – and maybe he'll be back. Or a woman with the kind of craggy (I mean, character-filled) face of Kerry O'Brien, still working in his 60s, being able to have such a long, illustrious television career, at least on the commercial networks. In the US, Barbara Walters still co-hosts an interview show at the age of 83. There was outcry in 2013 on social media after Geoffrey Barker, a well-known and now retired journalist, wrote a disparaging opinion piece for *The Age* about the plethora of young female reporters on TV news. He called them

‘post-pubescent babes’ with blonde hair and ‘pert and perky breasts,’ and he described them as if being young and blonde was the same thing as being dumb. What a pity he missed the more important question on ageism on commercial television, and the imbalance of young and older news and current affairs reporters. And what might the future hold for these bright, young female reporters if management’d he described t change? It’s time Australian commercial television woke up and began to value the expertise and wisdom of older women, instead of disappearing them at a certain age.

Though many women journalists are quite well known, women still struggle to attain real influence in media’s upper echelon. In 2011, the *Sydney Morning Herald* hailed Amanda Wilson as the first woman editor in the paper’s 180-year history. After 18 months, she left the organisation having helped with a strategy that led the paper to a root and branch restructure and mass redundancies. When she was appointed, people kept asking her what it was like to be the first woman editor of the Herald. She told them she had never thought of herself as a woman journalist, but as a journalist. Knowing what she knows now, she would say something different as she realised almost immediately how important it was for young women to have a woman in that leadership role. She told me once that it is imperative to have more women in positions of power and

responsibility as role models for other women. She believes media companies are foolish not to tap into the brainpower, and yes, the emotional responses of women in senior positions. A female boss may have predicted the public backlash that greeted the proposal to change *Daily Life* to *Women's Perspective*. And perhaps with more women in charge, there would be a restraining hand on the raunchiness and sexualised nature of stories that have crept into Fairfax's online news sites. This follows the unsurprising discovery that 'tits bring hits,' or to put it with more gentility, that when you put news online and can count exactly how many people click onto a particular story, the stories that rate well are about sex, crime and sport. It's called 'click bait.' But you can't just have one senior woman expressing a view that women readers might prefer a different mix. It would be too easy for her to be seen as 'not a team player.' As Amanda said to me, you need several.

In 2012, the Workplace Gender Equality Agency did a census on Women in Leadership. It found that Australia's media companies perform worse than insurance companies, banks, food and software companies. Their record is appalling. Research by Monash University academic Louise North also found that the Australian media performs well below the global average for women's participation in media management. And despite the seeming influx of women into journalism, females

still account for only around one-third of the staff. Remember that figure; it crops up time and again in measuring just about anything to do with media and gender.

The online news site, *New Matilda*, recently completed an investigation into Australian women in the changing media landscape. A team including Wendy Bacon, formerly professor of journalism at UTS, put together the alarming statistics.

While I won't bore you with all the figures, here are a couple:

- Women represented only 15 per cent of the board members of private media companies (it improves when you include the ABC and SBS).
- Channel Nine through Nine Entertainment had no women directors; the company that owns Channel Seven, West Media, had one out of nine.
- Of the 24 CEOs in the survey, only one was a woman – Deborah Wright, of the regional broadcaster, NBN.
- At the next level down, the executive team, of the 12 examined, women represented just 17 per cent. Again, Nine had no women. Fairfax had 2 of 13 – neither of the two had responsibility for editorial content or policy.
- There are quite a few people with the title of Editor or Deputy Editor at the *Sydney Morning Herald*. For example, of the newspaper, of the website, of the iPad.

Then there is News Director, and an Editor and Deputy Editor who presides over all of them. All are men, except for the editor of the *Saturday Herald*, Judith Whelan.

Christine Holgate, one of three women on the board of Channel 10, who moved to Australia from the UK, said recently at a UTS seminar on woman and leadership, “My observation when I came to Australia was, ‘Wow, it’s so blokey here!’” I think with gender inequality women on the board of Channel 10, who moved to Australia from the UK, said recently at al as we would like to think. In the media, because there are many women on the floor in the newsroom, especially young journalists, we have tended to overlook the bigger, badder picture. It also took a survey in 2012 of almost 600 female journalists by academic Louise North to reveal the continuing extent of sexual harassment in newsrooms, especially in commercial television. Tracy Spicer wrote a hilarious piece about her time in commercial television in the form of a letter, titled *Dear Mr Sexist*. It thanked her composite bosses for teaching her so much. “Why, I had no idea I was so fat, ugly and stupid,” she wrote. “I thought being a size 12 was perfectly acceptable.” Personally, I don’t think much will change with boards unless quotas are introduced for women’s representation.

The *New Matilda* team also looked at the presence of women writers on the influential opinion pages of the major newspapers, and as writers of analysis. Here, we see the figure of one-third again. Yet, we know there are many brilliant women out there! Women graduates have been outnumbering men for years, and are fully capable of writing such pieces. When writer Chrys Stevenson analysed the content of the front pages of eight of the leading newspapers to see how many women journalists had their stories on the front page, and how many women were quoted in front page stories, it was around one-third in each case. After all this time, and all the promise of the 1970s, this is just not good enough. During the fortnight of Stevenson's research, which covered from mid-October to early November 2012, I'm saddened to report that the Herald led her 'blokeyness index'. Perhaps this had something to do with the exodus of senior women from the Herald just beforehand. She was looking at newspapers, but I think the picture would be worse if she had looked at the online news sites or the iPad versions to see how and to what extent women are represented. When Wendy Bacon flicked through the *Sydney Morning Herald's* iPad version, she counted 100 images of men and 13 of women. Four of them were of then-Prime Minister, Julia Gillard.

What does this matter? A woman, Rebekah Brooks, former editor of Murdoch's *The Sun* and *The News of the World*, hardly

covered those papers in glory. Does having a woman in charge, women on the board, more women in senior editorial positions, more women getting their stories onto the front page, actually guarantee anything? Yes, we know that not every woman is a feminist. But that's not the point. Who makes decisions about what is news, and the prominence that stories receive is extremely important in shaping the national conversation. The calibre and outlook of the decision makers are crucial. Talented women deserve to have their stories recognized and equality – to be fostered, encouraged and promoted in numbers, so that they – and the rest of the staff – don't suffer the indignity of seeing less talented men rise to the top. And it does make a difference. It lowers the blokey tone of the workplace and the product. It means a senior woman has a chance to question the prominence given to sport, sex and crime on the front pages, and to fight to give similar prominence that may be in tune with the female readership.

My own experience taught me over the decades that you had to fight for stories about childcare, domestic violence, parental leave and so on, to be treated seriously instead of being regarded as soft news. These stories were given more prominence over the decades I was in journalism. It was more difficult to see similar prominence for other social issue stories regarding poverty, single mothers, and especially the

unemployed. These were people regarded as 'losers,' stories regarded as ought me o'tand as one past editor told me, stories that might depress the middle-class readership. Still, small progress was made here.

The online news sites of the major newspapers have become more important than their print product (although not yet for revenue), and that is one reason I believe the position has worsened for the reporting of these social issues. They are not given prominence on the main page of these online sites. If stories about women's poverty were not all that easy to receive prominence in the newspapers, they have less chance of seeing prominence on the newspapers' corresponding online site. It's tits that get hits. Women's issues, it could be argued by the men in charge, are being dealt with. They're being corralled away, in *Daily Life* or *Women's Perspective*, to be found right near the bottom of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* main page. It's the newspaper's new women's page, covering celebrity, cooking, fashion and some hard-core feminism in what is quite a savvy mix.

But here is the good news: what is happening in mainstream newspapers and television stations is less important than it used to be, and it is continuing to decline in importance. Influence is diffused and shared these days. Because there is

this amazingly vibrant and exciting other world out there, where women and feminist issues are doing better than ever. For example, as well as the individual bloggers like me, there are independent online news and magazine sites that do serious journalism across the welter of subjects. Politics, economy, social issues, feminist issues, and in some cases, investigations. *Anne Summers Reports* is one such site, akin to an upscale magazine, which would be of equal interest to men and women. So too, *The Global Mail*, another that does serious, long-form journalism. *New Matilda* and *Crikey* are others. And here senior women are faring much better. Of the nine such online news sites surveyed by *New Matilda*, only five were run by women.

Women have jumped with enthusiasm and imagination into the world of new media. They are not, for the most part, bewailing the loss of the old order. There is no going back. And I haven't even yet mentioned *Destroy the Joint*, an Australian feminist social media outlet with tens of thousands of online followers. It rose to fame when it galvanised social media pressure on Alan Jones's advertisers, in the wake of his comments about Gillard's father dying of shame. Every day, *Destroy the Joint*, posts on Facebook and Twitter about issues that shine a spotlight on sexism and misogyny. All these women realise that creating an online niche is one way of the future. So instead of seeing

women bloggers and digital publishers as marginalised scribes on a cyberspace women's page, I see them as a part of a feminist vanguard. Small vanguards always, in the tradition of *Dawn* and *The Woman's Voice*. People might be prepared, in the not-so-distant future, to pay to follow the work of a single blogger like Clementine Ford, or to receive just the *Daily Life* part of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Advertisers might one day flock to my blog on baby boomers. And hopefully donors will respond to Anne Summers' request to help fund her new online magazine. Ordinary informed citizens, academics and journalists are all working online in more collaborative ways today than in the past to bring information and analysis to the broader public. In some ways, this blurring of the boundaries is reminiscent of the collaborative ways of the suffragettes who were not journalists or editors to start with, but who came from different walks of life.

There is no doubt that it is a tough time for many journalists, as traditional newsrooms get smaller. Online sites, outside a few like *The Global Mail* (which is backed by a philanthropist), are hard-pressed to pay contributors anything at all. Of all my friends who left the Herald with me and needed to get jobs quickly, only one got a job in mainstream media, and one in online media (a business publication). The others are doing work for State Government Ministers or government

departments, others for universities or not-for-profit foundations. A big loss to journalism.

Even so, for readers, it is a fantastic time. You have so much choice. Much of it is good, and not all of it is opinion. Some is serious reporting and investigations, as on *The Global Mail* and *New Matilda*. *Anne Summers Reports* nthere is excellent journalism to be found there. *The Guardian* has started its special Australian online edition. There is a site called *The Conversation*, where journalists severely subedit academics' writing to make their research interesting and intelligible. If you hook into Twitter, it links you into a feast of fantastic journalism and research from all over the world.

Out there for readers, it's information overload. Sometimes the politically incorrect dinosaur within me raises its spikey head to wonder: how big are the audiences for these different sites? How long might they last? On their smartphones and iPads, how sustained and deep is the audience's reading? And if some of this independent journalism (such as *The Global Mail's* investigation into the pharmaceutical industry) appeared in the Herald instead, would it have more impact? But really, readers could hardly complain about the banquet on offer.

For feminism, there has not been a better time for years, as I've indicated if you hunt in the niches.

For people like me, brought up in the old school that taught the value of accuracy on the weather page, and the value of clear writing on the women's page, it's a time of transition and evolution. I'm being challenged to find my inner entrepreneur. I'm aiming to appeal to men and women. It's a bit scary, but also exciting.

In her first editorial, Maybanke wrote, "So long as women are allowed to give the nation their money in taxes ... And are not allowed to do the simple duty of casting a vote ... So long as women must bear children to die in hundreds in their infancy ... There will be teaching work for thinking women and the need for a women's paper."

Well, we've got the vote, and made massive steps in reducing infant mortality. But I'm sure the prodigiously energetic Maybanke Anderson would agree there is still much to be done in improving the position of women. And the new crop of cyber-feminists are carrying on her work.



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