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# "Don't Be Such a Girl, I'm Only Joking!" Post-alternative Comedy, British Panel Shows, and Masculine Spaces

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“DON’T BE SUCH A GIRL, I’M ONLY JOKING!”

POST-ALTERNATIVE COMEDY, BRITISH PANEL SHOWS, AND MASCULINE

SPACES

by

Lindsay Weber

A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

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## ABSTRACT

### “DON’T BE SUCH A GIRL, I’M ONLY JOKING!” POST-ALTERNATIVE COMEDY, BRITISH PANEL SHOWS, AND MASCULINE SPACES

by

Lindsay Weber

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2017  
Under the Supervision of Professor Elana Levine

This thesis discusses the gender disparity in British panel shows. In February 2014 the BBC’s Director of Television enforced a quota stating panel shows needed to include one woman per episode. This quota did not fully address the ways in which the gender imbalance was created. This thesis argues that the gender imbalance stems from post-feminist sensibilities and masculine-centric trends in British comedy and culture. This work demonstrates this through a discourse analysis of the opinions expressed about panel shows by the British popular press and media personalities from 2002 to 2017. The discourse analysis exposes patterns where British producers ignored the easily observed male dominance of panel shows. Arguments and opinions posed in these discourses demonstrate how British media personalities and the British public adopted post-feminist assumptions. Then, the panel show *8 Out of 10 Cats* is analyzed to show how British comedy panel shows fit into post-alternative comedy styles and lad culture, which both favor heterosexual masculine identities. The comedy used in this show exposes how post-feminism, post-alternative comedy, and lad culture combine to create a masculine space. In order to fix the gender disparity, these contexts would need to change.

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## Chapter One

### ***You Have Been Watching masculinized comedy in Great Britain: Inadequate solutions to gender disparity in panel shows***

In February 2014 Danny Cohen, the BBC's director of television, established a gender quota for panel shows, a program format similar to game shows where media personalities compete against one another in teams. Cohen told *The Observer* the BBC was, "not going to have panel shows on any more with no women on them. You can't do that. It's not acceptable."<sup>1</sup> Cohen's declaration came after panel shows were criticized by the popular press, bloggers, and other prominent British media personalities for being dominated by men—an issue that is not unique to the BBC. One of these bloggers, British scholar Stuart Lowe, compiled a list of percentages of appearances by gender on 53 different comedy panel shows. Only six featured women 50% or more of the time. On average, the shows feature 80.8% men and 19.2% women.<sup>2</sup> To combat this, Cohen said the BBC would enforce a rule in which each episode has to feature at least one woman. Could Danny Cohen's solution adequately address this gender imbalance? Most panel show regulars didn't believe Cohen's solution would help anything. Cohen's announcement did, however, shine a public spotlight on the gender disparity in panel shows.

Panel shows lack any comprehensive, published histories, but their lasting power and influence is easily observed. To Americans, panel shows seem like a foreign format. However, the format is not necessarily new, nor is it specifically a British concept. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Cooke, "Danny Cohen: 'TV panel shows without women are unacceptable,'" *The Observer*, February 8, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Stuart Lowe, "UK Panel Show Gender Breakdown," last updated May 19, 2017. <http://www.strudel.org.uk/panelshows/index.html>



US panel shows had early, but temporary, success with TV shows in the 1950s and '60s like *What's My Line?* (1950-1967) and *I've Got a Secret* (1952-1967). One American panel show that still airs in 2017 is NPR's *Wait, Wait... Don't Tell Me*. As evidenced by this program, panel shows are found in radio and in television. In the UK some of the early panel shows are still around today. *Just a Minute*, for example, is a BBC radio program that debuted in 1967 and still runs today.<sup>3</sup> On these shows comedians and media personalities engage in banter and jokes about particular topics or themes and the host awards points to give the program a game show element. The points and the game itself are not actually the purpose of the programs, instead the jokes the comedians make are the entertaining element.

There are a number of reasons why panel shows are so prevalent in the United Kingdom. Elise Czajkowski best explained the appeal of panel shows for British audiences in "A Guide to the Hilarious World of Panel Shows." First, for audiences, "topical panel shows are the primary source of satire."<sup>4</sup> In the US, audiences can choose to watch a number of nightly comedy talk shows that discuss current events. In the UK, the chat shows are weekly, so audiences turn to topical panel shows for satire about current events. Another appeal for audiences is that they will be able to watch programs featuring established, popular comedians while at the same time discovering new comics. Younger comedians are then able to start their careers on panel shows. For TV executives, panel shows are not particularly expensive to produce and almost anything can be made into a quiz—there are panel shows about sports, literature, current events, music, and even other television programs. Another appeal for television executives is

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<sup>3</sup> Elise Czajkowski, "A Guide to the Hilarious World of British Panel Shows," *Splitsider*, July 28, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

that panel shows are suited to the British broadcasting schedule. “In the UK,” Czajkowski notes, “it’s common for one season of a TV and radio show to only last six episodes, and a season of more than 13 episodes is almost unheard of. This means that big names in comedy, like Jimmy Carr and David Mitchell, can participate in panel shows for part of the year, while continuing to work on other things.”<sup>5</sup> Panel show seasons, which are referred to as series in the UK, are announced at differing times throughout the year and air weekly for six to 13 episodes. Comedy panel shows often air after what is known in the UK as “the watershed”—a time after 9 PM where there are less strict standards and rules for television content.<sup>6</sup>

The British style of comedy tends towards pithy dialogue and a celebration of awkwardness in order to get a quick laugh from the audience. American comedy tends to be more obvious and straightforward, tending toward slapstick, sensationalism, and competitiveness. In contrast, British comedy is more self-deprecating, awkward, and dry, which lends itself to the witty banter that panel shows thrive on. Stephen Fry suggests, “Do you know that scene in *Animal House* where there's a fellow playing folk music on a guitar and John Belushi picks up the guitar and destroys it and waggles his eyebrows at the camera? Well, a British comedian would want to play the folk singer.” British comic heroes want life to be better, Fry argues, but are, “on whom life craps from a considerable height.”<sup>7</sup> British comedians don’t need to rely on grandiose foolery in sketches, but employ pithy comments or small gestures to appeal to their audience.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “What is the watershed?” Ofcom, <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/tv-radio-and-on-demand/advice-for-consumers/television/what-is-the-watershed>, last updated May 10, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Sasha TP, “Panel shows are the UK rage, but here’s why they’d never work in the US,” *Mic*, July 15, 2013.

Danny Cohen's mandate seemed to approach the issue of gender representation as just a numbers game. If the BBC set a minimum for the number of women needed per episode, Cohen believed they would be fixing the problem. But the numbers don't happen to be the only issue. Another issue many female comedienne's face is the way their fellow panelists and the audience regards them. A lot of the criticism women appearing on panel shows receive is based on their appearance alone—a criticism that is not leveled at most male comedians. In 2014 Dawn O'Porter experienced this gender-specific criticism when she appeared on Channel 4's *8 Out of 10 Cats*. She was the only woman out of the six panelists (seven if you include the host, Jimmy Carr). She appeared on the show knowing that would likely be the case so was not too apprehensive. During the show she felt comfortable and that her jokes were on par with the men around her. The only difference was that O'Porter's hair and makeup stylist was not allowed on set (likely because six of the seven talents did not need that service). When the show aired, the insults she received on social media made her regret going on. Comments like “punch your hairdresser” and “sack your wig-maker” suffused her social media platforms.<sup>8</sup>

Comediennes that appear on panel shows have to create their own ways of getting around audience criticism. Women are undoubtedly heckled for reasons of gender and the worst heckling tends to be of women by men.<sup>9</sup> The fact that women have to adopt strategies to cope with criticisms they receive for appearing on panel shows demonstrates that this gender disparity is not just an issue with casting numbers, as Danny Cohen's

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<sup>8</sup> Dawn O'Porter, Leanne Bayley, “The TV Industry Needs to Grow Some Balls,” *Glamour Magazine*, May 19, 2014, <http://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/dawn-oporter-on-twitter-abuse-after-8-out-of-10-cats-appearance>.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Wagg, *Because I Tell a Joke Or Two: Comedy, Politics and Social Difference* (Routledge: 2004), 299.

decree suggests. It seems to be more an issue of the rhetoric prevalent in the shows and the way male comedians are valued over female comedians, demonstrated by lower numbers of repeat appearances of women, or how the women face criticism the male comedians do not face. Men are able to navigate the panel show landscape because they are one of the ‘lads’ while women are made to be out of place and scrutinized for any mistake or joke that falls flat. This issue does not stem only from problems with panel show casting.

More beneficially, Cohen’s quota sparked a public conversation about the gender divide on panel shows. As the BBC’s Director of Television, Cohen could really only enforce the quota solution for the programs on the BBC. But the public conversation did draw more attention to the gender disparity. Other networks that did not meet the standards set forth by the BBC’s quota would have been more likely to receive censure. The BBC sets much of the standards of British television. The main British channels, BBC, ITV, Channel 4, and Sky, have a history of collaborating with one another, they all work with the Creative Diversity Network—an organization dedicated to promoting best practices for inclusiveness and celebrating diversity. This public edict from the BBC undoubtedly caused a ripple effect and spread to other British television channels. This thesis examines whether the edict influenced the gendered power imbalance by simply creating a public conversation on the topic. Not only did Cohen’s announcement bring attention to the BBC’s new initiative, it brought the public’s attention to the gender imbalance on panel shows and perhaps in the culture more generally.

This thesis explores the issue of gender disparity in panel shows as a problem embedded within two distinct but overlapping and powerful ideological structures: post-

alternative comedy and post-feminism. Post-alternative comedy is a type of comedy the scholar Leon Hunt positions as a rejection of political correctness.<sup>10</sup> It comes directly after and as a response to alternative comedy, a style of British comedy that focused on rejecting the ‘easy’ techniques of racist, sexist, or derogatory jokes. Post-alternative comedy marked itself with a rebellious attitude that in reality cloaked conservative ideals, embracing the derogatory jokes alternative comedy spurned. This thesis exposes parallels between post-alternative comedy and lad culture sensibilities, and positions both within the broader context of postfeminist culture. Lad culture includes media and practices that celebrate specific masculine behaviors in hierarchal contrast to femininity. Lad culture is often employed through lad magazines, films, and more recently online media. Articles or storylines will celebrate or encourage certain products or activities because they are deemed masculine or ‘manly.’ In contrast, these types of media will disparage things that are feminine. One example Bethan Benwell pointed out was a 1997 feature in *Maxim* titled “Twenty reasons why men are men and women aren’t.” The article detailed stereotypical male and female behavior preferences to show how men were superior.<sup>11</sup> Both post-alternative comedy and lad culture are products of post-feminism, a construct in which society assumes the work of feminism (particularly second-wave feminism) is finished. Because women have more of a place in the workforce than in the past, the thought is that the goals of feminism have been achieved. Post-feminist notions in society (along with post-racial notions) allow post-alternative comedy to exist. Comedians can make demeaning and derogatory jokes and counter

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<sup>10</sup> Leon Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy: From Reeves and Mortimer to Psychoville*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Bethan Benwell, “Is there anything new about these lads?” *Gender Identity and Discourse Analysis*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2002).

criticism by passing off something as ‘just a joke.’ Under these notions, people believe that although a joke may be harmful, it cannot do any societal damage because we have collectively worked past gendered and racial problems.

This thesis further the relationship between post-feminist culture and post-alternative comedy and how panel shows operate within these contexts. Panel shows offer a unique situation in which audiences can view media personalities navigating a non-scripted format. Often, the media figures and comedians are enacting a base improvisation of their conception of post-alternative comedy and using jokes they think will gain the most laughter. From this perspective, we can see the importance in analyzing the nature of popular post-alternative comedy and what messages and notions it can end up creating and perpetuating. Analyzing how women are addressed in this kind of environment will demonstrate the necessity of addressing problems within mainstream British comedy rather than placing the blame solely on casting departments.

### **Literature Review**

The analysis of gender imbalance on panel shows is best understood in dialogue with scholarship on the relationship between gender and comedy. A good deal of work already exists demonstrating how gender and comedy are intertwined and how popular comedy television connects with broader ideas in society about gender relations. However, much of this work has not yet been applied to panel shows. Panel shows have put many popular comedians in Great Britain in the spotlight and helped some personalities rise to fame, but studies on panel shows are lacking. Despite the lacking literature, panel shows contribute to and are influenced greatly by trends in comedy, including how gender and comedy intersect. This literature review also examines the

notion of post-alternative comedy by clarifying its meaning and its place in British culture, because it is one of the trends in comedy that most influenced panel shows, particularly the panel shows that emerged in the late '90s and early 2000s. This section highlights the connections between the underlying ideals of post-alternative comedy and panel shows. Finally, this literature review explores some of the scholarship on post-feminism and identifies how popular comedy displays post-feminist characteristics.

### *Gendered Trends in Comedy from the 1990s-Present*

The rebellious nature of the post-alternative comedy employed in panel shows comes as a marked difference from previous trends in comedy. But previous mainstream comedy trends were inherently gendered as well. Post-alternative comedy became highly masculinized in response to the popular notions of masculinity in the comedy trends preceding it—namely as a response to the “new man.” Representations of gender, particularly of masculinity, came to the fore in the popular culture of the 1990s with a number of TV shows featuring men addressing or confronting shifts in what masculinity meant. *Home Improvement*, for example, was a 1990s American sitcom featuring a main character, Tim Taylor, navigating the new domestic manhood. Tim Taylor is both the joker and the joke.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the sitcom Taylor tries to exhibit a tough, masculine persona but invariably makes bumbling mistakes. In the sitcom *Coach*, “a great deal of the comic effectivity of this series arises from the efforts of Hayden Fox to preserve his unreconstructed masculinity when the women in his life expect him to act like a New Man.”<sup>13</sup> The ‘new man’ is generally characterized as, “sensitive, emotionally aware,

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Hanke, “The ‘Mock-Macho’ Situation Comedy: Hegemonic Masculinity and its Reiteration,” *Western Journal of Communication*, Volume 62, Winter 1998, 74-93.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

respectful of women, and egalitarian in outlook,”<sup>14</sup> but also as, “narcissistic and highly invested in his physical appearance.”<sup>15</sup> These characteristics make the ‘new man’ seem feminine, so male comedy eventually turns to rejecting the ‘new man’ identity, and in many cases that includes the notion of being respectful to women.

It also became apparent beginning in the 1990s that women were not only individually judged harshly, but that collectively women were not considered to have a lasting place in comedy. One suggestion for the reason women might not appear as frequently in panel shows is that women are not considered to be as funny as men. The scholar Eleanor Patterson points out an example of this with Jerry Lewis. In 2000, Lewis told a comedy festival audience that he did not like any female comedians. He later clarified this by saying, “some women comedians make me uncomfortable, because a man comedian can do anything he wants and I’m not offended by it. But we’re talking about a God-given miracle who produces a child. I have a difficult time seeing her do this on stage.”<sup>16</sup> Patterson asserts Lewis, “participates in an essentialist discourse of femininity, which contains womanhood within heterosexual domesticity and discursively reinforces the position that humor is fundamentally a male domain.”<sup>17</sup> Lewis represents a still-present assumption that a woman’s role is as a domestic mother. Female comedians step outside of this role. In television comedy, women as housewives still suggest that our society retains traditional ideas of gender roles. The scholar Joel Gwynne, for example, points out the character Marge in *The Simpsons*. Despite Marge being

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<sup>14</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Power and the production of subjects: a genealogy of the New Man and the New Lad,” *The Sociological Review*, 51, S1 (2003): 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Eleanor Patterson, “Fracturing Tina Fey: A Critical Analysis of Postfeminist Television Comedy Stardom,” *The Communication Review* 15 (2012): 238.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.



established as a feminist in the episode “The Way We Was,” she “remains a character dislocated from these cultural shifts and rooted in the domestic space.”<sup>18</sup> This depiction, among other housewives in comedy series, reflects how society still embraces heteronormative ideals regarding domesticity and gender roles. Panel shows don’t feature women as housewives, but tend to undervalue the women appearing on the shows. The criticisms female comedians face within panel shows are not as harsh as Jerry Lewis’s opinion, but they still send a message that comedy is a male domain. My thesis works to uncover the ways in which panel shows operate in connection to assumptions of gender roles in society, and the dialogue between panelists that reveal these assumptions.

In the early 2000s, the ‘new man,’ who embraced feminine qualities in an effort to transgress traditional gender roles in a postfeminist era, was almost absent from comedy and the ‘new lad’ took his place. Male comics spoke about things widely regarded as immature or raunchy. Female comics seemed to have to match that raunchy style. Sarah Silverman, for example, talked about ejaculation in a lot of her early sets. But raunch comedy for women in the early 2000s was still constraining—for one, these female comics still had to adhere to traditional standards of feminine beauty. In one industry panel, the comedienne Iliza Shlesinger noted that many women getting into comedy began to display a persona of, “I’m cute but I’m dirty.”<sup>19</sup> Women appearing on panel shows had to be raunchy or else they would end up ignored, or not seem as funny as their male counterparts. This raunchiness also fit under a post-feminist sensibility wherein

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<sup>18</sup> Joel Gwynne, “‘Might as Well be Dead’: Domesticity, Irony, and Feminist Politics in Contemporary Animation Comedy,” *Critical Studies in Television* 10, 2 (Summer 2015): 59.

<sup>19</sup> Yael Kohen, “Comic Rising,” *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2012), 282.

women are perceived as independent sexual subjects rather than objects. Rosalind Gill argues that this kind of shift represents a deeper form of exploitation than sexual objectification. Gill writes, “Girls and women are invited to become a particular kind of self, and endowed with agency on condition that it is used to construct oneself as a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography.”<sup>20</sup> Female comedians on panel shows had to portray themselves as willing sexual subjects and their comedy had to play up their sexual nature.

Panel shows certainly featured more raunchy comedy, but some instances around the time of Danny Cohen’s decree suggested that there would be a shift in popular British humor. A short time after raunchiness became a feature of entertainment and comedy, there was also a resurgence of feminist humor, although it wasn’t necessarily overt. Female comediennes like Tina Fey or Amy Poehler were finally openly discussing struggles women face in the realm of comedy—a phenomenon that was almost unheard of before, because as Susanne Bach states, “it has always been possible to laugh *at* feminists but hardly ever did laughter emanate from within feminists’ circles.”<sup>21</sup> Feminist humor also tended to be misconceived. Janet Bing pointed out that searching “feminist jokes” on *Google* in 2004 yielded only anti-feminist jokes and anti-male jokes. But articles about comediennes like Tina Fey’s successful turn towards feminist dialogue focus on comediennes’ dealings with the press, rather than the shows they write or act for. Fey’s comedy also tends towards self-deprecation in these interviews, which Martha Lauzen points out downplays any focus on her appearance over her work. However, Fey

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<sup>20</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist media culture: Elements of a sensibility,” *European Journal of Critical Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 10.

<sup>21</sup> Susanne Bach, Gaby Pailer, “May I Laugh about Women’s Lib? Or: The Difficult Relationship of Humour and Feminism in Margaret Atwood, Caryl Churchill, and Helen Fielding,” *Gender And Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional Modern Media* (New York: Rodopi, 2009), 316.

also uses this tactic to downplay her talent, which begs the question: should women have to downplay their success in order to be successful? Lauzen suggests Fey's "use of humor serves as a potent and effective counterweight to her direct remarks regarding women in comedy."<sup>22</sup> Self-deprecation could then be a disguise for women to successfully navigate the world of comedy and humor, and eventually reveal their feminist support. Despite feminist dialogue being accepted from female comics, it is typically showcased more effectively in their interviews and is less evident in their work. But when this self-deprecation also occurred in panel shows, audiences observed the celebration of masculinity and devaluation of femininity. My thesis uncovers these instances (both of valuing masculinity and degrading femininity) as applied to panel shows in this same period.

While many of the examples in this literature stem from American comedy, there were definite parallels between American and British humor trends during the 1990s to 2000's. The 'new man' and 'new lad' masculine identities were particularly present in the men's lifestyle magazines circulated throughout the UK.<sup>23</sup> American raunchy humor also closely paralleled the irreverence of post-alternative lad humor. Both raunchy humor and lad humor avoided critiques because what comedians said or did were meant to be interpreted as 'just a joke.' Feminist humor would also begin to become more acceptable in the UK. This thesis points out the ways more progressive comedy styles begin to circulate within Great Britain, marking a gradual shift in British comedy discourses.

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<sup>22</sup> Martha Lauzen, "The Funny Business of Being Tina Fey: Constructing a (feminist) comedy icon," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014): 106-117.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Alexander, "Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines," *International Journal of Men's Health* 5.2 (Summer 2006), 217-219.

### *Panel Shows and Post-Alternative Comedy*

Leon Hunt defines post-alternative comedy as the mainstream form of comedy that emerged in Great Britain during the 1990s that rejected political correctness with a marked rebellious attitude that, in reality, cloaked conservative views. As the name suggests, post-alternative comedy is so named because it is a direct, oppositional response to alternative British comedy that was popular in the 1980s. Hunt uses the label of ‘post-alternative comedy’ to characterize a distinct shift and sensibility in British comedy, although this is not a label that is used by the comedians who characterize this style. Post-alt comedy’s predecessor, alternative comedy, however, was a label given by the British public to recognize the period of comedy in the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Alternative comedy was in itself a response to sexist, racist comedy of the past and, “according to producer John Lloyd, its ‘objective was to change what people were allowed to laugh at’.”<sup>25</sup> Alternative comedy was ‘politically correct’ — sometimes at the expense of being funny. Post-alternative comedy aimed for laughs at the *expense* of being politically correct. It emerged as a way to use offensiveness for cheap laughs. Hunt uses the term ‘politically correct’ in this description as a way to highlight how alternative comedy avoids causing offence by bringing up social issues (like class, race, etc.). Prior to the late 1980s, describing something as ‘politically correct’ was akin to labeling it overly self-righteous. But in the 1990s, the term was picked up by conservatives as a way to push back against inclusive liberal ideologies. Moira Weigel aptly described that, in the US, political

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<sup>24</sup> Andrew O’Hagan, “The blunted edge of British comedy,” *The Telegraph*, April 23, 2005.

Sean O’Grady, “Minor British Institutions: Alternative comedy,” *Independent*, August 6, 2010.

Brian Logan, “How Rik Mayall and his alternative-comedy generation changed UK standup forever,” *The Guardian*, June 9, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Leon Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy: From Reeves and Mortimer to Psychoville* (New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), 3.

correctness, “became a term used to drum into the public imagination the idea that there was a deep divide between the ‘ordinary people’ and the ‘liberal elite’, who sought to control the speech and thoughts of regular folk.” She continues, “Opposition to political correctness also became a way to rebrand racism in ways that were politically acceptable in the post-civil-rights era.”<sup>26</sup> This notion of political correctness was paralleled by the new post-alternative comedy in the UK. In the mid-‘90s ‘politically correct’ sensitivity in British comedy all but vanished. British comedy changed to allow for more offensive rhetoric and those who criticized this shift it were viewed as inhibiting the free speech of ordinary people. This shift was bolstered because post-alternative comedy featured more comics that were working class, such as Lee Mack and Sean Lock.

Comedy might not be too funny if its goal were to alienate and insult its audience, so the offensiveness of post-alternative comedy involves “projecting outrage onto an imagined other.”<sup>27</sup> This perceived other is then mocked as being too easily offended. This tactic works to flatter those who are ‘in’ on the joke, and inherently works to make the comedian’s audience feel as if they are better than those who are offended. The offensiveness also has seemingly political connections. Hunt notes that jokes which were once regarded as ‘lazily conservative’ take on a certain edginess. Humor with a misogynistic or racial punch line or observance was not only acceptable, but was popularized.<sup>28</sup>

Post-alternative comedy brought with it new trends of comedy and new TV comedy formats, and panel shows came back into prominence with a glut of new series

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<sup>26</sup> Moira Weigel, “Political correctness: how the right invented a phantom enemy,” *The Guardian*, November 30, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 201.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*.

beginning. Leon Hunt notes that quiz and panel shows were revitalized during this period and gained a cultish reputation that they previously had not attained under alternative comedy. Hunt asserts, “the panel show tends to be one of comedy’s most homosocial environments and while the ostensible competition built into the format tends to be of negligible importance, the competition between male wits can be more visible.”<sup>29</sup> Not only did panel shows gain more of a cult following, but they also became an avenue for comedians to make and build their careers. Two comics that thrive on the offensiveness of post-alternative comedy, Jimmy Carr and Frankie Boyle, owe panel shows much of their success. Hunt expresses that panel shows fit into the post-alternative comedy aesthetic, but doesn’t necessarily point out how. My analysis demonstrates how panel shows fit into the post-alternative comedy style in order to show how panel shows create masculine spaces.

Ben Thompson points out how certain styles of comedy emerge based on political happenings. While he mentions that post-alternative comedy was able to emerge because of new media outlets in the late 1980s, he also points out how comedy styles sync up with mainstream politics. Alternative comedy emerged just when Margaret Thatcher was coming to power. Post-alternative comedy doesn’t have a clear connection to a specific political event, but it certainly emerged when mass society was weary from the recession of the late 1980s. Thompson’s account of post-alternative comedy is more of a history than an analysis, but he does point out how comedy creates an ‘in-group’ mentality in its audience. Thompson recalls French philosopher Henri Bergson’s notion that “laughter

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 16.

implies a kind of secret freemasonry.”<sup>30</sup> Thompson writes, “comedy can teach a great deal about who is swimming with society’s tide and who is swimming against it.”<sup>31</sup> This echoes Hunt’s assertion that post-alternative comedy projects its offensiveness onto a perceived ‘other,’ and allows the audience the pleasure of being on the right side of a joke. In panel shows, the masculinized rhetoric also works to create the sense that the female panelists are ‘other.’ They do not fit into normalized masculinity.

Leon Hunt also notices a particular nostalgia emerging in the mid-1990s for the depictions of masculinity in 1970s media. Hunt shows that during the post-alternative era where comedians pushed back on political correctness, they also looked fondly upon days that lauded heterosexual masculine stereotypes. Hunt notes, “In the first episode of *Match of the Seventies*, Dennis Waterman wistfully recalls a time when ‘men were men.’”<sup>32</sup> The 1970s were also an era that pushed sexploitation films into a genre of economic importance. Nostalgia for an era that celebrated male heterosexuality shows that mainstream entertainment in the mid-‘90s worked to strengthen male hegemony. Hunt also notes that, around 1993 and 1994, a “new lad” masculinity emerged that celebrated a party lifestyle, rejoiced in masculinity, and rejected the feminine. This new lad, along with other men’s movements, longed for a “Mythic past, a time before the ‘soft’ men who capitulated to the emasculatory onslaught of feminism.”<sup>33</sup> The time wasn’t too far in the past, as evidenced by the nostalgia surrounding 1970s entertainment. Bethan Benwell characterizes the ‘new lad’ as valuing humor and male camaraderie and

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<sup>30</sup> Ben Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy from Vic Reeves to the Office* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), xxi.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Leon Hunt, *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Sexploitation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

rejecting feminist-friendly values. New lad magazines like *Loaded*, which was launched in 1994, seemed to, “Re-embrace very rigid, conformist, and conservative models of masculinity, including an adherence to misogyny and homophobia.”<sup>34</sup>

New lad culture and post-alternative comedy were likely born out of the same perceived need for men to resist changes in gender relations, but both seemed to work together to help one another grow in popularity. Post-alternative comedy fed into these notions of masculinity by allowing conservative views to have a cloak of edginess and society’s implicit permission and acceptance. Lads revel in post-alternative comics and comics speak to those lads that feel the need to celebrate their masculinity. My research shows that this celebration of masculinity is often juxtaposed against a derision of femininity and that panel shows perpetuate this attitude. My thesis shows how this results in a show format that establishes camaraderie among its male participants while ‘othering’ the female panelists. Not only do panel shows end up portraying a gender imbalance to the audience, they don’t make the show environment welcoming to potential female panelists, which could, in turn, make it even more difficult to find women willing to appear on the shows at all.

In the context of post-alternative comedy, some scholars point out how offensive words are deemed protected or permissible because they are ‘just a joke.’ Michael Billig argues these jokes are a “denial of doing something criticisable.”<sup>35</sup> Despite the knee-jerk rebuttal that jokes can be deemed permissible, there is no doubt that offensive jokes can still cause harm. Sophie Quirk points out a few ways these jokes can actually harm

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<sup>34</sup> Benwell, “Is there anything new,” 151.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Billig, “Humour and Hatred: The racist jokes of the Ku Klux Klan,” *Discourse and Society* 12, no. 3 (May 1, 2001): 270.



society. For one, Quirk points out that jokes “Have the advantage of being eminently repeatable,”<sup>36</sup> and therefore are able to spread ideas to a much wider audience. Secondly, they reveal and exploit already existing, damaging stereotypes in society. Offensive jokes, “Will be incomprehensible to a person who does not have a pre-existing knowledge of the stereotype upon which it plays.”<sup>37</sup> However, if they are surrounded by an audience that reacts to the joke with laughter, someone who may not have accepted or been aware of the stereotype before may then realize that it is a notion accepted by their peers or other members of society. And finally, Quirk reinforces the notion of jokes ‘othering’ particular groups of people. Not only do offensive jokes perpetuate stereotypes of a specific group, but they also allow the joke’s audience to feel connected on the inside. If one does not get the joke or accept it, they are also deemed to be outside of the group. Laughter then, is used as a bribe or reward for the audience to accept stereotypes or take a side “without any very close investigation.”<sup>38</sup> Despite the gender imbalance on panel shows being easily observed, it is a problem overlooked by audiences because the shows are not meant to be taken seriously, they are meant to make us laugh. My thesis confronts the notions and assumptions about gender inequality left ignored or unsaid in comedy. This work rejects the idea that jokes cannot cause any harm to society or individuals because they are simply meant to elicit laughter. Instead, my thesis uncovers the problems inherent in the panel show format that truly create the gender imbalance among its panelists, and the problems the shows perpetuate.

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<sup>36</sup> Sophie Quirk, *Why Stand-Up Matters: How Comedians Manipulate and Influence* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 58.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Philips, “Racist Acts and Racist Humor,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (March 1984): 92.

<sup>38</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 103.

### *Post-Feminism and Lad Culture*

For this thesis, the term post-feminism is used to refer to the historical shift that occurred after the time of Second Wave feminism. The concept of post-feminism in this thesis is particularly in line with Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra's assertion that post-feminism, "Broadly encompasses a set of assumptions widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the 'pastness' of feminism."<sup>39</sup> Because of this general assumption that the work of feminism is finished, Angela McRobbie eloquently points out that post-feminism then becomes an "Active process by which the gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be undermined."<sup>40</sup> This assumption leads to gender imbalances continuing without question. Rosalind Gill points out that there is "An attachment to and myth of equality and diversity in work organizations that remain dominated by men, white people, and the middle classes, particularly at senior levels."<sup>41</sup> This is not just inherent in office settings, but is also apparent in British media and entertainment, particularly in comedy panel shows. This notion of post-feminism is particularly fitting with post-alternative comedy because jokes that could be deemed offensive to women are played off as ironic or 'just a joke' because the assumption is that the work of feminism is complete. My thesis analyzes the jokes and dialogue of panel shows to specifically reveal what insults or demeaning comments are disguised in the context of humor. Some of the jokes are overt, and some are not as readily apparent.

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<sup>39</sup> Yvonne Tasker, Diane Negra, "Introduction," *Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, October 12, 2007), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Angela McRobbie, "Post-feminism in popular culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (November 2004): 27.

<sup>41</sup> Rosalind Gill, "Unspeakable Inequalities: Post Feminism, Entrepreneurial Subjectivity, and the Repudiation of Sexism among Cultural Workers." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 21, no. 4 (2014), 527.

Gill elaborates on the notion of irony used to make offensiveness permissible. She points out that irony is used as a way of “Establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs.”<sup>42</sup> One can say an offensive joke because they can claim they do not mean it, or that it was just a joke. Irony also functions by offering an extreme point of view. Media dedicated to lad culture can write something overtly sexist because “extremeness of sexism is evidence that there is no sexism,”<sup>43</sup> and the statements are then construed as jokes and “harmless fun.” Gill then points out that if the notion of these media and rhetoric are not simply permissible as “just a joke,” then there is a large part of media that is blatantly misogynistic. Women are openly objectified with little opposition, which shows how powerful irony and the “just a joke” defensive position can be.

Another notion that fits into the postfeminist sensibility is a “backlash against feminism.”<sup>44</sup> Modern feminists can be derided based on the assumption that the goals of feminism have been achieved, or because there is a pushback to reassert the long-established heterosexual male hegemony. One consequence of post-feminism is that openly sexist remarks that are veiled as jokes are not challenged or disputed. This is particularly evident in a study from Bethan Benwell where he interviews readers of lad magazines, a genre of magazines that largely emerged in the early 1990s to celebrate the ‘new lad’ masculinity. While connecting post-alternative comedy to post-feminism is a contribution of my work, my claims build on the extensive work connecting the ‘new lad’ identity (which was encouraged by the edgy conservatism of post-alternative comedy) to

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<sup>42</sup> Gill, “Postfeminist media culture,” 164.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 165.

<sup>44</sup> Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, “Introduction,” *New Femininities: Postfeminism, Neoliberalism, and Subjectivity* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011): 3.

post-feminism. The interviews expose a rather problematic aspect of the magazines because they clearly show members of its audience spouting rhetoric that derides femininity but defend the magazines as not being sexist or problematic. For example, in one portion of the interview, the interview subjects discuss why cooking is not a primary part of the magazines:

*I: Cooking isn't cool? Why's that?*

*M: [deliberate tone] Because it's a men's magazine and women are meant to do the cooking and men are meant to do the hunting and gathering.<sup>45</sup>*

The interview subjects were also asked their opinion of the objectification of women in the magazines, and decidedly found the magazines not sexist. One interviewee insisted that the objectification of women in the magazine was simply a marketing tool. When asked about articles involving irony, the respondents seemed to misidentify them. For one article that poked fun at men that insist grooming products are feminine, the respondents felt that the humor was actually meant to make fun of women and “gay men” that used grooming products.<sup>46</sup> Even when the magazine aims irony at itself, the readers look to put the joke outside their own lad culture.

The ‘new lad’ identity came in opposition to other new forms of masculine identity, similar to how post-alternative comedy rose in opposition to alternative comedy. The ‘new man’ identity that came just before the ‘new lad’ in the 1980s differed from tough guy images by “embracing female roles and qualities.”<sup>47</sup> In comparison, alternative comedy accepted notions of feminism by turning away from the simple trope of sexist jokes that had long been popular. The new man became a “Potent symbol for

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<sup>45</sup> Bethan Benwell, "New Sexism?" *Journalism Studies* 8, no. 4 (August 2007): 545.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew Spicer, *Typical Men: The Representation of Masculinity in Popular British Culture* (New York: I.B Tauris, 2001), 187.

men and women searching for new images and visions of masculinity in the wake of feminism and the men's movement."<sup>48</sup> The new lad then came along to loudly re-embrace "retro-macho culture"<sup>49</sup> and embodied a misogynistic response to postfeminist male panic.

Annabelle Mooney also points out that lad magazines normalized the objectification of women's bodies. Despite containing nude photos of women, the magazines are not sold on the 'top shelf' like *Playboy*, but are often available at the supermarket check-out stand. Thus, readers claim, "You obviously wouldn't classify it as pornography or they wouldn't be selling it at Safeways."<sup>50</sup> Others point to that fact that there are articles on a wide range of topics in the magazines: sports, technology, drinking, and entertaining. Mooney argues that the articles serve to only frame the nude photos as acceptable. There have been previous magazines and clubs dedicated to a masculine identity, like *Playboy* and Victorian-era men's clubs where men sought an all-male environment to escape female authority and domestic responsibility. What is different about this lad culture is that it is occurring in a "post-feminist" era, at a time when the men partaking in this media are aware of how it offends good taste and acceptable attitudes towards women. At the core of lad culture, "The implication is that they do indeed know better, but take pleasure in not caring. Defiance is melded with a general ethos of 'not taking things too seriously.'"<sup>51</sup> Under this kind of attitude, misogynistic

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<sup>48</sup> Rowena Chapman, "The Great Pretender: Variations on the New Man Theme," *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988), 226.

<sup>49</sup> Spicer, *Typical Men*, 192.

<sup>50</sup> Annabelle Mooney, "Boys will be boys," *Feminist Media Studies* 8, no. 3 (September 2008): 247-265.

<sup>51</sup> David Hansen-Miller & Rosalind Gill "Lad flicks: Discursive Reconstructions of masculinity in film" in Radner, H. & Stringer, R. (eds.) *Feminism at the Movies*, New York: Routledge, 2011, 38.

notions and rhetoric are not only allowed but are also accepted and encouraged as entertainment.

The new lad sensibility that emerged in connection to post-alternative comedy was permissible under postfeminist assumptions. The kinds of entertainments that allowed the celebration of masculinity and eventually the derision of femininity sprung new forms of sexism. The term 'new' can be used loosely, because as the feminist media critic Judith Williamson stated, ““The problem is that sexism didn’t go away, we just stopped talking about it.”<sup>52</sup> But programs have often veiled any sexist notions or rhetoric. Postfeminist assumptions, however, began to allow for blatant sexism on television. Ann Johnson points to *The Man Show* as an example. Johnson asserts, “The sexism of the program is in no way hidden. *The Man Show* is different from the other texts... in that one need not uncover patriarchal ideology.”<sup>53</sup> Johnson reveals that the show revels in sexist rhetoric as a way to push back against the feminine, and the program places men as new victims of power in society. The show not only implies but practically declares that feminism has gone too far. *The Man Show* and other media that espouse masculine celebration not only take an anti-feminist stance, they suggest that men should reassert their dominance in society. Panel shows are not as overtly misogynistic as *The Man Show*, but part of the issue for panel shows is that they are programs that are seemingly welcoming to all facets of society (be it men, women, minorities, etc.). Any sexism apparent on panel shows is then considered normal or permissible because it occurs in the context of a joke.

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<sup>52</sup> Rosalind Gill, “Sexism Reloaded, or, it's Time to get Angry Again!.” *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (2011): 61-71.

<sup>53</sup> Ann Johnson, “The Subtleties of Blatant Sexism,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 4, no. 2 (June 2007): 168.

## **Methods and Theory**

This thesis demonstrates how contexts surrounding British panel shows from the mid-1990s to present (namely post-alternative comedy and post-feminism) have created environments in which masculinity is celebrated and femininity is derided. Comedians within the panel show environment then perpetuate and further spread notions in line with post-feminism. Therefore, the gender imbalance of panel shows cannot be easily fixed by meeting a quota because the notions that created the imbalance are still embedded within their framework. To show how panel shows operate within these contexts and how they perpetuate these contexts, this paper analyzes the discourse surrounding panel shows and then analyzes the texts themselves.

The discourse analysis focuses on articles, editorials, and opinion pieces surrounding panel shows found in journalistic media and from comedians that participate in panel shows. I used the academic search engine LexisNexus with the key term “panel shows,” and connected terms like “women,” “gender,” “British television,” and “comedy” to find these discourses. The temporal locus for the articles is Danny Cohen’s decree, and the analysis pulls from articles before (but during the post-alternative comedy sensibility), directly about and in response to, and after the decree. Analyzing the discourses about panel shows, including articles from the press and from panel show participants themselves, revealed how deep the issue of gender imbalance in the show format is. Analyzing the patterns in the popular press through a discourse analysis had the advantage of demonstrating the relationship between the media and society. In this case, any critiques or opinion pieces about panel shows illustrated how society interacts with these texts. Discourse analyses also demonstrate mainstream assumptions. One

main question behind this analysis was whether or not postfeminist assumptions are not only evident in panel shows, but also in the discourses surrounding them.

Discourse analyses also help place issues, trends, and social structures historically and temporally. Leon Hunt's book *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Exploitation* employs a discourse analysis to explain and demonstrate how low points of popular culture from the 1970s are celebrated again in the 1990s within mainstream culture. Not only do the discourses he discusses provide evidence for his claims, but they also connect overarching concepts and reveal the mainstream assumptions about particular subjects. The discourse analysis for this thesis focused on how the press and the personalities who appear on panel shows regard the shows and the issues that arise on and from them. These discourses provided a lot of insight into how panel shows fit into British society and culture, how the problems of gender representation are being addressed, and even suggested that British audiences echo post-feminist ideals. The chapter organizes and presents these discourses temporally in order to uncover patterns or reoccurring issues and how they are either solved or summarily dismissed, concentrating on the issue of gender disparity and how female panelists are treated or regarded on the panel shows. These discourses were pulled primarily from popular British press publications.

The thesis also includes a qualitative textual analysis of a panel show. Qualitative textual analyses are used to interpret and understand the relationship between media, culture, and society.<sup>54</sup> This textual analysis primarily focuses on the dialogue in the shows that connects to gendered notions in society. The show's audience typically

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<sup>54</sup> Bonnie S. Brennen, "Textual Analysis," *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 192-231.



reacted in line with the dominant ideas in the dialogue—the audience usually laughed or applauded to praise a comedian or media personality for their joke. Any instances in which the audience reacted differently are pointed out in the analysis to show how audiences perceive the permissible limits in British comedy and gender discourses. For the purposes of this thesis, I analyzed two seasons of the show *8 Out of 10 Cats*. *8 Out of 10 Cats* currently has a 7.8 rating on IMDB and TV.com and has spawned numerous online articles from fans celebrating the show, like *Buzzfeed's* “25 of the Weirdest, Funniest Moments on *8 Out of 10 Cats*.”<sup>55</sup> This analysis focused on series 16 and 18, which aired before and after Cohen’s decree respectively from 2013-2014. Series 17, which aired during the time the decree was announced and debated, was not analyzed. The series has been taken off of online media platforms and is not readily available. This instance highlights the difficulty of studying international and cross-cultural media.

*8 Out of 10 Cats* was selected for several reasons. First and foremost, the show is easily accessible with many of its episodes available to view on YouTube. Second, the host Jimmy Carr is a comedian who is well known for embracing offensiveness for the sake of making a joke. Leon Hunt specifically named Jimmy Carr as a quintessential example of the post-alternative comedy style.<sup>56</sup> Third, the show format involves the panelists discussing current events and the things said on the show can easily show the connection between comedy and important events. Fourth, the show also features seven comedians or media personalities, while other panel shows can feature five.<sup>57</sup> This offers the opportunity to note particular patterns in jokes from a larger range of personalities.

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<sup>55</sup> “8 Out of 10 Cats,” *IMDB*, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0465315/?ref =nv\\_sr\\_2](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0465315/?ref =nv_sr_2).

Remea Patel, “25 of the Weirdest, Funniest Moments on 8 Out of 10 Cats,” *Buzzfeed*, June 15, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> Leon Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*.

<sup>57</sup> Except for the episodes featuring the pop-duo Jedward and two members of music group The Vamps.

Finally, the show is a rather typical example of the noticeable gender imbalance in the genre. *8 Out of 10 Cats* is not the show with the highest ratio of male appearances, but it falls rather closely to the average. As of April 21, 2017, comedy panel show appearances are made up of 80.8% men while the appearances on *8 Out of 10 Cats* are 79.4% men.<sup>58</sup> This statistic almost makes it seem like the title *8 Out of 10 Cats* implies that eight out of ten comedians are men, but this is just an ironic coincidence. The show's title actually plays up the statistical game within the show, and refers to an older Whiskas cat food commercial slogan that says "9 out of 10 cats prefer it!"<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, this textual analysis uncovers patterns of gendered humor and notions that appear on the show through jokes, the dialogue between the panelists, and discussions that specifically involve masculine or feminine characteristics and stereotypes and how each are regarded. Often, the masculine is as dominant as the "8 out of 10" figure suggests.

## **Chapter Descriptions**

Chapter Two analyzes the discourses surrounding panel shows in mainstream British culture and uncovers patterns related to ideas and conceptions of gender. One of the underlying points of this thesis is that enforcing a specific casting rate of female comedienne or personalities is ineffective because it doesn't confront the notions or ideologies that caused the gender imbalance in the first place. I chart three different phases of discourse on this issue. The first phase includes discourses prior to Danny Cohen's decree that panel shows will have to include at least one female guest or cast member. In this phase, some articles, mainly opinion pieces, pointed out issues of gender

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<sup>58</sup> Lowe, "UK Panel Show Gender."

<sup>59</sup> "Whiskas Cat Food – 1987 UK Advert," DrDejvu, *YouTube*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jC1D\\_a1S2xs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jC1D_a1S2xs), February 9, 2008.

representation, and typically began to suggest ways to fix the problem. The next phase includes discourses at the time of Danny Cohen's announcement and as a direct response to the announcement. Cohen's decree sparked a momentary influx of opinion pieces on gender representation in panel shows and a lot of the discourses include criticisms of Cohen's attempt to address the issue. The third phase includes discourses after Cohen's decree had been put into place. This phase includes any discussion of gender representation in panel shows some time after Cohen's decree but, more importantly, these discourses take place after the decree was enacted by the BBC and other networks that followed its lead. This discourse analysis shows how the gender disparity on the panel shows is evident and how it is regarded or disregarded by popular voices. Not only are postfeminist ideals embedded within the framework of panel shows, but this discourse analysis reveals they are used to excuse gender disparity as well.

The third chapter analyzes several seasons of the panel show *8 Out of 10 Cats*. This textual analysis demonstrates how panel shows fit into the contexts of post-alternative comedy and post-feminism based on content, rather than simply based on the gender disparity of the guests. The textual analysis pays particular attention to references to gender in jokes or offhand comments. Danny Cohen's solution to fix the gender disparity by ensuring at least one woman appears each episode implies that the issue lies only in casting numbers. While this casting issue should not be ignored, this textual analysis shows that problems also arise from within the dialogue on the program and the types of interactions the panelists engage in.

The fourth and final chapter builds on the discourse and textual analyses, which show how panel shows operate under the contexts of postfeminism and post-alternative

comedy. The concluding chapter considers these implications—does the gender disparity occurring on panel shows simply reflect the social structures that restrict society? Do panel shows provide an environment welcoming to women? Did Cohen’s decree actually create any noticeable change in the gender disparity? If not, or if it created very little change, what needs to happen in order for the inherent gender disparity to be adequately addressed? This thesis suggests that the gender imbalance of panel shows cannot be easily fixed by meeting a quota because the notions that created the imbalance are still embedded within their framework. The concluding chapter summarizes the discoveries of the previous chapters and connects them to social structures and institutions and suggests future studies that build off of this work.

## Chapter Two

### **Never Mind the Gender Divide: How discourses surrounding panel shows address the gender imbalance**

This chapter looks at discourses surrounding panel shows before, during, and after Danny Cohen's quota for women on panel shows was enacted in order to examine how the problems with panel shows were and are regarded by the public, the press, and the shows' panelists. Across these discourses, the gender imbalance easily observed on panel shows was at times overlooked and at other times brought up, then dismissed or debated. Since the Cohen quota, the gender divide on panel shows has been regarded more seriously, but there are still evident biases favoring male panelists. These discourses demonstrate a number of patterns from the 2000s to present, all of which illustrate how panel shows inhibit women in ways beyond not featuring them on the show. Because Danny Cohen's decree only aimed to increase the number of female panelists on panel shows, it did not fully address the inherent gender imbalance. At times, the discourses around and evident within panel shows even seemed to encourage an unruly and often offensive masculinity.

Even though the gender imbalance on panel shows was discussed openly in the mainstream press, there has not yet been any scholarly work on the subject. This chapter exposes how panel shows were constructed as a masculine terrain and how the framing of the masculinity on these panel shows exhibited a post-feminist lad sensibility. Media personalities and comedians that worked to cover up or excuse the gender divide show how the post-feminist lad sensibility was not just excused as a product of panel shows. Their vehement defense of the humor employed on panel shows indicates that panel

shows stem from a post-feminist society that excuses masculine hegemonic comedy. This chapter examines the press coverage of the gendered nature of panel shows through articles that overtly discuss the gender imbalance and through articles that uncover patterns in which panel shows celebrated masculinity. Navigating the patterns presented throughout these discourses also shows how enacting a casting quota for women does not fully address the systemic gendered issues inherent in the panel show format.

*“..As rare as a woman on Mock the Week:” Discourses about Panel Shows Prior to  
Danny Cohen’s Decree*

Before the BBC’s Danny Cohen declared that panel shows needed at least one female panelist per episode, people with an investment in these shows, or in questions of gender equity, were already making note of the problems inherent in these programs. A number of patterns emerged in how panel shows were addressed by the press, but critiques about the gender imbalance remained few and far between from the panel show resurgence in the mid-2000s up until the end of 2013. These critiques also didn’t seem to gain much momentum—when a new article would discuss the gender imbalance on panel shows it was either not given much importance and would be joked about, the critique would fall flat and not be followed up, or the critique would be outright rebuked. It’s not just the gender imbalance that exposes a bias against women, but the way the gender imbalance is discussed or dismissed that shows that the bias stems from greater social inequalities, not simply from numbers of performers on screen.

Any commentary about the gender imbalance on panel shows also tended to be overshadowed by a flood of articles rebuking panel shows for other reasons. One of the most prominent themes in articles discussing panel shows before 2014 was questioning

whether or not panel shows were a good comedy format. Many articles also focused on profiling comedians that regularly appeared on panel shows. When female comedians were profiled, they often noted that gender imbalances in panel shows did not bother them. In one case, Sarah Millican actually suggested it may have been easier for women to appear on television than for men because productions were hoping to include more women.<sup>60</sup> Prior to 2014, critiques about the gender imbalance on panel shows were easily pushed aside, either focusing on other issues with the format, not giving any credence to those discussing the gender imbalance, or outright denying that the imbalance was a problem and/or making a joke out of it.

A standard narrative that was repeated throughout this period was that panel shows were not a good format for comedy or for TV. While this narrative was not inherently gendered, it would later be used to place the issue of gender imbalance on panel shows as one of low importance. By questioning whether or not panel shows matter, media personalities can later argue that considering a solution to the gender imbalance on panel shows should not be a priority. One of the earliest online accounts that recalls this was an article in *The Times* from 2002. In the article, Jasper Gibson, an editor of a satirical magazine, says that panel shows, “are vehicles for one-liners which wear a bit thin. They're terrible. They go for cheap crude jokes and swear words to get the laughs. They rely on the lowest common denominator of comedy.”<sup>61</sup> Even some comedians disapproved of the panel show format. John Bishop, for example, told the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* in 2011, “a lot of them are overcooked... You have to spend

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<sup>60</sup> John Plunkett, “Sarah Millican: women can make their mark in TV,” *The Guardian*, March 2, 2012.

<sup>61</sup> Dalya Alberge, “TV bosses wasting young talent in cheap panel shows, say comedians,” *The Times*, August 6, 2002.

four hours filming a 30-minute programme. That seems mental to me.”<sup>62</sup> Another comedian, John Thomson, felt similarly, and suggested that the reason there have only been a few “decent” comedy television shows since the 1990s was because of panel shows.<sup>63</sup> Because panel shows are cheaper to produce, a network would choose to create a new panel show rather than backing new sitcoms or sketch shows. Comedian Kevin Bridges dislikes the competitive nature of the programs, stating, “I just don't enjoy comedy in that format, seeing six comics trying to get a word in on top of each other.”<sup>64</sup> Even the comedian Rob Brydon, who is known more recently for hosting or appearing on panel shows, consistently derided them. “If you do a panel show, your career is in freefall,” Brydon stated.<sup>65</sup> And at another time Brydon suggested, “Panel shows are what you do when you've lost respect and all your integrity's gone.”<sup>66</sup> Comedian Vic Reeves, known for heralding in the post-alternative comedy era, was even quoted as saying, “TV is full of comedy panel shows now and they're just not funny,” despite the fact he was creating a new panel show, *Lucky Winners*, around the same time.<sup>67</sup>

While these opinions are not inherently gendered, they helped create a defense against criticism by implying panel shows do not need to be examined closely. Forcing the opinion that panel shows are a simple, meaningless comedy format could then allow people to assume that the gender imbalance on them does not matter, or is not worth considering. The argument that placed panel shows as less valuable comedies allowed

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<sup>62</sup> Colene Mckessick, “Enjoying the glare of comedy sunshine,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, February 3, 2011.

<sup>63</sup> Gordon Smart, “John’s Panel Beaten,” *The Sun*, November 4, 2011.

<sup>64</sup> John Earls, “View from a Bridge; why comic Kev hates telly,” *The News of the World*, November 21, 2010.

<sup>65</sup> Stephen Armstrong, “Media: Let’s get quizzical: The plethora of 'irreverent' panel shows, complete with pre-packaged humour, are fair game in a new spoof, starring Rob Brydon,” *The Guardian*, July 3, 2006.

<sup>66</sup> Caitlin Moran, “Dynamic Duo come up trumps,” *The Times*, July 8, 2006.

<sup>67</sup> “Vic pokes fun at TV,” *Daily Star Sunday*, June 17, 2012.



for an argument that seemed almost contradictory when considering panel shows. Those who believe panel shows are a less valuable form of comedy go against the post-alternative notion that suggests comedy or jokes should not be examined. Instead, they insist that panel shows should be evaluated for their ability to elicit laughter. In contrast, those who then use this point to say the gender imbalance on panel shows is not worth examining align with post-alternative comedy notions. This point of view depicts offensiveness or masculine dominance as acceptable because jokes are not meant to be taken seriously or examined too closely. Perhaps these discourses that devalue panel shows are also why there has been no scholarly work examining them.

Despite some critics believing that the panel show format has become, “tired, decrepit, and when it comes to the comedians involved; old and knackered,”<sup>68</sup> there were also a deluge of voices springing to the format’s defense, none of which addressed the gender question specifically, even when these perspectives came from female comedians. Writer Sarah Dutton, for example, celebrated panel shows in contrast to sketch shows, saying, “I think it takes a lot more skill from the comedians that participate than it takes a load of people sitting around in a room carefully constructing a joke.”<sup>69</sup> The comedienne Holly Walsh included her own perspective as a panelist and said, “I love writing jokes and I love the fact that you can't rely on your old material - you have to come up with new stuff.”<sup>70</sup> And from an audience perspective, Walsh also commented that she enjoyed watching panel shows because they showcase new comedians. David Mitchell, a comedian known for his success with both sketch comedy and panel shows, was able to

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<sup>68</sup> “What went wrong with... comedy panel shows?” *What Went Wrong With...*, November 19, 2013

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Dutton, “Culture Clash: Panel Shows vs. Sketch Shows,” *SCAN*, November 6, 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Mayer Nissim, “Holly Walsh defends comedy panel shows,” *Digital Spy*, August 6, 2010.

defend the format as someone who participated in all aspects of comedy television. Mitchell pointed out that the spontaneity of panel shows allows for creative jokes to emerge from a wide variety of topics a comedian may not have pondered before. “Some of the best material comes when things are allowed to run and breathe,” Mitchell defended.<sup>71</sup> While the debate of whether or not panel shows are valuable to comedy or television wasn’t inherently gendered, the amount of articles focusing on the topic show that the media, society, and comedians did not give a great amount of focus to the gender imbalance playing out on screen. Rather than examine the issues on panel shows, comedians were focusing instead on why there are panel shows. This debate would later also surface as a way to distract from discussing the gender imbalance playing out on the small screen.

While comedians continued to debate whether or not panel shows were valuable in the pre-decree era, a number of patterns across the behavior and media coverage of comedians on panel shows showed not only a celebration of masculinity in their comedy, but a number of egregious instances showing disrespect towards women. For some comedians, the disrespect stems from their personal life that was made public. One such instance is shown through Angus Deayton. Deayton was briefly disgraced when his private life was exposed in 2002. Deaton admitted to taking cocaine, having sex with a prostitute, and having an affair with his partner’s friend while his partner was pregnant with their child. But in 2007 he was heralded back into the spotlight with the debut of a new panel show, *Would I Lie to You?*, which was created with him in mind as the presenter. One article discussing his comeback turned the focus to his long-time partner,

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<sup>71</sup> Hugo Gye, “David Mitchell defends ‘cheap’ comedy panel shows against criticism by claiming they are wittier than sitcoms,” *Daily Mail*, September 26, 2013.

Lise Mayer, who stayed with him throughout the ordeal. In defending their relationship, Mayer asserts, “Men are different, aren’t they? For a start, men seem to be able to separate sex and emotion in a way most women just can’t understand.” Mayer was made to defend her wayward partner’s actions, and even her defense was not enough for *The Daily Mail* to accept why she might be staying with Deayton—the article makes its own assumptions and suggests she stayed with Deayton because she felt guilty about the fact he stayed with her through IVF treatments.<sup>72</sup> British society indulged in masculine laddishness by allowing male promiscuity while at the same time policing female decisions.

Another instance of a comedian facing a career comeback after setbacks stemming from his private life comes from Jason Manford. Manford was forced to quit *The One Show*, a news talk program, when it came to light that the married comedian exchanged obscene texts and video messages with at least a dozen women while his wife was pregnant with their third child. Coincidentally, the allegations came to light just before he hosted the Mother and Baby Awards, an awards ceremony dedicated to celebrating the best products for raising a baby based on reviews from mothers in the UK. British society celebrates heteronormative family life and Manford transgressed these values. Despite losing his job at *The One Show*, Manford was able to find redemption in panel shows as a regular guest, and was able to heavily promote his comedy tours through his appearances.<sup>73</sup> Going against heteronormative family values made Manford lose his job at *The One Show*, but British comedy was still a welcoming space for his lad-

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<sup>72</sup> Alison Boshof, “Have they got news for him?” *Daily Mail*, May 24, 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, “Jason Manford quits The One Show following sex message claims,” *The Daily Mail*, November 19, 2010.

like behavior. In order to show solidarity with her partner and in order to regain the favor of the greater society that valued heteronormative domesticity, Manford's wife Catherine appeared in public with the comedian. While the appearances were meant to show that the couple was still committed to one another, as in the case of Lise Mayer, they forced unwanted attention upon Catherine Manford.

Male comedians are allowed a chance to redeem themselves when they come back to the spotlight, but their partners are perpetually scrutinized for their tenuous connection to the comedian's scandal. By excusing this behavior and in turn placing these men in positions of power as hosts or team captains, panel shows seemed to give permission for these kinds of indiscretions. These instances show that panel shows also create an atmosphere where transgressive behavior for men is allowed. The instances connect with the sensibility of lad culture—men have a rebellious attitude that cloaks notions that are unfriendly to women. Panel shows become a masculine space akin to the Victorian-era men's clubs where men went to escape from the feminized domestic space.<sup>74</sup>

Beyond male comedians bringing undue scrutiny to their partners due to indiscretions in their private life, British male comedians were also able to publicly insult women and still find success in comedy and panel shows in the pre-decree period, another case in which the growing dominance of lad culture shaped the gender politics of panel shows. One instance comes from Rob Brydon, but within the context of satire. As a host of the panel show *Annually Retentive*, Brydon parodies panel shows by demonstrating a mean persona in backstage segments while playing a gracious host on

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<sup>74</sup> Hansen-Miller and Gill, "Lad flicks."

set. During the first episode, Brydon insults former TV presenter Gail Porter when he finds out she is going to be a guest in the backstage segment, but focuses the insults around her looks. Making fun of her alopecia, he jests, “Oh, someone on the show with less hair than me,” and then takes it even further by saying, “She’s not as beautiful as she used to be.”<sup>75</sup> While the comment is construed as ironic, Brydon essentially constructs a notion of Porter’s worth as only being connected to her beauty. Lad culture and post-alternative comedy use irony as a defense against criticism—according to lad culture, Brydon’s jokes about Porter should not be construed as sexist because they are “meant to be a joke.” Audiences accept this excuse because this laddish sensibility was normalized within panel shows. If Brydon would need to apologize for this joke, most other male comics would need to apologize for their comedy as well.

Jack Whitehall and James Corden don’t have the same excuse for their appearances on Channel 4’s 2012 *Big Fat Quiz of the Year*. There were a few instances during the show that brought some ire from the British press, and more particularly from *The Daily Mail*. Drinking a bottle of wine each throughout the taping and loudly shouting and laughing, spurring each other on, Corden and Whitehall exemplified the behavior of ‘lad culture’ and their jokes certainly fit in with this sensibility. While discussing the music video for Carly Rae Jepsen’s song “Call Me Maybe,” Whitehall jokes, “If you had given your phone number to someone like Carly Rae Jepsen and discovered how annoying she was, you’d suck a cock to get rid of her.” Later, the show asked about the poorly thought-out hashtag used to promote Susan Boyle’s 2012 album. The hashtag was meant to say ‘Susan album party,’ but when put into the hashtag

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<sup>75</sup> Spencer Bright, “Brydon joy; Life wasn’t funny for Rob Brydon when he won his first British Comedy Awards...” *The Daily Mail*, July 1, 2006.

#susanalbumparty, was made fun of as being “Sus anal bum party.” Despite the situation already playing into a joke against the singer, Whitehall and Corden took it even further by answering, “Subo loves it in the ass.” Even the Queen was not safe from misogynistic jokes. Discussing the Queen’s Jubilee, Whitehall remarked, “I have a theory, [The Queen] didn’t sit down for the entirety of that thing, and people were talking about that. It was the day after the night of her anniversary and Prince Phillip woke up with a urinary infection... I’m just saying what everyone’s thinking, people.”<sup>76</sup> Whitehall and Corden’s jokes positioned successful, powerful women as the target for ridicule and also implied that these women should be regarded in a sexual context. The comments reiterate conservative, masculine hegemonic notions that regard women as the object for male pleasure. These conservative notions are cloaked by a rebellious, blasé attitude that characterizes lad humor and post-alternative comedy, and that was central to many panel shows.<sup>77</sup>

That’s not to say these jokes didn’t inspire some pushback. The lad culture and post-alternative comedy that ran unchecked since the ‘90s was beginning to be questioned and examined more closely. Articles from *The Daily Mail* reprinted the jokes, along with others throughout the night, to expose how offensive they were, and female writer Jackie Clune wrote, “These performers are peddling a cheap formula of gags that deserves to have been left behind in the sexist, homophobic working men’s clubs of the Seventies — and they’re getting rich as a result.”<sup>78</sup> Later in the article Clune wrote, “It’s

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<sup>76</sup> Keith Gladdis and Claire Ellicott, “Outrage after drunken British comedians guzzle wine and trade obscene jokes about Obama, the Queen, and Susan Boyle during pre-recorded New Year’s Eve program,” *The Daily Mail*, January 1, 2013.

<sup>77</sup> Benwell, “Is there anything new?”

<sup>78</sup> Jackie Clune, “These bullies reek of misogyny. If we don’t confront their revolting sneers, they’ll get worse,” *The Daily Mail*, January 1, 2013.

difficult for an outsider... to criticise and say ‘I found that offensive’ without sounding like a bumptious bore, rampant royalist or joyless, feminist harpie,” and she was proven right. *The Daily Mail* faced a barrage of tweets accusing them of manufacturing controversy in response to Clune’s piece.<sup>79</sup> Whitehall and Corden’s comments could be defended by the lad culture parlance of ‘just jokes.’ Under post-alternative comedy and lad culture, not being ‘in’ on a joke is deemed worse than offending someone with a joke. By not finding the joke funny, Clune became the object of derision instead of Corden or Whitehall. Corden and Whitehall’s jokes are normalized within the context of panel shows, so Clune was deemed as overly sensitive.

Channel 4 did not find a problem with the show’s content. In a response to the controversy, a spokesperson simply defended, “*Big Fat Quiz Of The Year* is a well-established comedic and satirical review of the year’s events with well-known guests and is broadcast after the watershed with appropriate warnings.”<sup>80</sup> When the comedians themselves were confronted, Whitehall seemed to make a joke of it:

I am having a dry January,” he told XFM. “I watched that film ‘Flight’ with Denzel Washington where he plays an alcoholic pilot, and there’s this bit at the beginning where he pours his alcohol down the sink and shouts at his ex-wife - well, I did that to my girlfriend. I didn’t have a problem before or anything, I just drank recreationally, but made it like I had a real problem and started pouring it away and throwing tinnies round the room and kicking stuff.”<sup>81</sup>

Rather than apologize for his comments, Whitehall placed the problem solely on his drinking during the show. By ignoring the comments, he essentially positions them as irrelevant. By making a joke, Whitehall shows he believes the fact people found the

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<sup>79</sup> Paul Vale, “Big Fat Quiz of 2012 Controversy: Daily Mail faces Twitter backlash for ‘manufacturing’ outrage over New Year Eve’s comedy show,” *Huffington Post*, January 1, 2013.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> “Jack Whitehall ‘Big Fat Quiz of the Year’ Controversy: Comedian reveals he’s giving up booze following the storm,” *Huffington Post*, January 7, 2013.

program offensive to be humorous. A spokesperson for Corden first told *The Daily Mail*, “James would never want to offend anyone and is sorry if his comments have been taken out of the context they were made in.”<sup>82</sup> But when Corden himself was confronted, he said he did not have any regrets and called the show “good fun.”<sup>83</sup> Corden and Whitehall’s comedy careers were unaffected and Whitehall even went on to appear in 2013’s *Big Fat Quiz of the Year*.

The biggest controversy that seemed to occur for British comedians in the renewed era of panel shows before 2014 involved Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand in an incident that became known as ‘Sachsgate.’ On October 15, 2008, Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand called the British actor Andrew Sachs and left a series of voicemails on his phone discussing Brand having sex with Sachs’s granddaughter for BBC Radio 2’s *The Russell Brand Show*. Producers of the show did not find the material problematic and the show aired on the following Saturday, October 18. However, the show sparked a backlash with the public; the BBC and the Office of Communications, colloquially known as Ofcom, received 44,000 complaints. When Ofcom fined the BBC for the broadcast, they highlighted the moment Ross shouts, “he f\*\*\*ed your granddaughter!” as “particularly gratuitous.” Ofcom also noted that the repetitive and “prolonged nature” of the phone conversation compounded the offense.<sup>84</sup> In response, Brand actually resigned from his radio show (but still had work with Channel 4 and *The Guardian*), and Ross was suspended from the BBC for twelve weeks.<sup>85</sup> While the two wrote apology letters to

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<sup>82</sup> Gladdis and Ellicott, “Outrage after drunken...”

<sup>83</sup> Tim Walker, “James Corden has no regrets about Channel 4’s Big Fat Quiz,” *The Telegraph*, January 11, 2013.

<sup>84</sup> Sarah Crawley-Boevey, “Ofcom fines BBC £150,000 for Sachsgate mistakes,” *Campaign*, April 3, 2009.

<sup>85</sup> “Jonathan Ross suspended from the BBC for 12 weeks over prank calls,” *The Guardian*, October 30, 2008.



Sachs, they also resisted defining the moment as offensive. Ross had reportedly called the program ‘fun,’ and Brand tried to make the phone calls seem acceptable by urging, “What’s worse? Leaving a swear word on somebody’s answerphone or tacitly supporting Adolf Hitler when he took charge of the Third Reich?”<sup>86</sup> Brand’s ‘at least I’m not Hitler’ approach demonstrated that he was more upset by the uproar he caused than he was apologetic about the comments themselves. It shows that Brand also didn’t take the uproar seriously, coinciding with the lad culture ethos of not taking anything seriously.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the career setbacks due to the phone calls, the two weren’t hindered professionally for long. In a baffling turn of events, Russell Brand won an award for Best Live Stand-Up Performer at the British Comedy Awards in December later that year, prompting Andrew Sachs to respond, “It’s sad to see that this is popular with the executives.” Almost as if he wanted to add fuel to the fire, Brand dedicated his award to Jonathan Ross in his acceptance speech, adding, “It’s a pity he is not here. The comedy awards are not the same without Jonathan.”<sup>88</sup> After his suspension and weeks of apologizing, Brand knew that he was in the wrong. Despite knowing his segment was offensive, Brand also embodied an ethos of not caring. Brand knew Ross was not at the Comedy Awards for a reason, but chose not to acknowledge it. The two also continued to make regular appearances on panel shows, assuring their comedy careers were only barely tarnished, if not helped, by the scandal. These patterns of men offending, hurting, or verbally targeting women, yet still finding success and recognition through panel shows, showed that the problem with the gender imbalance on panel shows was not one

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<sup>86</sup> Richard King, “The age of outrage: From Russell Brand’s Sachsgate to Plebgate, taking offence has become ubiquitous in modern life,” *Independent*, March 30, 2014.

<sup>87</sup> Hansen-Miller and Gill, “Lad flicks.”

<sup>88</sup> Laura Roberts, “Sachs is ‘baffled’ by Brand’s comedy prize,” *The Daily Telegraph*, December 8, 2008.

based solely on numbers. If anything, the behavior of the men toward women or the feminine demonstrated that panel shows were masculine spaces. Male behavior exemplified a laddishness that positions masculinity in hierarchal contrast to subordinate groups. Any gender imbalance that played out on screen was a result of that fact, a consequence of panel shows in the context of lad culture and of post-feminist, and post-alternative comedy attitudes. It was not just the number of women appearing on screen that was at issue, but rather the attitude towards women embodied and enacted by the male comedians within a broader culture that rejected femininity while celebrating masculinity.

The panel shows of the mid-2000s allowed men to exemplify laddishness and unruliness without much reproach. If women appeared on the shows at all at this time, they had to fit into the same comedy style or they were overshadowed. Panel shows during the post-alternative comedy era require a fast-paced, insult-based, banter between the panelists. If a female panelist does not keep up, she will not participate much in the show. Jackie Bird, a journalist and news reader, notes that she only spoke during introductions while participating in a show on *Radio Scotland*.<sup>89</sup> Female comedians were more prepared to participate by mastering the mainstream comedy styles, but they would have to participate in the more raunchy rhetoric. For women appearing on televised panel shows, they would often have to embody the “cute but dirty” persona.<sup>90</sup> While patterns emerged in the debates about panel shows or the comedians that regularly appeared in them that took precedence over the issue of gender imbalance, that divide

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<sup>89</sup> Jackie Bird, “Panel show wags made me mute with laughter,” *Daily Record and Sunday Mail*, September 29, 2013.

<sup>90</sup> Yael Kohen, “Comic Rising,” *We Killed: The Rise of Women in American Comedy* (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2012), 282.

was still noticed in some popular discourse. Jonathan Ross even made a joke of it at the 2013 Comedy Awards, when he said, “A comedy award is that rarest of things...like a woman on *Mock the Week*.”<sup>91</sup> Masculinity was the standard for panel shows, and the female panelists embodied a distinct ‘other.’ The gender imbalance was apparent, but it still took some time before anyone tried to come up with a solution.

The gender imbalance may have been easily observed, but it required a few notable women to speak out in order to gain the public’s consideration. The gender disparity on comedy panel shows was criticized in 2008 by Sandi Toksvig, who hosted *The News Quiz* on BBC Radio 4 at the time. Toksvig’s criticism was one of the first instances to really pull the public’s attention to the issue of gender imbalance on panel shows. Toksvig said that “testosterone-fuelled” banter between the male comedians caused female comedians to get shut out because “women’s jokes aren’t about trying to top the last person.”<sup>92</sup> In 2009, the comedy writer Victoria Wood echoed Toksvig’s sentiments in calling panel shows “male dominated” prior to her appearances on *I’m Sorry I Haven’t a Clue*.<sup>93</sup> Wood’s sentiments prompted an article from Jan Moir in *The Daily Mail*, in which Moir verbally attacks Wood’s thoughts as being unnecessary. Moir asserted that the issue of gender imbalance on panel shows is so insignificant in the realm of what’s sexist that it is a waste of time. She asserted that the gender disparity in panel shows can be ignored in favor of addressing other issues. Instead of writing that there are more gendered problems with panel shows that need concern, Moir insulted the notion

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<sup>91</sup> “BBC says no excusing the ladies,” *Funny Women*, December 16, 2013.

<sup>92</sup> Nicole Martin, “Comedy panel shows are ‘testosterone fuelled,’ says BBC Radio 4 presenter,” *The Telegraph*, November 13, 2008.

<sup>93</sup> Urme Khan, “Panel shows are too ‘male dominated,’ claims Victoria Wood,” *The Telegraph*, June 9, 2009.

that gender imbalance in comedy panel shows is a significant issue.<sup>94</sup> Deeming the gender disparity on panel shows as unimportant only serves as permission for the imbalance to continue.

Despite the ways that Moir reasserted the logic of post-alternative comedy and lad culture, the tensions around the gender politics of panel shows continued. Wood's comments inspired the comedienne Jo Brand to echo her sentiments. First, Brand pointed out that it's not just panel shows where the presence of women is lacking, but in the stand-up comedy circuit in general. Brand added that panel shows seem to favor their regular panelists or 'team captains,' and a lot of guest jokes can be left out of an edit. Brand continued that women who have a poor first appearance on a panel show are given second chances less often than are men.<sup>95</sup> Jo Brand's commentary once again demonstrates that the way women are demeaned by panel shows is not solely based on the fact that there is a lack of them. Panel shows instead advance the careers of more male comedians than female comedians.

These various articles from women in comedy, all published in 2009, prompted the BBC2 channel controller Janice Hadlow to admit that there should be more women in panel shows in August of that year.<sup>96</sup> Hadlow's admission seemed to assume that the other gendered issues present in panel shows could be solved simply by including more women. But rather than leading to a call for a solution, the debate was more or less shelved until a few years later. Post-alternative comedy was still at its peak, and Wood's and Brand's comments easily could have been deemed over-sensitive. Wood and Brand

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<sup>94</sup> Jan Moir, "Not enough women on panel shows? Don't make me laugh!" *The Daily Mail*, June 12, 2009.

<sup>95</sup> Jo Brand, "Women – beware panel shows!" *The Guardian*, June 10, 2009.

<sup>96</sup> "Not enough women on BBC2, Janice Hadlow admits," *The Guardian*, August 28, 2009.

were still outsiders—the male comedians dominated the screen and their post-alternative comedy style would victimize those that were not in on their jokes.

The debate about gender imbalance emerged again in 2012 and 2013. The two years brought more assertions that the imbalance should not continue to be ignored, even as it brought comments defending panel shows as male spaces. First, one of the female comics that regularly appeared on panel shows, Sarah Millican, dismissed the notion of gender imbalance on panel shows. Millican asserted that the true crux of the problem stems from the lack of women in stand-up comedy in general. She even continued that the imbalance makes it seem easier for women getting a start in comedy. “Men coming through have to compete with loads of other men, whereas women coming through will be grabbed...and put on a panel show.”<sup>97</sup> Despite Millican’s claims, a month later Victoria Coren came forward to discuss how panel shows can be scary experiences. Apart from being a comedian and journalist, Coren is also an accomplished poker player. Poker, another male-dominated sphere, was a much easier terrain to navigate than panel shows for Coren. Coren said, “Poker is a game, it’s fun, and if you screw up a hand, a bunch of people on the internet will take the mickey, but it is not broadcast to a million people, then over and over again on [UK comedy channel] Dave forever for people to say ‘she’s not funny’.”<sup>98</sup> In this instance, two spheres that are heavily dominated by men and include highly competitive elements are compared and one—the world of comedy and especially the panel show—is found to be the less hospitable to women. Despite how panel shows and poker both encourage participants to further themselves at the expense

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<sup>97</sup> John Plunkett, “Sarah Millican: Women can make their mark in TV,” *The Guardian*, March 2, 2012.

<sup>98</sup> Barry Carter, “‘Comedy panel shows are much scarier than poker’ – interview with Vicky Coren,” *PokerStrategy.com*, April 21, 2012.

of the other participants, panel shows are also broadcast and syndicated. As this thesis previously discussed, the public assumed a post-feminist sensibility that allows and excuses sexist remarks and behavior as simply jokes because it assumes gender equality has been achieved. Comedy then becomes the perfect avenue for hegemonic masculine views to be disseminated. Sexist rhetoric in comedy is assumed to be ironic. But when these jokes come mostly from male comedians, it creates a one-sided comedy that always positions women as the butt of the joke. The masculine nature of panel shows was normalized and the female panelists were outsiders who were sometimes invited to participate.

Lad comedy and humor reigned on panel shows in the early 2000s and 2010s, but in 2013 British comedy began to shift away from the masculine-centered rhetoric and toward more inclusive and progressive comedy styles. In January of 2013, comedy critic Brian Logan disparaged the laddish nature of the shows, writing, “That’s par for the course on panel shows, which consign women to the margins and treat male club banter as if it were Wildean wit.”<sup>99</sup> In June of 2013, Jo Brand once again put out an interview discussing how panel shows are terrifying for women, echoing Coren’s thoughts from the prior year.<sup>100</sup> And in a move that seemed like a step in the right direction, Bridget Christie won the year’s Foster’s Edinburgh comedy award in August, perhaps the most prestigious British comedy award.<sup>101</sup> It wasn’t just Christie’s win that was significant, but the fact that most of her comedic material was a critique of sexism and misogyny, finally showing how female-centered comedy can be embraced in Great Britain. Her win

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<sup>99</sup> Brian Logan, “Comment: Men behaving boorishly: the comedy boom of the last decade has created a demand that cannot be filled by intelligent acts,” *The Guardian*, January 5, 2013.

<sup>100</sup> “Brand: Panel shows are terrifying,” *Belfast Telegraph Online*, June 15, 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Brian Logan, “Female comic has last laugh at Edinburgh as standup prizewinner pokes fun at sexism,” *The Observer*, August 25, 2013.

showed that Great Britain could also make room for newer, more progressive and feminist comedy styles, and it showed a shift away from post-alternative comedy as the mainstream.

This progressive comedy style wasn't adopted immediately in the UK, and it was a slower shift, similar to the way Tina Fey was able to slowly shift her public rhetoric and comedy to a more feminist sensibility.<sup>102</sup> Not everyone was on-board with the shift toward accepting more female voices in British comedy. A regular on panel shows, and a team captain on *Would I Lie To You?*, Lee Mack, said men are more suited to becoming stand-up comedians and panel shows guests because they are more competitive and boastful than women. Mack went on to say, "I'm only quoting scientific reports. When men sit around and talk they are very competitive.... [women] will be far more interested in what the other person has to say."<sup>103</sup> Mack's comments reasserted the age-old notion that men and women are fundamentally different, and in doing so, heavily implied that the field of British comedy is a space only accessible by men. Mack's comments immediately prompted even more of a pushback from women than the actual gender imbalance itself did. Comedienne Kathy Lette used the instance to argue that women needed their own panel show. Neuroscientist and comedian Sophie Scott said the problem was not that women aren't funny, but that society doesn't expect stand-up comedians to be women. "It's more about our biases than it is women not being funny," she continued.<sup>104</sup> And one uncredited woman asked, "What does he even mean 'scientific

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<sup>102</sup> Lauzen, "The Funny Business."

<sup>103</sup> Tammy Hughes, "Girl comics are a joke says TV Lee; funnyman's jibe sparks backlash," *Daily Star*, September 30, 2013.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

reports', sounds like a study from the University of silly bollocks to me."<sup>105</sup> It even prompted an article from Edinburgh winner Christie, where she discussed how boring the 'are women funny' debate is.<sup>106</sup>

The gender imbalance of panel shows was noted for years with nothing done to correct it. Occasionally, the discussion was brought back into the spotlight only for the debate to go quiet again for a few more months or years. But 2013 was different. Sachsgate and Lee Mack's comments brought too much bad attention to the BBC and the UK was shifting away from allowing offensive post-alternative comedy to continue as the norm. The BBC Trust finally had the gumption to create new rules to address the gender disparity on panel shows.

#### Have I Got News For You: *The BBC enacts a panel show 'fix'*

In December of 2013 the BBC Trust, an entity that evaluated the BBC's content to ensure the BBC is still providing a valuable public service, gave the channel's senior management new objectives in order to have more women appear on panel shows. BBC executive Mark Linsey reiterated the Trust's objectives, telling *Broadcast Magazine*, "Comedy panel shows are always better for having a good mix of people and of course that must include women. I'm making it clear to production teams that there's just no excuse for delivering all male guest lists."<sup>107</sup> *Broadcast Magazine*, however, is a trade publication, aimed more towards those already working in the broadcasting industry, and more specifically geared towards program producers. The story was only picked up by even more narrowly targeted outlets like *British Comedy Guide*, or it was mentioned in

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Bridget Christie, "The 'Are women funny?' debate is as dead as Christopher Hitchens," *The Guardian*, October 2, 2013.

<sup>107</sup> "BBC to focus on booking more women on panel shows," *British Comedy Guide*, December 13, 2013.



only a small section, like a 90-word update on page 59 of a mainstream publication like *The Sun*.<sup>108</sup> Larger stories finally started to appear in February of 2014, when Danny Cohen, the chief of the BBC's television output, talked to *The Observer* and made it clear the BBC was no longer going to allow episodes of panel shows to have all-male guests.<sup>109</sup> Finally, the public was able to see an industry executive address the gender divide on panel shows in a serious manner. The public's attention also prompted more comedians to add to the discussion.

Cohen's discussion with *The Observer* concentrated on how all-male lineups are unacceptable, and how the BBC is 'getting better' but 'needs to do more.' The article notes that the initiative follows the attention paid to the articles from Wood and Jo Brand in 2009, as well as the 2012 publication of a document from the Creative Diversity Network, an organization focused on promoting wider representation and inclusion in UK media, that singled out the BBC's shows *QI* and *Mock the Week* for rarely representing women. The report from the Creative Diversity Network, which has since been taken off of the BBC's Diversity and Inclusion page, did not just say there were not enough female faces on screen; it also noted that the women that did appear were typically the same few women, making them appear to be token women.<sup>110</sup> But what most of the public concentrated on was the notion that, "every episode recorded from now on will include at least one woman."<sup>111</sup> Cohen's 'solution' courted criticism from all sides: from those who participated in panel shows and did not see anything wrong with the way things were

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<sup>108</sup> "Gender Mender," *The Sun*, December 15, 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Vanessa Thorpe, "BBC chief: no more shows with all-male panels," *The Observer*, February 9, 2014.

<sup>110</sup> "BBC & Creative Diversity Network Research Findings: Serving all ages," *Scene TV*, January 31, 2012.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

going, from those who felt panel shows were too male-dominated, and from those who were just skeptical of what the ‘fix’ would do for comedy.

The most-cited critic of Cohen’s edict, Dara O’Briain, hosted one of the panel shows cited in the Creative Diversity Report, *Mock the Week*. O’Briain said he believed the ‘legislation’ from the BBC was wrong, making several points against Cohen’s edict. O’Briain’s first critique was that stating the edict publicly made it look like the comediennees that were already appearing on the show were simply there as token women. O’Briain’s critique of Cohen’s edict coincides with a point the CDN report already made. Female comedians were already appearing to be the ‘token woman’ to some audiences, but Cohen’s edict made the point more widely acknowledged. But O’Briain did not offer an alternative way to address issues of gender imbalance, showing that what he really objected to was having his show criticized. The comedian Jason Manford also echoed O’Briain’s sentiments, saying that women on panel shows would now just wonder, “‘Am I here because I’m funny or because they needed one?’”<sup>112</sup> Manford and O’Briain are dismissive of Cohen’s decree, but veil their dismissal by seeming concerned for the female comedians already appearing on panel shows. Their comments also implied that the women that were already appearing on panel shows appeared on their own merit, but those that may appear in the future may only appear because of this quota. This inadvertently places a woman appearing on panel shows in a defensive position—she will always need to prove her worth. O’Briain and Manford unintentionally played into the notion that masculinity was distinguished in hierarchal contrast to femininity. Under their assumptions, male comedians did not need to question

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<sup>112</sup> John Plunkett, “BBC should not have announced ban on all-male panels, says Jason Manford,” *The Guardian*, March 10, 2015.

why they appeared on panel shows, but female comedians would have always needed to second guess themselves.

The worry about tokenism on television is not a new issue. Tokenism stems from the observance that minority actors may be more prevalent than in the past, but that they are typically given minor or bit parts.<sup>113</sup> Tokenism demonstrates that there may be an increase in the frequency of minority actors on screen, but that the importance of those roles has not changed. Even favorable minority portrayals in bit parts constitute no threat to the world of the white man on television. Simply linking tokenism to women on panel shows ignores the fact that women are actually the majority of the general population and it also implies that a female guest on a panel show would be less important than her male counterparts. After Danny Cohen's interview, audiences may have been more mindful of the gender imbalance on panel shows. But after Dara O'Briain and Jason Manford's comments they may have questioned the worth and value of the female comedians appearing alongside their male counterparts. By invoking a claim of tokenism, O'Briain and Manford make a show of concern for female comedians and panelists, but in action the two never suggest an alternative solution to address the gender imbalance and they only show their concern when the panel shows they appear on are questioned.

The voices that were challenging the decree also relied on essentialist notions of gender to justify the male-dominance of panel shows. At times, the critiques implied that it's normal to view comedy as a masculine space. O'Briain stepped beyond the 'token women' notion and also pointed out that men are more interested in being part of comedy than women. "You're not going to shift the fact that loads more men want to do it,"

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<sup>113</sup> James L. Hinton, John F. Seggar, Herbert C. Northcott, and Brian F. Fontes, "Tokenism and Improving Imagery of Blacks in TV Drama and Comedy: 1973," *Broadcasting Research*, Fall 1974, Volume 18, Issue 4, p. 424.

O'Briain notes.<sup>114</sup> Manford also echoed these claims by saying, "It's harder for females sometimes to come on and be at the forefront because that's not what we're used to in our society. Generally the woman's passive. For a female to be aggressive is not what we're used to."<sup>115</sup> Manford's comments implied that the gender disparity on panel shows is directly connected to biology and genetics. He made it seem as if the gender divide is natural, rather than a product of societal factors. By making this point, Manford seemed to also imply that the gender divide should not be addressed or solved. Manford at least went on to say that the women who achieve success in British comedy have to work a lot harder to do so than do their male counterparts. O'Briain does not point out this distinction. But by saying this, Manford again masked his comments (which could be considered sexist) in a veil of concern for female comedians.

Another discursive strategy for denying the need for Cohen's quota was trying to distract from the focus on the gender imbalance of panel shows. O'Briain particularly tried to shift the focus away from panel shows. "I wish a tenth of the energy that was put into the women-on-panel-shows debate was put into women in computer coding," he deflected.<sup>116</sup> Political commentator Deborah Orr likened this comment to arguments against cracking down on crime against women.<sup>117</sup> If women are treated worse in other countries, why should it be a worry in Great Britain? The argument highlights the fact that O'Briain sees issues of gender imbalance in comedy and computer coding as separate. Rather, both issues actually stem from the dominance of a masculine

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<sup>114</sup> Josh Halliday, "Dara O'Briain hits out at BBC ban on men-only panel shows," *The Guardian*, February 25, 2014.

<sup>115</sup> Plunkett, "BBC should not have..."

<sup>116</sup> David Sanderson, "BBC is wrong to insist on token women, says panel show host," *The Times*, February 25, 2014.

<sup>117</sup> Deborah Orr, "A lack of women on TV panel shows may not be the worst injustice, but it matters," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2014.

hegemony. Suggesting that society needs to choose between advocating for women in comedy or in computing is a defense of the masculine space and culture that panel shows have created. Dara O’Briain also pointed a finger at the politics-based panel show *Question Time* (a point which David Dimbleby, *Question Time*’s host, critiques because the show has 44% female panelists, while *Mock the Week* had less than 10%).<sup>118</sup> By once again trying to distract from the issue of gender disparity on panel shows, O’Briain showed that he does not take the issue seriously. Positioning the gender disparity on panel shows as unimportant gives tacit permission for the gender disparity to continue. It is not a stance that is overtly connected with laddishness, but one that finds no problem with the laddish nature of panel shows. By maintaining the position that these gender disparity problems don’t need to be addressed, O’Briain ultimately normalizes the laddish, highly masculinized nature of the shows. O’Briain’s reasoning rests on post-feminist assumptions. Even when faced with the fact that the show he hosts, *Mock the Week*, was one of the most unwelcoming panel shows towards women, he denied there was any legitimate problem.

There were then a number of people that used the publicity around Cohen’s edict to make other claims about panel shows, again obscuring the discussion of gender imbalance in order to discuss whether or not the format is valuable. Several articles shifted the conversation from how many women appear in panel shows to how many panel shows there are. These articles suggested that Cohen’s edict assumes that panel shows are an avenue comedians should want to participate in, and these articles would rather once again question whether or not panel shows can be seen as a good comedy

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<sup>118</sup> “Dimbleby hits back at comic in row over gender balance,” *The Herald*, February 26, 2014.

television show. Writer Jill Galone says that comedy is “stuck in a cheap panel show rut.”<sup>119</sup> Alice Jones wrote that arguing over gender imbalance “misses the point,” and the point should instead be that panel shows are, “a tired, lame format.”<sup>120</sup> What Galone and Jones don’t consider is that shifting the conversation back to the value of panel shows undermines the discussion of gender imbalance in a different way. The articles imply that not only do panel shows not matter, or not have any worth, but discussing the gender imbalance playing out on them also doesn’t have any worth. Galone’s and Jones’s points end up coinciding with Dara O’Briain’s—by not giving the gender disparity any thought or consideration, or by overshadowing the disparity with other issues, they inadvertently allow the gender disparity to continue unchecked. By trying to overshadow the discussion about obtaining gender equality on panel shows, they undermine the effort to provide women with more opportunities in British comedy and television.

Even those who rejected post-feminist notions and critiques like O’Briain’s and Manford’s also had concerns over the BBC’s quota solution. Cohen’s edict prompted another strain of criticism from those who welcomed more feminine-friendly comedy but believed the solution would not really provide much change. While O’Briain’s arguments against the gender quota took a post-feminist approach, there were media personalities that pointed out how the gender imbalance actually stemmed from problematic post-feminist attitudes in greater society. These critiques took more of a feminist approach. Comedy critic Brian Logan, for example, questions whether or not Cohen’s solution is enough. Logan believes it’s not just the gender balance on panel shows that need to change, but the culture itself. Logan cited commenters on an article

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<sup>119</sup> Jill Galone, “It’s time the world of comedy moved on a bit,” *Derby Telegraph*, February 20, 2014.

<sup>120</sup> Alice Jones, “Women aren’t the answer to quiz question,” *i-Independent Print LTD*, February 14, 2014.

he wrote about the comedian Sarah Millican disparaging her looks in order to demonstrate his point. Logan insists that a better solution would be to have women in more dominant positions on panel shows, like as team captains or hosts.<sup>121</sup> Logan's comments show that the gender disparity on panel shows is not just a deliberate casting choice, but an imbalance that stems from an unequal society that perpetuates post-feminist assumptions. Professor and TV presenter Mary Beard also notes the issue is deeply embedded within the culture. "Most viewers accept, without a blink, the craggy, wrinkled faces and bald patches of male documentary presenters, as if they were the signs of mature wisdom," she demonstrates, "yet in the case of women presenters, grey hair and wrinkles often signal 'past-my-use-by-date.'"<sup>122</sup>

Some also believed the edict would do nothing to curb the sexism still apparent in British society. Fern Brady writes it's, "The hot [women] or posh [women that] are first in line when it comes to getting the one designated spot for a woman on panel shows."<sup>123</sup> While Brady's article positions women in panel shows within yet another bind, it also demonstrates that women that appear on panel shows are not just perceived differently from the male panelists they appear with, but in even getting to that point they have different obstacles to cross than the men do. Katherine Ryan, one of the few female comedians that regularly appears on panel shows, also worried that the decree would not bring more female comedians to the shows, but that shows will settle for including glamour models that don't necessarily have the right experience or comedy training to

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<sup>121</sup> Brian Logan, "Danny Cohen's panel-show gender pledge won't halt the comedy rot," *The Guardian*, February 11, 2014.

<sup>122</sup> "Call to challenge TV's 'maleness,'" *Belfast Telegraph Online*, March 4, 2014.

<sup>123</sup> Fern Brady, "More women on comedy panel shows? Sure—if you're posh or pretty," *The Guardian*, February 11, 2014.

add to the conversations effectively.<sup>124</sup> Dawn O’Porter also wrote that after her appearance on *8 Out of 10 Cats*, she received a large amount of abuse on social media regarding her appearance, an issue a male comic may not have with as much regularity. O’Porter’s experience shows that sexism is not just a product of panel shows, but the problems of the culture itself.<sup>125</sup>

Months after Cohen’s decree, actress Sharon Horgan also questioned how helpful it was to just aim for one woman per episode. She noted that by having at least one woman in an episode, producers might believe they are doing a good thing because they are fulfilling their ‘quota.’<sup>126</sup> TV presenters Richard and Judy also wrote that the decree came too late because women like Jo Brand and Victoria Coren, despite being great comediennes, already dislike appearing on many panel shows.<sup>127</sup> Comedian Michele A’Court also criticized the decree, writing, “It makes me feel as though every time I walk on stage, or sit on a TV panel show, I carry my gender on my shoulders.” She continued, saying that any time she might make a mistake in comedy, rather than it being a personal blunder, it could be a blunder that affects all women.<sup>128</sup> A’Court’s comments show that there is a marked difference in the way men and women are perceived on panel shows. Adding more women will not necessarily help unless those women are also given more power within the programs.

### *It’s Question Time: Did Cohen’s decree change things?*

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<sup>124</sup> Sanderson, “BBC is wrong...”

<sup>125</sup> Dawn O’Porter, Leanne Bayley, “Dawn O’Porter: ‘The TV industry needs to grow some balls,’” *Glamour*, May 19, 2014.

<sup>126</sup> Sinead Gleeson, “Sharon Horgan: These days female comedy sells, and people want to watch it,” *The Irish Times*, November 22, 2014.

<sup>127</sup> Judy Finnegan and Richard Madeley, “No place for women in this bear-pit,” *The Express*, February 15, 2014.

<sup>128</sup> “Inside Story: Time for women to make a stand?” *Sunday Business Post*, April 13, 2014.



Cohen's decree certainly brought more attention to the gender imbalance on panel shows. But did the decree create any noticeable changes in the discourse around panel shows? Or were many critics' fears realized and did producers only aim to fill a one-woman quota? Did the quota help create an environment more welcoming to women on panel shows?

One year after Cohen's decree, the flood of articles about the gender imbalance on panel shows lessened to only a trickle. A few more women appeared on panel shows than they did before the decree (in 2013 the ratio was 74 men to 26 women, in 2014 the ratio was 72 men to 28 women).<sup>129</sup> In an April 2015 interview, comedienne Holly Walsh acknowledged that there was still a problem with the representation of women on comedy panel shows. Walsh didn't mention Cohen's decree, but she suggested that the next step would be to have more women as team captains or regular hosts of the serial shows.<sup>130</sup> Just six months later, Walsh's suggestion came true and pushed panel shows into the spotlight once again for a discussion of gender imbalance.

On October 14, 2015, Stephen Fry stepped down as the presenter of *QI*. While this itself is significant, as Fry hosted the show for 13 years, what was perhaps more significant was that Sandi Toksvig was selected as Fry's replacement. With this decision, Toksvig became the first female host of a comedy panel show on British television. Toksvig's appointment was a significant achievement for women in British comedy and television, and the fact that she was the first woman to host a mainstream comedy panel show caused people to ask, 'What took so long?' It prompted the public and mainstream

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<sup>129</sup> Lowe, "UK Panel Show Gender."

<sup>130</sup> Stephanie Merritt, "Holly Walsh: Britain's the best place in the world to do comedy," *The Observer*, April 15, 2015

British press to take another look at the gender divide playing out in panel shows more than a year after Cohen's decree.

One thing that was readily apparent was how *Mock the Week* did the bare minimum- rather than use the decree as a warning to include more women, the show only fulfilled the basic requirements and did not have more than one woman appear in a single episode since the announcement. Perhaps even more revealing is that in the 22 episodes that aired between Cohen's decree and Toksvig's appointment, only eight different women appeared in the show. None of the women were women of color. In a more general snapshot of the BBC, it was revealed that since their pledge to include more women, just 13 out of 125 episodes of panel shows included more than one woman.<sup>131</sup> The quota did not create any drastic change for how many women appeared on panel shows within its first year. This shows that there were more systemic problems panel shows needed to address in order to create a more welcoming environment for all genders, and in order to reflect a more inclusive medium. The BBC put a quota in place, but by not changing anything else it allowed the same producers and personalities to adhere to the bare minimum standards, and did not change the way of thinking that created the gender disparity in the first place.

Despite being known for his irreverent and offensive jokes that often play off of stereotypes about women, Jimmy Carr also came forward to support more women on panel shows. "It's a hugely positive thing," he told BBC's *Newsbeat*. "It's that thing where you say you have to have a bit of positive discrimination to push it forward a little

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<sup>131</sup> Luke Bailey, "Here's how many women actually appear on BBC comedy panel shows," *Buzzfeed*, October 15, 2015.

bit.”<sup>132</sup> Carr’s opinion is significant. Not only does the comedian appear on panel shows, he also hosts *8 Out of 10 Cats* and various iterations of *The Big Fat Quiz*. And Carr’s comedy style had tended towards more of a male audience, with many of his jokes talking about sex with women. In 2006, Carr wrote a book about comedy, defending offensive jokes and denigrating political correctness. Along with his co-author Lucy Greeves, Carr wrote that a joke is seldom without a victim anyway, and if no one was made fun of, comedy would only consist of a handful of puns and knock-knock jokes. They warned in their book that no matter what social group or subculture you belong in, someone is making a joke at your expense and they encourage the reader to make their joke first and make it funnier.<sup>133</sup> The problem is that in a male-dominated genre, a lot of the time the butts of these jokes were women. Carr’s insistence that the gender imbalance on panel shows needs to actively change works towards making the statistics inexcusable. Carr loved to push the boundaries using post-alternative comedy and even he was finally recognizing that the gender disparity was a boundary that should no longer be pushed.

People were paying more attention to the gender imbalance that had been playing out for years because the data about panel shows showed a clear bias that favored men over women. Stuart Lowe’s UK Panel Show *Gender Breakdown* received more attention and was cited in articles from *Hexjam*, *Chortle*, and *The Guardian*, among others.<sup>134</sup> In

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<sup>132</sup> “Jimmy Carr: We need more women on television comedy panel shows,” *BBC Newsbeat*, November 3, 2015.

<sup>133</sup> Jimmy Carr, Lucy Greeves, *Only Joking: What’s So Funny About Making People Laugh?* Gotham, September 2006.

<sup>134</sup> Rich Cooper, “The state of sexism in British TV is even worse than we thought,” *Hexjam*, October 15, 2015.

“Revealed: True extent of panel show sexism,” *Chortle*, December 11, 2016.

late 2016, Lowe used his data, which already demonstrated a clear gender divide, to make a more blatant point. Only one of 4,700 episodes of comedy panel shows since 1967 included an all-female panel. In contrast, 1,488 of those episodes featured an all-male lineup. The one episode that featured an all-female lineup was in 2012 on a BBC Radio 4 show called *Heresy*, so there has never been an all-female lineup on a televised comedy panel show. Victoria Coren (now Victoria Coren-Mitchell) had hoped the show would pass by without any scrutiny that specifically gendered it as a female lineup, in the hopes that it would be accepted as normal. But her hopes were dashed when the continuity announcer introduced the show, saying, “And here's something unusual - an all-female lineup!”<sup>135</sup> All-male panel show lineups are regarded as normal, but all-female lineups are an oddity. Cohen’s solution tried to fix this issue, but fell short because it still failed to address the gendered assumptions about British media personalities and comedians. It failed to consider the societal assumptions that find all-male lineups normal and all-female lineups abnormal. If Lee Mack was able to assert that men make better comedians than women in 2013, it shows that societal thought had not evolved to view men and women as equals in TV comedy.

Lowe’s data shows that the conversation around gender imbalance on panel shows has not ended, but more importantly it demonstrates that the conversation shouldn’t end. The conversation likely will, and should, continue until, as Tara Flynn puts it, “they have an all-female panel without any justification,” similarly to how there can be all-male lineups on panel shows without an audience finding it abnormal.

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Esther Addley, “Study of UK comedy panel shows finds just one all-female episode,” *The Guardian*, December 23, 2016.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

The discourses surrounding gender disparity on panel shows highlight issues that go beyond just acknowledging the lack of women on panel shows, but the only solution that has been offered tackled the issue as if it was just about casting numbers. The BBC may have hoped that including more women would make the rhetoric change, but by not discussing problems with how women are addressed and positioned as outsiders and how masculinity is celebrated within the shows, the network failed to provide a full solution. The solution they did offer ignores how the post-feminist sensibility stemming from British society and anti-feminine post-alternative comedy influence the gendered attitudes on the shows. The BBC and other British radio and television networks needed to consider the amount of power women have on panel shows. The BBC, whether intentionally or inadvertently, presented a better solution when they placed Sandi Toksvig as the host of *QI*, because they placed a woman in the position with the most power in a panel show. The next chapter of my thesis will take a closer look at the panel show *8 Out of 10 Cats* to illustrate how the gender dynamics and differences in power between men and women were playing out on screen during this period.

## Chapter Three

### ***8 Out of 10* comics are men: How does a dominance of male comics influence panel show comedy and rhetoric?**

This chapter analyzes the panel show *8 Out of 10 Cats*. *8 Out of 10 Cats* takes a comedic look at statistics, opinion polls, surveys, and current events. Six comedians appear alongside the host, Jimmy Carr, split into two teams of three. The teams consist of one team captain, a comedian that appears every week of the series, and two guest panelists who are typically comedians or other media personalities. Jimmy Carr and the two team captains have a fair amount of control over the show. They are responsible for leading the conversation and setting the comedic tone. From the show's beginning in 2005 through 2015, both of the team captains were always men. Having three out of the seven personalities appearing each night be the same three men created an assumption of normalcy—it is normal to see men on *8 Out of 10 Cats*, but it would be odd to see many women on the show.

The show aired before and after Danny Cohen's decree. This analysis aims to take a closer look at the rhetoric and humor within the show to analyze the extent to which it may be friendly to women in spite of the gender imbalance that places them outside of the show, or whether it demonstrates an attitude that denigrates women. Based on the previous chapter, it is hard to believe that simply excluding many women from the show is the only way panel shows favor masculinity over femininity. *8 Out of 10 Cats* is not the most overly masculine of the panel shows in terms of its casting. In fact, it falls pretty close to the average percentage of men appearing on any panel show based on the data calculated by Stuart Lowe. If the show falls close to the 'normal' gender appearance

statistics, does it provide a neutral example of panel show gender dynamics? The usual gender appearance statistics heavily favor men. Does *8 Out of 10 Cats* position men as dominant over women?

For this chapter, I focus my analysis of *8 Out of 10 Cats* on the seasons surrounding the decree from Danny Cohen. While *8 Out of 10 Cats* airs on Channel 4, there is no doubt that the show creators would have paid attention to the critiques of panel shows and adhered to the same standards that were publicly enacted by the BBC. This is partially due to how British television is overseen. Both the BBC and Channel 4 adhere to standards set by Parliament, and particularly by Ofcom, a colloquial name for the Office of Communications.<sup>136</sup> Many of the producers for the different networks in the UK also have histories at the different channels. Danny Cohen, for example, used to work at Channel 4 as the head of E4 and the head of Documentaries before moving to the BBC.<sup>137</sup> And the fact that Channel 4 paid attention to Cohen's decree is certainly evident in their decision-making afterward. In a less-publicized move, Channel 4 released new network guidelines in early 2015 and declared, "Entertainment shows, including panel shows, must have 25 percent female representation and a minimum of 15 percent representation of LGBT people, people of color, disabled or 'another underrepresented group' across a series."<sup>138</sup> The network never declared that this decision stems from the BBC's new initiatives, but they nevertheless occurred less than a year after the BBC publicized their new diversity guidelines.

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<sup>136</sup> "What is Ofcom?" <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/what-is-ofcom>

<sup>137</sup> Ian Burrell, "BBC TV Boss Danny Cohen Quits," *Independent*, October 13, 2015.

<sup>138</sup> Doyin Oyeniyi, "UK's Channel 4 Issues New Diversity Guidelines, and The US Entertainment Industry Should Take Notice," *Bustle*, January 13, 2015.

The show displays a number of patterns of gender casting and stereotyping that were in place before Cohen's decree in February 2014. Gender stereotypes were particularly used to denigrate women for jokes, humor, and discussion. These instances, which parallel Bethan Benwell's notions regarding lad culture, were more likely to celebrate masculinity by devaluing femininity.<sup>139</sup> The question, then, is whether or not those patterns disappeared or were lessened by Cohen's decree— or rather, if the quota solution provided a 'fix' for other gendered problems inherent in panel shows. Series 16 aired from October 2013 until December 2013, before Cohen's decree, and featured Sean Lock and Jon Richardson as the two team captains. Sean and Jon remained the team captains for series 18, which aired from October 2014 to December 2014, six months after the decree, and they, along with host Jimmy Carr, were still the ones setting the comedic tone for most of the series. If the decree had changed anything, series 18 would be the first full season audiences would be able to notice.

**“How dare you call me a feminist!”: Gendered discussions in series 16 of 8  
*Out of 10 Cats***

Series 16 of 8 *Out of 10 Cats* would not appear to have any problems if one were judging based on Danny Cohen's quota solution. Every episode included a female panelist, and some episodes even included two women. But one did not need to watch the show for very long in order to find humor directed towards women. Many times the first joke aimed at women occurred in the beginning monologue, which means that the audiences only needed to watch for one minute in order to hear a joke about women. Another pattern includes jokes based on gendered stereotypes. The show perpetuated

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<sup>139</sup> Benwell, “Is there anything new.”



traditional notions about gender roles and emphasized differences between masculinity and femininity. And finally, the panelists targeted a lot of jokes at the women appearing on the show and other female media personalities.

In keeping with the standard format of the program, Jimmy Carr introduces each episode. Carr appeared to embody the ‘new man’ masculinity. Carr always wore a nice, fitted suit, had his hair dyed and styled, had surgery for veneers, and had nicely groomed skin and facial hair. He certainly appeared to favor the more ‘narcissistic’ aspect of the ‘new man.’<sup>140</sup> But all similarity ends with his appearance. His comedy transgresses his genial appearance by aiming more for raunchiness and shock value. There is no question that Carr’s comedy characterized the ‘new lad’ sensibility. Carr begins each episode by bringing up three different statistics and making a joke for each of them. These monologue jokes help set the tone for the rest of the show. In series 16, the majority of the episodes include one joke targeted towards women in the monologue. Many of these jokes are sexually suggestive. For example, in episode eight of the series, Carr joked, “Only 29% of women reach orgasm during sex. I’ve got a tip for those women, or if they’d like, I’d put the whole thing in.”<sup>141</sup> Some of these jokes also included an unusual target, like in episode six of the series, when Carr asserted, “30% of people say their favorite food hasn’t changed since childhood. Mine’s still the same, sucking on boobies, right mom?”<sup>142</sup> It seemed no woman was safe from Jimmy Carr’s sexualized monologue jokes, including his own mother. This attitude was certainly in keeping with lad humor—Carr appeared not to care at whom he aimed his humor because, to him, making a joke

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<sup>140</sup> Gill, “Power and the production,” 37.

<sup>141</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.8, Channel 4, November 22, 2013.

<sup>142</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.6, Channel 4, November 8, 2013.

was more important than respecting anyone's sensibilities. Carr fully embraced the post-alternative notion that laughter should be encouraged even at the expense of being respectful or politically correct.<sup>143</sup>

Some of the monologue jokes also policed women's behaviors and appearances. In the first episode of the series Carr joked, "23% of Brits have never visited France, which means they've never experienced the thrill of sitting on a cafe on the Champs Elysees and being put off their croissant by the sight of a woman's hairy armpits and the smell of dog shit."<sup>144</sup> This joke carried the message that only shaved armpits are acceptable for women and it positioned a woman's unshaved armpit as something as unappealing as fecal matter. Audiences were then left to accept the joke only on the condition that shaved armpits are the norm for women. In the same episode, the monologue also set forth the notion that one can only be considered a woman if one has the right anatomy, when Carr joked, "20% of travelers claim to be members of the mile high club. I once had a near-miss on a flight to Thailand. Sorry, not near-miss, pre-op transsexual."<sup>145</sup> This transphobic joke both sexualized and excluded women whose gender identity differed from their biological sex. In the second episode of the series, Carr policed the attitudes some single women have towards marriage. In the monologue Carr joked, "11% of single women have already picked out their wedding dress. It's an important decision, it's a lot of money to spend on a dress you're only going to wear never."<sup>146</sup> With this joke, Carr implied that single women eagerly looking forward to

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<sup>143</sup> Hunt, *Cult British TV Comedy*, 3.

<sup>144</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.1, Channel 4, October 4, 2013.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.2, Channel 4, October 11, 2013.

marriage were unappealing to men. It carried the message that single women should not fantasize about their romantic futures.

The monologue also alluded to stereotypical notions about women. In the Christmas episode, Carr joked, “Women spend an average 49 hours planning how they’ll look Christmas day. What? Overheated, drunk, and crying?”<sup>147</sup> This one joke carried several gendered stereotypes about women. First, it asserts that women spend too much time thinking about their appearance. The joke not only implies this notion, but it has statistical data to reinforce the stereotype. Secondly, the joke implies that women have no self-control. Carr made it seem like it was inevitable for women to get drunk on Christmas—they do not have the willpower to prevent themselves from doing so. Finally, the joke also plays to the stereotype of women being too emotional. The joke carried the message that despite women spending so much time thinking about their appearance for Christmas, their emotions would undoubtedly get the best of them and ruin their careful planning.

Once Carr finishes his three jokes at the beginning of the show, usually in less than one minute, he makes his way to the seat accompanied by the audience’s applause and the show begins. For the show’s typical format, in the first segment of the show the panelists guess either the most talked about news stories for the week, or on special occasions they guess the most popular answers for survey questions. This is followed by a segment where they guess how the audience answered a poll. Finally, in the last segment, the panelists try to guess the most popular answer for a national poll. While there is a competitive element to the game, where the team with the most correct answers

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<sup>147</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.11, Channel 4, December, 2013.

at the end wins, the humorous discussions among the panelists are what really matter. Every week, new topics and categories will be featured within the episodes, but the panelists inevitably have discussions or make jokes with gendered implications, assertions, or stereotypes.

One aspect in particular that makes *8 Out of 10 Cats* an interesting series to examine is the combination of comedy and news. In the show, the comedians are often asked for their own opinions about current events or politics. If a comedian is playing a character or employing a lot of sarcasm, it can at times be difficult for the audience to tell whether or not they are being genuine. To show the audience they are joking, comedians on the show will often pull exaggerated facial expressions, change the pitch of their voice, or after they earn the audience's laughter or confusion from their fellow panelists, they will say they were just joking or they did not really mean what they said. Often, comedians will also combine their personas with their actual opinions. The team captain Sean Lock, for example, was characterized as a curmudgeonly, grumpy comedian who uses his jokes to complain about something. He would combine his character with answers about his opinion. In one instance from series 16, Lock was asked if he had parenting advice for the royal family. Lock said, "No, but I don't really do much parenting," which prompted laughter from the audience. Here, he implied that parenting was his wife's job, but he veiled this notion in his grumpy comedic persona. This fits in with Rosalind Gill's notions of irony—it can function as a disguise for what is now deemed an extreme point of view.<sup>148</sup> Throughout the series, Lock did not do or say anything to suggest that this was not his genuine opinion. Similar to how Annabelle

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<sup>148</sup> Gill, "Postfeminist media culture."

Mooney suggests female nudity is normalized through lad magazines, these jokes with conservative notions about gender differences were normalized in a setting where media personalities were asked their genuine opinions.<sup>149</sup>

*8 Out of 10 Cats* is taped before a live audience. While the audience doesn't actively participate, the audience's reactions (typically through laughter and applause or, more rarely, through disapproving 'oohs') guide the viewer-at-home's experience. The faceless audience contributes to the show's atmosphere and humor. This means the audience also has a role in the gender imbalance that plays out on screen. The main pattern the audience participates in is normalizing gendered humor. Most of the jokes that include stereotypical notions of gender, and all of the jokes mentioned in this chapter, are followed by laughter. The laughter shows that the audience understands the gendered implications brought up in the joke and that they approve of the humor. The audience reinforces the masculinist nature of panel shows. The laughter and applause wordlessly encourage the viewer-at-home to also accept and celebrate the humor employed in the show.

One of the most prominent patterns that was inherent in the series 16 discussions was how the male panelists would make jokes targeting female media personalities—whether it is their fellow panelists or other prominent women. In the first episode of the series, the only woman appearing on the panel was Jamelia, a British singer and TV presenter. In the beginning segment of the show, the panelists targeted most of their jokes towards Vanessa Feltz, a British TV personality who had appeared on *Strictly Come Dancing*, a dance competition TV show featuring celebrities, earlier in the week.

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<sup>149</sup> Mooney, "Boys will be boys."

The jokes were mostly targeted around Feltz's weight, once again policing the appearance of a woman. But not too long into the show, the target shifted from Vanessa Feltz towards Jamelia herself. In one instance, the panelists discuss how the United States Congress was unable to pass their federal budget and Jamelia tries to deflect criticism about her intelligence by starting, "I *do* actually know something about it...I know, I know you're quite shocked," but she has trouble finding the words to explain the news story. Carr then cuts Jamelia off, joking, "What was it you knew about it?" Later on in the episode, Carr mentions how Jamelia appeared on the *X-Factor: Ukraine* and she pleads with him to not show a clip from the show, and asserts she only took the job for a lot of money. Carr then chimes in, "If you're willing to do things you don't want to do for shitloads of money, I think you're the girl for me," and received a lot of laughter from the studio audience. Despite the fact that Jamelia had a successful media career, Carr implied she was a prostitute, for which he received only applause—no criticism.<sup>150</sup>

The second episode of the series begins in a similar way, but in this instance the first target for the panelists' ire is the musician Miley Cyrus. Cyrus' "Wrecking Ball" music video was picked apart by the panelists for displaying an unappealing female sexuality. Conversely, Carr later sexualized a woman in a position of power, Parliament member Nicky Morgan, by calling her the "new Minister for total sexiness." In the same joke he also tied in gendered stereotypes by calling Parliament member Helen Grant the "Minister for hoovering." The panelists then shifted to joking about their fellow panelist Carol Vorderman, making jokes about her older age. What no one pointed out is that Vorderman was only two years older than team captain Sean Lock. Vorderman is not

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<sup>150</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.1.

only known as a TV personality, but she is also a mathematician. Towards the end of the show, Vorderman remarked that she believed another panelist, comedian Paul Foot, was smarter than her. Foot then cuts in, “Well, yes. Obviously.” Here, the audience saw an accomplished woman downplay her intelligence in deference to a man and they saw the man place himself as better than the woman.<sup>151</sup>

The comedienne Katherine Ryan pointed out her worries about Cohen’s quota when she asserted, “The worst thing a panel show could do is to invite four headliner male comedians and one female glamour model.”<sup>152</sup> Episode 3 of the series exemplified Ryan’s critique because the female panelist, Helen Flanagan, was not a comedian. As a model and soap opera actress, she did not have the experience or training to use comedy as a weapon like her male counterparts. Throughout the episode, Flanagan typically just speaks when Carr directs a question to her. She was the feminine ‘other’ among the masculine panelists. Throughout the episode, she is criticized for her feminine characteristics. Flanagan is the source of ridicule for her lack of knowledge about British football and politicians, her interests, and the amount of selfies she takes. Throughout the series, jokes targeted women who deviate from societal beauty standards, but in this particular episode Flanagan was criticized for her over-interest in her appearance. The show created a double-bind for women—you should be constantly monitoring your appearance, but you should not appear to be overly interested in how you look.<sup>153</sup>

But men were not the only ones targeting women—many of the female panelists would also participate in the gendered jokes. In the fifth episode of the series, Jimmy

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<sup>151</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.2.

<sup>152</sup> Sanderson, “BBC is wrong.”

<sup>153</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.3, Channel 4, October 18, 2013.

Carr asks Katherine Ryan to create a rap. She directs the rap towards her fellow panelist Tinchy Stryder, a British rapper. She raps that Tinchy should, “Take her back by the bins,” so she could, “be his baby mama.”<sup>154</sup> Ryan’s freestyle fit in with post-alternative raunchy humor. Ryan played to the notion that women can only relate to men through a sexual relationship. Post-feminist logic assumes it is acceptable to sexualize women because they are now responsible for encouraging their own sexuality. In other words, women are now deemed sexual subjects rather than sexual objects, creating an assumption that women invite sexual attention.<sup>155</sup> Ryan embodied a post-feminist sensibility because she was not sexually objectified; she was a sexual subject on her own.

In the seventh episode of the series, another woman participated in targeting women as the object of jokes when Jo Brand directed her ire towards female celebrities. First, she insults Nicole Scherzinger’s singing abilities in order to question her worth as an *X-Factor* judge. Then, in a more-pointed attack, she insults Miley Cyrus. Brand is particularly incensed by Cyrus calling herself a feminist. When another panelist brings up how Cyrus said she was the world’s biggest feminist, Brand chides her and implies she is the better feminist. When Sean Lock asks, “Would you put a flea in her ear?” Brand responds, “I bloody well would, I’d put a f\*\*\*ing fist in her ear.”<sup>156</sup> Brand’s comments not only advocated violence against another woman, but also the comments sent the message that women should only promote a certain kind of feminism, one to be defined by Brand. By chiding Cyrus, Brand created a dividing line between those she considered to qualify as feminist and those she did not, a kind of judgment that defies a

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<sup>154</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.5, Channel 4, November 1, 2013.

<sup>155</sup> Gill, “Postfeminist media culture.”

<sup>156</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.7, Channel 4, November 15, 2013.



movement invested in solidarity between women. In this moment, Brand's own empowerment was declared through her derision of another woman. Brand does not consider Cyrus's media image to be a result of postfeminist culture standards. Instead, Brand considers Cyrus's choices as solely her own. Brand positioned herself as a feminist, but presented a rather post-feminist notion. Brand assumed individual choice was the primary factor of Cyrus's media image, and not the ways in which women, and more specifically, female pop stars, were positioned socially.<sup>157</sup>

Perhaps the most apparent and telling pattern in the show included instances in which men put forth ideas or jokes damaging to women in general, or portrayed an unappealing masculinity fitting with lad culture. In the second episode of the series, the panelists discuss how power cuts in Holland led to an increase in the birth rate. Carol Vorderman suggests it was a way to keep warm, but the TV personality Richard Hammond suggests an unsavory notion by saying, "That's because she can't get away, it's dark."<sup>158</sup> As the joke left his mouth, Hammond made a face as if he realized the joke suggested sexual assault, but nonetheless the audience and Carr rewarded Hammond with a lot of applause and laughter. This showed that the program still fit within the post-alternative comedy style. Hammond was able to imply rape because he was making a joke in a comedic context. He could make that joke without any ramifications because, as his facial expression suggested, it was meant to be ironic. As Rosalind Gill points out, irony is used as a way of "establishing a safe distance between oneself and particular sentiments or beliefs."<sup>159</sup> It can work as an excuse for one to say an offensive joke. This

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<sup>157</sup> Gill, "Postfeminist media culture."

<sup>158</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.2.

<sup>159</sup> Gill, "Postfeminist media culture," 164.

is a particularly post-feminist notion because it assumes that a joke cannot be misogynistic since Second-wave feminism eradicated sexism.

Most of the other jokes did not have the same violent implications as Hammond's, but they nonetheless created a sense that certain masculine behaviors should be accepted as normal, or that men should be taken more seriously than women. The jokes aligned with laddish notions that celebrate masculinity in hierarchical contrast to femininity.<sup>160</sup> For example, in episode three of the series, Jimmy Carr joked, "Helen Flanagan has 100s of filthy photos on her mobile. I know, because I sent them to her."<sup>161</sup> Here, Carr makes it seem normal for a man to harass a woman with unwanted sexual photos. The audience laughed and the show went into another segment. There was no pause to examine the joke's undertones. In the eighth episode of the series, cricket star Freddie Flintoff and comedian Rob Beckett discussed how gay marriage is a good thing by discussing how good it would be to be married to another man. The two heterosexual men discussed how men were more fun and you would be able to do more activities together, implying that women were not fun to be around. Here, two panelists provide a less-conservative opinion by appearing accepting of gay male relationships, but they do so at the expense of women.<sup>162</sup>

Mothers were not exempt from being the target of the comedians' jokes, either. When the panelists discussed the most difficult jobs, Lock sarcastically asserted, "People say motherhood is the hardest job, ha!"<sup>163</sup> The quip prompted audience laughter, and the camera quickly panned to Tess Daly who argued, "It is!" Lock continued his derision of

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<sup>160</sup> Benwell, "Is there anything new?"

<sup>161</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.3.

<sup>162</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.8.

<sup>163</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.4, Channel 4, October 25, 2013.

motherhood by calling it, “One long tea-break.” Lock disregarded the domestic labor required for raising children. Lock is displaying the conservative opinion that men do the ‘real work.’ There is no evidence that his joke was made with ironic intent—Lock offered no opinion otherwise, suggesting this is really what he felt. While this particular moment doesn’t seem to be veiled in irony, there is no doubt that Lock would be able to deflect any criticism about his opinions by saying they were just a joke. In another episode, the panelists discussed a government program that aimed to give new mothers shopping vouchers if they breastfed for six or more months. The panelists questioned how the government was able to really know if women should receive the vouchers. Jo Brand asked, “What, they come along and have a squeeze?” to which Carr replied that his “boob-inspector” shirt would come in handy. Lock then suggested a screen in which women could place their nipples, which Carr then dubbed a “gloryhole for boobs.”<sup>164</sup> Instead of simply joking about the impracticalities of the new government program, the panelists devolved into jokes about breasts. The jokes seemed to align with and encourage the nature of lad humor—if older, established comedians can say these jokes, then young men or lads in the audience can also say them. This portion of the show made the government program (which could help disadvantaged mothers) seem like a joke. Rather than consider breastfeeding as a way for a mother to nourish a child, the discussion simply turned to reducing women to their sexualized bodies.

In the Christmas episode, Carr played up gender stereotypes beyond just the jokes within the show. Carr gave a Christmas present to each of the panelists. He gave the male panelists general gifts, like food, or gifts specific to their character, like a pair of

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<sup>164</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.7.

mop slippers for Jon Richardson, who has OCD and has frequently brought this condition up in the show and in his stand-up comedy. The two women on the show received gifts stereotypically meant for women. Holly Willoughby was given a handbag that was meant to store wine. Roisin Conaty was given a calendar of “hot hunks” and a mistletoe headband because she was known as perpetually single. This gift also implied a sense of desperation—the audience assumed Conaty was not happy being single, and that she was always seeking the company of a man. These gifts show that the female panelists were thought of as women first and foremost, while the men were thought of as either a typical panelist or as having more of a personality.<sup>165</sup>

There were two instances in the whole series where women on the show made an effort to defend other women. These instances made it seem as if there was a line men on the show should not cross, but that the line was not entirely clear, given how often it was breached. In the fourth episode of the series, the panelists were discussing the show *Strictly Come Dancing*. Jimmy Carr asked the newscaster Krishnan Guru-Murthy whether or not he would be interested in appearing on the show. Guru-Murthy replied, “It’s the job of the female newsreaders to sort of bounce around, to entertain.” Guru-Murthy directly undermined the power and accomplishments of female newsreaders with this statement—he was not joking, he was honestly responding to Carr’s question. He positioned male newsreaders as more serious, and therefore more important than female newsreaders, imposing a distinct hierarchical contrast between men and women. But fellow panelist and comedienne Aisling Bea jumped in to question, “Like your sister?”<sup>166</sup> By bringing up his sister, another prominent newsreader, Bea pushed Guru-Murthy to

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<sup>165</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.11, Channel 4, December, 2013.

<sup>166</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.4.

reconsider his rather sexist and stereotypical thoughts of female newsreaders. In this instance the audience backed up Bea and applauded her questioning. The scene showed that sexist rhetoric may be acceptable within panel shows when it is disguised in an ironic context, but it becomes unacceptable when sexism is expressed more directly. Comedy is a disguise for misogynistic discourse, because any accusation of sexism can be defended as ‘ironic’ or ‘just a joke.’ Jokes create an opportunity for men that vocalize misogynistic notions to deny “doing something criticisable.”<sup>167</sup> This sensibility fits within a post-feminist media culture because it assumes sexist jokes are harmless given the belief that the work of feminism is already complete.<sup>168</sup>

In the other instance, two of the panelists had a discussion about feminism during the Christmas episode. The panelists discuss New Year’s resolutions and Lock adds, “My New Year’s resolution is to be more chivalrous to feminists; they don’t like it.” This comment generated a good amount of applause and laughter from the audience. The joke prompted a conversation with his fellow panelist, the female comedian Roisin Conaty.

Roisin: Chivalrous just means being polite. Of course feminists like people being polite, it’s good manners.

Sean: No they don’t like it, feminists hate men.

Roisin: They do not. You’re a feminist.

Sean: No I’m not.

Roisin: Saying you’re a feminist is like saying you’re not a racist.

Sean: How dare you call me a feminist.

Roisin: Of course you’re a feminist. You have to be a feminist.

Sean: Why? What have I done?

Roisin: Because you believe in equal rights for women.

Sean: What?<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Billig, “Humour and Hatred.” 270.

<sup>168</sup> Gill, “Postfeminist media culture.”

<sup>169</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 16.11.

At this point, Carr changes the subject and the conversation ends. Lock put forth misconceptions about feminism and Conaty was able to use her role as a comedian and panelist to address those misconceptions. Lock, however, seemed resistant to learning about feminism or what the movement really stood for. Lock began the conversation with his joke about feminists and seemed caught off-guard by Conaty's criticism. Lock's dialogue with Conaty was paired with an exaggerated shocked expression and his higher-pitched, questioning tone of voice implied that Conaty's queries were an interrogative attack he was fending off. It was as if Lock embodied the notions and perceptions society had about feminism and feminists and he demonstrated how difficult it would be to correct those misconceptions because his ignorance came across as genuine rather than ironic. In fact, his behavior during the exchange came across as a staunch effort to not learn about feminism. Despite Conaty's quick attempt to correct these perceptions, she is ultimately silenced. Because only two instances throughout the series challenged rhetoric against women or feminists, the rest of the masculinist humor was accepted as normal. Series 16 of 8 *Out of 10 Cats* depicted comedy and panel shows as a masculine space in which women are only sometimes invited.

**“Fit for filth!”: Gendered discussions in series 18 of 8 *Out of 10 Cats***

Series 18 aired one full year after series 16, but in that time Danny Cohen had enacted the gender-quota at the BBC, and the debate about its merit had been well under way. Series 17, which aired during the time the quota was announced, was pulled from online streaming availability. This speaks more to YouTube's indiscriminate copyright rules than anything to do with the quota. This also highlights the difficulties of analyzing international or cross-cultural media. The BBC quota would not have directly affected

the show because *8 Out of 10 Cats* aired on Channel 4, but the public conversation would have undoubtedly come to the producers' and panelists' attention during that year. While *8 Out of 10 Cats* already booked at least one woman in each episode by series 16, the question I am concerned with is whether or not the public conversation about gender in panel shows changed the rhetoric and humor within the show. If Cohen's solution actually helped solve the real gendered problems with panel shows, it would not just change the number of female panelists, it would change the gender dynamics and discussions throughout the shows. If this change had occurred, then it follows that there would be significant differences in the gender dynamics between series 16 and series 18 of *8 Out of 10 Cats*.

Series 18 started much like series 16, with a gendered joke in the monologue. Carr joked, "One third of women choose their own engagement ring because they don't trust their partner's taste. Well, they chose you."<sup>170</sup> Here Carr poked fun at women whose tastes were deemed too particular. It implied a couple of different messages—that women should just be happy with what they are given and that men's tastes in women and objects could be easily equated. In the sixth episode of the series, Carr joked, "43% of men over 36 say they don't have any close male friends, so mission accomplished, eh ladies?"<sup>171</sup> While the joke victimized men more than women, it seemed to vilify women—men were losing friendships because of women nagging at them. It played into the stereotype of the woman as the nagging wife or girlfriend who causes men to lose out on fun. This kind of comedy trope places men as the victims in society, and positions women as the new oppressors. This comedy trope fits with Ann Johnson's discussion of

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<sup>170</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.1, Channel 4, October 6, 2014.

<sup>171</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.6, Channel 4, November 10, 2014.

how the American *Man Show* could enact sexist rhetoric through the realm of comedy and position female empowerment as a threat to men and their masculinity.<sup>172</sup> This trope ignores the documented power imbalances that favor men over women (like in careers or salaries) and puts forth the notion that men are the victims because they are now having less fun. This trope is fitting with Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff's notion of post-feminism that characterizes it as a backlash against feminism. The humor trope works with the underlying message that feminism has gone too far.

But there was a noticeable change between the monologue jokes from series 16 and series 18. Not all of the shows started with a gendered joke, and when they did they did not necessarily target women as the victims of their humor. The second episode of the series brought a return of the sexualized monologue jokes, and Carr declared, "75% of women would rather date a man with love handles than a six pack. Well, I have one love handle, it's this long and it sticks out the front."<sup>173</sup> Within the first minute of the show Carr reminded the audience that he had a penis. He turned away from an obvious ploy about women's interests and instead made a joke about his penis. In the eighth episode, Carr joked, "78% of women prefer the man to pay after a first date. I went out with a girl and at the end of the date she said she wanted to go Dutch. Shagged my roommate Lars."<sup>174</sup> Again, Carr turned away from a punchline that would attack women and instead turned the joke on himself. But the biggest difference between the gendered monologue jokes in series 16 and series 18 was that there were significantly less of them. Instead, the jokes were aimed at targets like Americans, immigrants, and current issues

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<sup>172</sup> Johnson, "The Subtleties."

<sup>173</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.2, Channel 4, October 13, 2014.

<sup>174</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.8, Channel 4, November 24, 2014.



like obesity. *8 Out of 10 Cats* was certainly turning away from introducing the show with gendered jokes, but this trend would not be significant if there were not also a shift in other gendered patterns from series 16.

The show still made a habit of judging female celebrities and media personalities harshly. The favorite target throughout series 18 was the tennis coach and *Strictly Come Dancing* contestant Judy Murray. Murray was brought up in a few shows with unsavory jokes. In the second episode of the series, Sean Lock joked, “She’s like an Ikea flatpack...they might as well have just gotten a dead person.”<sup>175</sup> In the seventh episode of the series, Carr called Murray, “The most wooden thing they’ve had on the show since the coffin they kept on standby for Brucey,” (Bruce Forsyth was a former *Strictly* judge in his late eighties).<sup>176</sup> The panelists’ discussions also put forth a double bind for women on *Strictly Come Dancing*. They judged Judy for being too stiff, but in episode three they also added that the dancer Joanne Clifton was “too smiley.”<sup>177</sup> This implied that women on *Strictly* had to ensure they portrayed the right amount of enthusiasm. They could not be too stoic and they could not be too bubbly, otherwise they would garner criticism.

Murray was not the only target throughout the series; other famous women were also critiqued for their behavior, appearance, and performances. In the fourth episode, Joe Wilkinson joked that Kate Middleton likely used her illness as an excuse to get out of event appearances.<sup>178</sup> In the sixth episode of the series the panelists reveled in Spice Girl Melanie C’s criticisms of Cheryl Cole’s singing.<sup>179</sup> In episode seven, a discussion of the

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<sup>175</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.2

<sup>176</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.7, Channel 4, November 17, 2014.

<sup>177</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.3, Channel 4, October 20, 2014.

<sup>178</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.4, Channel 4, October 27, 2014.

<sup>179</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.6.

politician Ed Milliband quickly devolved into a discussion of Kim Kardashian’s butt.<sup>180</sup>

At one point in the sixth episode, Sean Lock praised Taylor Swift because she didn’t “Make a career out of singing in her pants.”<sup>181</sup> By praising Taylor Swift here, Lock was actually criticizing other female pop stars. His notions were rather postfeminist—he was of the opinion that pop stars sing in their underwear solely by their own volition, not due to any societal pressures toward “sexiness” these women may face. The jokes about these female celebrities were not as drawn out as they were in series 16, but they were still readily apparent.

The difference between these discussions and the discussions of male celebrities or politicians was that the men had undoubtedly done something to garner attention; they were objects of humor due to their actions, not their looks or personas. For example, a discussion in the first episode focused on the Tory politician Brooks Newmark sending inappropriate photos to a reporter posing as a young woman.<sup>182</sup> Even as this discussion mocked Newmark, the men made jokes that excused Newmark’s behavior. For example, Jamie Laing brings up an anecdote about how he accidentally exposed himself in Dubai, explaining that the photos could have been an accident. In another incident, panelists mocked UKIP politician Roger Helmer visiting a ‘sleazy’ massage parlor where the women advertised their services with sayings like, “fit for filth,” or “adorable and affordable.”<sup>183</sup> Men had to transgress the set standards of decency throughout British society in order to garner criticism, while women with enough media attention only had to make the most minor decisions in order to garner criticism.

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<sup>180</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.7.

<sup>181</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.6.

<sup>182</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.1.

<sup>183</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.3.

The female panelists did not receive as much negative criticism as they did on series 16, but a new pattern emerged of the male panelists ignoring or excluding the female panelists. In the first episode of the series, radio DJ Gemma Cairney tried to talk while Jon Richardson tried on Cuban heels and Carr cut her off saying, “I don’t think anyone is listening to you.”<sup>184</sup> In the second episode of the series, the Olympic swimmer Rebecca Adlington only spoke when Carr addressed her directly. Adlington was an athlete placed in a setting meant for comedians, and she was mostly left out of the conversation.<sup>185</sup> In the third episode of the series, Roisin Conaty tries to discuss the trend of trolls and people being rude online with her own personal story. Lock then interrupts Conaty in an attempt to change the subject.<sup>186</sup> Before the fourth episode, Carr asked some of the panelists to bake cakes for the *Bake Off* judge Paul Hollywood to critique. The only two panelists excluded from the mini-competition are Gabby Logan and Aisling Bea, the two women appearing on the show.<sup>187</sup> This pattern didn’t show anything directly harmful to women, but it still added to the sense that men are the standard for panel shows, and it positioned women as outsiders. Not only did panel show humor position women as the target of jokes, behaviors and patterns on the show depicted the women on them as ‘other.’ They did not fit in with the men on the show. This normalized panel shows as a masculine space.

In series 18, there was only one instance where a panelist decried humor against women on the show. In the eight minutes into the eighth episode of the series, Carr turned to Jon Richardson’s team, which included Carol Vorderman and comedian Sara

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<sup>184</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.1.

<sup>185</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.2.

<sup>186</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.3.

<sup>187</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.4.

Pascoe, and pointed out, “Boys versus girls tonight, innit?” which prompted the audience to laugh. Pascoe turned to the audience and questioned, “Are people laughing because you just called Jon a girl?” Carr returned, “I presume that’s why, yeah.” Pascoe persisted, “What’s wrong with being a girl?” At this point Richardson cut off Pascoe’s questioning by saying he can fight his own battles. Richardson continued, “I have a penis. I have a girlfriend, and some testicles, and some whiskey, and a fridge...I mean, we can carry on with the things I’ve got. I’ve got a hammer. I tried to put up some shelves.” Richardson’s joking both helped and hurt Pascoe’s line of questioning. Richardson took the attention away from Pascoe’s serious inquiry. The audience did not have to think too long on why they thought it was funny that Carr called Richardson a girl. But Richardson’s defense also seemed to purposefully highlight the fragility of masculinity. Richardson protected his masculinity by invoking his anatomy, his heterosexuality, and a few of his stereotypically masculine possessions. After he brings up how he tried to put up shelves, Voderman prompted, “And?” to which he responded, “Doesn’t matter.” Making light of protecting his manhood, Richardson humorously brought up stereotypical notions of masculinity in order to expose its fragile nature, making himself and hegemonic masculinity more generally the butt of the joke.<sup>188</sup>

If one were watching series 16 and 18 of *8 Out of 10 Cats* solely based on Danny Cohen’s quota, one would not find any issues. In fact, series 18 of the show included two female panelists half of the time. But the patterns of humor still created a sense that comedy and panel shows are a masculine space and that women are outsiders who are welcomed into the space only sometimes. The show still had different approaches

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<sup>188</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.8, Channel 4, November 24, 2014.

towards discussions of men than of women and of discussions of masculinity versus femininity. This showed that Danny Cohen's quota did not really address a lot of the gendered issues inherent in panel shows. What may have helped lessen some of the gendered problems between series 16 and series 18 was the public discussion of how panel shows leave out women. But while some of the gendered problems lessened between series 16 and 18, they were still occurring and apparent. *8 Out of 10 Cats* would need to do more than simply include women as panelists in order to correct its gender imbalance.

The previous chapter showed that one of the most positive steps panel shows took towards a more balanced representation was hiring Sandi Toksvig as the presenter of *QI*. It is not simply enough to include more women on a show that is dominated by male panelists—in numbers or by the power they have as a host or team captain. In order to create an atmosphere more welcoming to women, female comedians or media personalities need to obtain positions of power within the show. If this were the case, female comedians like Aisling Bea, Roisin Conaty, or Sarah Pascoe would not need to take a moment to divert the conversation to a discussion of feminism or a defense of women. Instead, they would already be leading the discussion. Having a female team captain or host should help dispel the notion that comedy or panel shows are a masculine space. The conclusion of this thesis shows how *8 Out of 10 Cats* has worked towards gender balance regardless of Cohen's decree. Casting quotas don't work to solve or address the source of gender imbalances. In panel shows, the gendered problems stem from the broader contexts of post-alternative comedy, lad culture, and the postfeminist society. Placing women in positions of power in spaces such as panel shows may be one

of the only strategies that can help to change the conversation, shifting away from masculine-centered humor and the gender inequalities it perpetuates.

## Chapter 4

### **It's *The Last Leg*: Can panel shows overcome post-feminism and masculine comedy styles?**

The previous two chapters of this thesis show that since panel shows reemerged in the late '90s and early 2000s they have been fixed in a post-feminist, masculine-centered comedy style. Cohen's quota solution in early 2014 did not make any direct or immediate impact on the gendered power imbalance on these shows. What the quota did do was start a conversation. Public critique suggested that the quota was not doing enough to solve the inherent gender imbalance on-screen. Women like Sandi Toksvig and Holly Walsh were able to point out that producers needed to hire women as team captains or hosts in order to change the masculine nature of the shows. While Cohen could only directly enact change at the BBC, the discussion caught the attention of others working in the industry. In January 2015, Channel 4 took an entirely new approach to their diversity guidelines in a plan titled the '360 Diversity Charter.' Within these guidelines, Channel 4 included new quotas for panel shows and other entertainment programs. But what set this charter apart from Cohen's quota was that it was released in conjunction with a set of initiatives for the whole network to increase diversity on-screen and off-screen.<sup>189</sup>

The quota Channel 4 set in 2015 wasn't drastically different from Cohen's 2014 panel show quota, but the wording and parameters prevented 'token woman' critiques. Channel 4's "360 Diversity Charter" stated that entertainment shows (including panel shows) must have a minimum of 25% women for on-screen talent. While 25% seemed

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<sup>189</sup> "Channel 4 Diversity," Channel 4, last updated March 2017, <http://www.channel4.com/info/corporate/about/c4-diversity>.  
"360 Diversity Charter," Channel 4, January 12, 2015.

like a small amount, panel shows typically feature five or seven on-screen talent, so just one woman on a panel would be unacceptable under this initiative. BBC's *Mock the Week*, which only included one woman a week after the BBC quota, may fit Cohen's standard solution criteria, but they would fail to meet Channel 4's. Making it normal for more than one woman to appear on a panel show also prevents 'token woman' critiques because a comedienne or female personality won't seem as out-of-place in such circumstances than if she were on her own. Channel 4's quota also goes on to ensure gender diversity behind the scenes by requiring that at least one Executive Producer, Director, Producer, Writer, or Head of Production is a woman, and that a production crew is at minimum 40% women.<sup>190</sup>

My intention here is not to point out how quotas don't work then go on to praise another quota. Channel 4's quota worked because it was also backed up by a set of initiatives the network enacted to increase its diversity. One objective the company put forward was the Skillset Diverse Casting Initiative, which called for its television programs to "increase the auditioning of newly discovered and trained diverse talent for mainstream roles."<sup>191</sup> While this objective was not specifically gendered, the network went on to list female comedians as an example of an underrepresented group. It was clear that Channel 4 was taking the gender imbalance on panel shows into account with their new initiative. Introducing a quota with a program that will increase diversity for the network long-term showed that Channel 4 was focused on approaching the gender imbalance on panel shows as a more complex problem rather than just finding a quick fix.

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid, 22.



The changes Channel 4 made in a push towards diversity were readily apparent in series 20 of *8 Out of 10 Cats*. The biggest change on the show was a change in the regular talent lineup. Jimmy Carr was still the host, but Sean Lock and Jon Richardson were replaced by Rob Beckett and Aisling Bea as team captains—a male and female comedian respectively. The new series, which began airing on November 8, 2016, included a woman in a position of control on the show. Having Bea in a role where she would return every week inhibited the normalization of male dominance in panel shows and comedy and helped generally give women more of a voice in British comedy.

The first episode of series 20 showed a marked difference from the rhetoric and gendered patterns in series 16 and 18. The show featured three female panelists and three male panelists. The episode doesn't completely show an equal distribution of gender, as Jimmy Carr was still the host, but the booking distribution went against the previous numbers on the show. Not every gendered pattern disappeared. In the monologue, Carr still included a gendered comedy trope with a “your mum” joke that played off the stereotype of women being bad drivers. When discussing Thailand, he included a joke about women flinging ping pong balls out of their vagina. Aisling Bea and female TV personality Paisley Thomas were featured twerking with their butts in the camera in another segment.<sup>192</sup> But these instances were also juxtaposed against other instances that transgressed societal gender roles as a whole and instances that transgressed the previous gendered patterns within the show.

The episode included a couple of instances in which the panelists went against typical gender roles. First, the panelists were discussing the celebrity dance competition

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<sup>192</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 20.1, Channel 4, November 8, 2016.

*Strictly Come Dancing* (a favorite topic in the series) when the male panelist and reality TV personality Jamie Laing asserted, “I want to be the first male contestant that’s lifted.” Female panelist and comedian Jayde Adams immediately offered to lift Laing. The two danced in front of the desks and ended their dance with Adams picking up Laing in a bridal-carry position to the audience’s applause.<sup>193</sup> Adams and Laing went against the usual gendered conventions of dancing and Adams took the more dominant role by leading the dance, instructing Laing what to do, and ultimately portraying female strength.

In the episode Aisling Bea also critiqued a commercial that was part of a larger gendered trope in British media. Towards the end of the episode, the panelists were asked to discuss romance. The male comedian Joe Wilkinson made a joke about standing at the end of a woman’s bed while she’s sleeping. Bea interjected after the audience’s laughter, saying:

I mean, you joke, but that is essentially the Milk Tray adverts, which they brought back. It’s like a man, in a cloak, with a hat on, creeps up in the middle of the night, up your drainpipe, gets in through the window when you’re in the bathroom on your own, brushing your teeth or something. Then he goes over to your bed, leaves a box of chocolates and do you call the police? No, you don’t ‘cause [in an exaggerated voice and waving her hands] women love sweets, ahhh!

Bea’s tone a voice made it clear that this type of advertising should not be accepted as normal, and it should be derided. The audience showed support for Bea’s point of view by laughing and applauding. Bea turned around a joke about men preying on women and made her own joke critiquing these instances in British media.<sup>194</sup> Bea subtly refused to normalize the trope of women as victims and instead worked to change the ways comedy

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

can be used. Bea's comedy style shifted away from the post-alternative mode. Rather than cause offense for the sake of humor, Bea used comedy as a way to critique the status quo, and point out how normalized situations in media should be examined.

The episode also defied the show's own previous patterns of gendered comedy. Most notably, women were no longer going ignored. Bea controlled a lot of the conversation and the female panelists Jayde Adams and Paisley Thomas seemed more comfortable and didn't need to hear a question from Jimmy Carr before speaking. The conversation wasn't dominated by the male panelists. In fact, Bea was able to regulate some of the masculine rhetoric. For example, the male panelist Jamie Laing discussed a story that included an anecdote about male foreskin and Bea mimed throwing up, rejecting the ploy of penis jokes. The episode wasn't characterized by lad humor or post-alternative comedy devices. The episode showed that British comedy styles were changing in the face of these casting shifts. Great Britain is becoming more accepting of feminist voices in comedy. Female comedians like Bea successfully navigated the post-alternative nature of panel shows before revealing a more feminist perspective in their comedy. Bea is now able to be more open with her feminist views. This emulates the way Tina Fey's self-deprecating comedy began to shift towards an openly feminist perspective.<sup>195</sup>

One instance in the episode highlighted the way that *8 Out of 10 Cats* moved away from normalizing the masculinization of comedy. In chapter three I pointed out an instance in series 18 where Jimmy Carr said that Jon Richardson is on the "girl's team" because he was on a panel with comedienne Sara Pascoe and female TV presenter Carol

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<sup>195</sup> Martha Lauzen, "The Funny Business of Being Tina Fey: Constructing a (feminist) comedy icon," *Feminist Media Studies* 14, no. 1 (2014): 106-117.

Vorderman. In response, Pascoe directly asked the audience why pointing this out was funny, questioning Carr's point.<sup>196</sup> In the first episode of series 20, Rob Beckett had the comedienne Jayde Adams and female TV personality Paisley Thomas on his team. Halfway through the show, Beckett looked to his other panelists and seemed as if he was going to make a similar point. But rather than point out the gender of his team members, he instead pointed out, "This is the working class team, innit?" Beckett found a point of solidarity with his teammates to focus on (in this case, their cockney accents, which betray a working-class upbringing) rather than distancing himself from his teammates on the basis of gender.<sup>197</sup>

Channel 4's "360 Diversity Charter" and the changes in series 20 of *8 Out of 10 Cats* show how the network adequately worked to rectify the gender imbalance on panel shows. Channel 4 did enact a quota, but that wasn't the sole component of their solution. Channel 4 also put forth long-term initiatives to normalize diversity and inclusivity across their television programs. *8 Out of 10 Cats* cast a female comedian as a team captain, giving a woman the power to direct the comedy and rhetoric on the show. Danny Cohen's quota for the BBC was too simplistic and an inadequate quick-fix to a problem that was more complex. The gender imbalance on panel shows was a product of post-feminist sensibilities and the masculine-centered lad culture and post-alternative comedy. Channel 4's charter shows that the network rejected the notion that the work of feminism was complete, because they recognized that hiring practices needed to be guided in order to achieve more inclusion. By placing Aisling Bea as one of the team captains on *8 Out of 10 Cats*, the network hired a talented comedienne who showed that comedy doesn't

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<sup>196</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 18.8.

<sup>197</sup> *8 Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 20.1.

have to fit within the post-alternative style to make an audience laugh, as well as showing that panel shows and British comedy are not exclusively masculine spaces.

### **After Uncovering *The Unbelievable Truth*, How Does This Research Move Forward?**

This thesis focused on exposing the contexts that create the gender imbalance on panel shows in order to demonstrate how casting quotas are insufficient solutions to the problem. Channel 4 showed how quotas can work as long as they are paired with another plan to increase or initiative to increase gender diversity. These initiatives were announced in 2015, and the casting change on *8 Out of 10 Cats* in late 2016 show how Channel 4 committed to their charter. Future research could show other long-term effects within the network's television programs. This research was constrained by the time frames in which these changes were announced. As new talent and crews enter the television industry, audiences could begin to see long-term changes to the gender distribution on panel shows. This research could and should be revisited in order to see if there are any long-term changes due to Cohen's quota or Channel 4's charter.

This thesis was also limited by constraints in cross-cultural media research. As I previously mentioned, I could not include an analysis of series 17 because it was taken off of YouTube and Channel 4 doesn't offer free streaming of the series in the United States. The analysis in Chapter Three relied on fellow fans of the show that ignored copyright laws and uploaded the episodes online. The ability to watch *8 Out of 10 Cats* was not the only cross-cultural inhibitor, as the language used in the show also limited the research. The UK and the US both speak English, but the slang terms and more conversational phrases are very different. The show also discusses current events relative to British audiences, so television shows only available in the UK like *Strictly Come*

*Dancing* and *The Great British Bake Off* are discussed with no context behind them, and British politics are frequently a subject of conversation. Some knowledge of British culture was required in order to understand the jokes or humor in each episode.

The fact that I personally am a fan of *8 Out of 10 Cats* both helped and limited my research. I previously watched these episodes of *8 Out of 10 Cats* for my own personal enjoyment before completing the textual analysis. Doing this helped me get over some of the hurdles in understanding the British political and cultural events and elements that were brought up by the panelists. I had already learned that slang terms like ‘steaming’ means drunk or ‘chuffed’ means pleased. I had already learned by watching panel shows which politicians are part of the Tory party (which is the political party in power as of 2017 in the UK), Labour party, or UKIP. I understood the backgrounds of the panelists. I already knew contextual facts, such as Jon Richardson’s stand-up often referring to his OCD or Jimmy Carr having a tax scandal the panelists sometimes alluded to. The knowledge helped immensely, but I’m sure there are still some jokes or phrases that went over my head. My enjoyment of panel shows may have also limited some of my analysis. I had to consider the implications of jokes that I previously had not considered. Post-alternative comedy and lad humor were normalized within these shows, and the audience at home took a lot of cues from the audience in the studio regarding when to laugh. I had to instruct myself to look beyond a lot of the audience’s reactions to critique the dialogue. I do still enjoy the show after my analysis, but I’ve learned to be more critical about the normalized aspects and tropes in comedy.

There are a few ways my thesis could be used in future research. First, I think it would be interesting to do the same type of study in five or ten years to see if there are

lasting effects from the discussions and decisions made regarding the gender imbalance on panel shows. I think the changes in series 20 of *8 Out of 10 Cats* suggest that a new comedy style is becoming mainstream in the UK. The time of post-alternative comedy may be over. Now, more comediennes like Sara Pascoe and Aisling Bea are emerging with stand-up jokes and comedy series from a feminist perspective. Seeing more of these openly feminist comediennes on the screen makes me, as a fan, more excited for the future of this British TV genre. It is entirely possible that series 20 of *8 Out of 10 Cats* will mark a clear turn in British comedy away from masculinized lad humor. It needs to be considered in a larger context and larger sample of British comedy, and there may not be a cohesive shift right away. The effects may be more apparent five or more years down the line.

This research may also be useful outside of the context of panel shows. The major argument this thesis makes is that casting and talent booking quotas do not work on their own. Quotas fail to fully address the systemic societal issues that inhibit diverse and inclusive entertainment. This thesis presents two distinct ways networks worked to correct how their programs poorly represented British society and its diverse talent spectrum. Panel shows are not the first and only genre that has this kind of issue. This thesis focused solely on the lack of women in British panel shows, but the same process for this research can be used to influence the studies about casting quotas in other genres, cultures, and media. The research could be used to examine how producers attempt to include more underrepresented groups. For example, in 2014 ITV announced they would

be enacting a quota for black and Asian actors.<sup>198</sup> Another project could analyze the cause of this quota and whether or not change was inherent in ITV programs after it was announced. Alternatively, Hollywood doesn't tend to announce their casting quotas like the UK does, but actors tend to discuss their frustrations with the limiting, unspoken quotas.<sup>199</sup> More research could expose how unspoken quotas in Hollywood inhibit inclusion and reinforce racial or gender inequalities. Channel 4's 2015 "360 Diversity Charter" even includes initiatives to include more people of color, LGBT+ talent, and individuals with disabilities.<sup>200</sup> This same kind of project could look instead at the representation of racial minorities, LGBT+ media personalities and comedians, or disabled talent. More research should focus on the societal issues and assumptions that lead to underrepresentation across various media and programs. Exposing the root of these problems shows the ineffectiveness of casting quotas, and suggests alternative solutions to these problems.

This same type of study could also be applied in the context of class in Great Britain. Most panel shows, including *8 Out of 10 Cats* include some discussion of class differences. The UK still has a rather stratified class system. One 2013 survey sponsored by the BBC found an alternative class model that includes seven social classes: the elite, established middle class, technical middle class, new affluent workers, traditional working class, emergent service workers, and precariat (those with poor economic

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<sup>198</sup> Mark Duell, "ITV 'set to bring in quotas for more black and Asian actors' after channel's drama director brands all-white casts 'frankly dull,'" *Daily Mail*, July 13, 2014.

<sup>199</sup> Jethro Nededog, "'Parks and Recreation' star Aziz Ansari claims this is the exact formula TV shows use to cast minorities in order to reach a racial quota," *Business Insider*, October 26, 2015.

<sup>200</sup> "360 Diversity Charter."



capital).<sup>201</sup> Panel shows don't necessarily discuss all of these social classes, but often allude to tension and differences between the 'posh' elite and the working class. Rob Beckett's remark in the first episode of series 20 united his team based on their more working class backgrounds. This was juxtaposed particularly in contrast with the panelist Jamie Lang on the opposing team, who is known for his 'posh' or high-class upbringing.<sup>202</sup> It would be interesting then to consider how these different class distinctions affect the humor on panel shows and, in turn, how discussions of class affect the discourses about gender on the programs.

This thesis doesn't intend to vilify panel shows, British comedy, prominent British comedians, or the producers, like Danny Cohen, that enact quotas. Rather, I point out that it is important to consider the issues that cause or reinforce inequalities in media. Lad culture and post-alternative comedy created a masculinized sensibility in panel shows. That sensibility created and reinforced the exclusion of women from the panels—both in numbers and in the dialogue. Post-feminist assumptions excused this kind of sentiment and comedy because audiences presumed gender inequality was a product of the past. Casting quotas at least acknowledge there is a gender imbalance, but these “solutions” don't fully approach or consider the sources of the problem. All-male panel shows were simply accepted as a normal phenomenon. These panels were not considered ‘male’ panel shows, they were considered typical. The gender imbalance on panel shows cannot entirely be solved until all-female panels or lineups are considered normal without the caveat of being panel shows for women. Including more women as hosts or team

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<sup>201</sup> Mike Savage, Fiona Devine, Niall Cunningham, Mark Taylor, Yaojun Li, Johs. Hjellbrekke, Brigitte Le Roux, Sam Friedman, Andrew Miles, “A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey Experiment,” *Sociology* 47:2 (2013): 219-250.

<sup>202</sup> 8 *Out of 10 Cats*, Episode 20.1.

captains works towards this goal; in the case of panel shows, these efforts have begun to bring about change.

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