



Women in news

Christine Ockrent has set new standards for women in news for the past three decades. Here she discusses candidly the heights scaled, and battles fought, won and lost.

Turn on your television, radio, laptop or smart phone and it's highly likely you will see or hear a female reporter or presenter. The door may still be only half open to the boardroom but in the newsroom women across Europe can sit at whatever desk they chose to... be it foreign news, business, politics, health or sport.

Christine Ockrent has played a major part in making this happen. The celebrated Belgian-born journalist has had a ground breaking career in television as a documentary producer, commentator and as the first female news presenter in France. Her appointment and performance created quite a stir at the time and a ream of column inches in the French and foreign press. She is quoted in the New York Times back in the 1980s as saying: "It shows that something is happening in this society when women can get accepted in this kind of responsibility."

Twenty years on and speaking to INSEAD Knowledge at the Women's Forum in Deauville in October, her views are just as pertinent.

Women take more risks

"It's very striking to be in the newsroom, to see that women tend to take more risks than men. You have many of them on the front line. And of course, many of them are on the air, even in the United States

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which is paradoxical. When Katie Couric did the evening news (nationally, on the NBC network), many countries in the world starting with France had done that 25 years before. That being said, it is still very difficult for women to get to the top and that is true in many, many other activities."

Ockrent's career began in Paris back in the sixties when she herself joined the American network NBC News as a researcher. She worked abroad and back home in France, climbing both the editorial and executive ladders. By the early 1980s she was the sole anchor and executive producer of the evening news programme for Antenne 2 TV network. It hasn't all been plain sailing though. Earlier this year she left her position as head of the news channel France 24 after a fierce and very public battle with the chairman.

Ockrent is straight-talking and engaging. She is passionate about news and women's role in journalism and while she may have reached the pinnacle in broadcasting she is not one for resting on her laurels.

"I think it is changing but all the same, a woman has to prove her legitimacy all the time, however high up she gets to be; whereas the man, it seems to me, once he reaches a certain level of responsibility, a few stripes on his arm, people don't question him

that much. For a woman, people will keep looking at you - including other women - and say, "What is she doing up there?" That has to do with the fact that it is still a rarity to find women at the top."

Some have made it. In politics, Germany, Australia and Brazil are among an increasing number of countries to have voted a woman into the top seat in government. Three women have just won this year's Nobel Peace Prize while another, Christine Lagarde, arguably holds one of the most powerful jobs in the world as head of the IMF. A woman, Virginia Rometty, was just appointed CEO of IBM.

Gaps at the top

Switch over to the media and standing out amidst the plethora of male executives is Elizabeth Murdoch of the troubled Murdoch dynasty, and on-air there is a host of high profile female presenters and reporters around Europe. Figures from Global Media Monitoring Project 2010 bear this out showing the ratio of men and women presenting and reading the news is equal. However, when it comes to who is interviewed there's a wide disparity. The figures show women are repeatedly under-represented as experts in the media; 19 percent are women compared with 81 percent men. Similarly only 18 percent of spokespeople are women with 82 percent men.

Closing that gap has proved a huge challenge in the traditional media. But will women fare any better in this new era of high speed multi-media platforms where literally anyone can become a reporter or blogger at the click of a button? Or will it depend on the gender of who is clicking?

Bloggers as journalists?

Ockrent has major concerns about the explosion of blogging and the demise in quality journalism be it a man or a woman at the keyboard. "Anyone, who doesn't even give his or her name and writes a blog, how can I say this politely, is not always that interesting; that's not journalism. It's just a lot of chatter and a lot of noise."

Yet while she may be the doyenne of the old school of journalism she fully embraces the technology revolution. She recognises the excitement and the driving force of "the younger generation on their computers all the time" and readily admits while it's "fascinating" it's also "a bewildering phenomenon".

Log on anytime of the day and that phenomenon is fully apparent particularly from the mass of female bloggers. They may not be producing award-winning journalism yet but the more women blog, the more women are visible on the media landscape and, you never know, the next Christine Ockrent may well be

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among them.

The 7th Edition of the Women's Forum Global Meeting was held on 13-15 October 2011 in Deauville, France. The article is based on an interview by Zoe McKay.

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