

## WOMAN'S HOUR Interview with Wyn Knowles and Sue MacGregor



Wyn Knowles



Sue MacGregor

**Born in October 1946, *Women's Hour* is the BBC's longest running daily programme. It reached a peak of popularity in the 60s with audiences of up to 3 million, and though the ratings fell sharply when it moved from Radio 2 in 1973 and again with the launch of daytime TV, it remains one of Radio 4's most popular programmes, with up to a million listeners. Frankie Rickford spoke to the editor Wyn Knowles and presenter Sue MacGregor.**

*You've edited *Woman's Hour* for 20 years during a period of dramatic change for women. How has the programme changed?*

**Wyn Knowles** I've been associated with the programme for about twenty years, first as a producer and then for about twelve years as editor. You don't notice the changes as they

happen because the programme evolves gradually without dramatic shifts in style, but when you listen to what we were doing a few years back you realise how much it is changing. What has been very exciting is that we have always had enormous response from the women in our audience, and certainly reactions have changed. At one time there would have been a great shock-horror response to anything about sex, like abortion, which was never talked about in the 50s. *Woman's Hour* was a pioneering programme in that we introduced these subjects before most of the press. Though there still was a lot of post from people who were shocked, on the whole they took it because it was not done for sensation but to be useful and helpful. So almost every subject has been covered in one way or another though you might treat many of these differently today. I think we were more cautious in the

past — we had a storm warning in case children might be listening and could get upset — or their mothers might get upset to have them with them.

**Sue MacGregor** That abortion will be coming up after half past two?

Wyn That's right. 'You may not want to tune and listen with your young children so if you leave us for 5 minutes . . .'

Sue So the kids rush out and listen next door.

*Has *Woman's Hour* always dealt with controversy or was there a time when you concentrated on knitting and cookery?*

Wyn It was more domestic during the first five years when it was aimed at women

returning from the war who perhaps hadn't kept house before, but it soon took off because different editors came in who realised that women didn't want to just hear about keeping house. They are interested in everything — we covered CND during its early marches.

Sue The first presenter of *Woman's Hour*, in 1948, was a man.

Wyn A lot of men believe women want to hear men's voices because they are more sexy I suppose — disc jockeys for example.

*You've never actually entirely avoided covering domestic issues?*

Wyn Oh no. If we didn't who would? There are a lot of people who want it very much. But it's difficult to know how to treat things like cookery — whether to be advanced or very simple.

Sue Cooking is terribly popular, isn't it?

Wyn Yes, and child care too.

*How much air time do you devote to the problems facing women at home with young children?*

Sue I feel at the moment we don't have quite enough for young mums. The programme depends on the interests of the producers themselves. Some are passionately interested in babies — we had one about two years ago but she's left us now. At that time we did a lot of items on children, and then people would say, 'Oh Lord, nappies again!'

Wyn You often get that reaction from those in the audience who are older and don't want to know, but on the other hand you get all the young mums who love it.

Sue But some young mums don't want to hear about babies either you know. They want to get away from the wet nappy syndrome for a while.

Wyn We try to produce a balance every day with some practical items, some escapist items and some just for interest's sake. I suppose about a third of the programme is directed specifically at women, whether it's the child care side or the feminist side and the rest would probably interest everybody, we hope, because a lot of the audience now are unemployed men.

*Have you any idea what proportion of your audience is male? And in view of the arguments quite commonly made for abolishing women's newspaper pages, for example, what are your reasons for producing a programme aimed at women once you have abandoned those stereotyped ideas of women's interests?*

Wyn I think there is plenty of reason for a woman's programme at the moment because men do still dominate in deciding what goes on the air as heads of programmes and so forth. So there is still plenty of room to have someone pushing women's interests. But we have never been terribly self-conscious about everything having a women's angle. We always felt we were a general magazine programme with a bias towards women. And the fact that women are on the whole running the programme does give it a different feel even though it is difficult to pinpoint this difference exactly.

Sue It's less aggressive and more caring — all those clichés about women do happen, I think like most clichés, to be true. I don't think any other programme would have done our children in care feature in quite the same way. It wasn't tough, yet it was concerned — I suppose that defines it.

Wyn Some men say the programme is soft but I think you can be penetrating without being aggressive. I don't think we're soft just because we have fewer confrontations and ding-dong battles.

*Do you go out of your way to find women to interview even on quite general subjects?*

Wyn If a man does something it is always irritating when people ask if we would like to talk to his wife because we want the most interesting people, whether man or woman. But in a discussion we would normally try and get both a man and a woman rather than two men — sometimes we might have two women. We are conscious that we are a women's programme and should be giving women a chance to come forward to express themselves as much as possible, but there are days when we have had only men on the programme and some listeners don't like that.

*Have you noticed a change in your audience because of unemployment and are you responding to it?*

Wyn I don't think the audience research has come up with any very recent figures, but I notice that we now get many more letters

from men. If we give a recipe using half a pint of double cream for example people will write saying, 'my husband and I are both unemployed and we can't afford this so please don't suggest using luxury foods'. On the other hand we get letters saying 'don't be ridiculous, I am also unemployed but once a week we like to have a treat'.

*How many letters do you get a day?*

Wyn I should think 30 or 40.

*Do you think the programme appeals more to women of one class than another?*

Wyn Yes, probably. We are accused of being middle class. We do have more working class listeners but don't penetrate as deeply as we could. I mean, any mass audience programme will have more working class listeners but we probably have a higher proportion of the middle class. When people go on about this you get a lot of letters saying, 'I'm working class and I enjoy your programme — why are you fussing so about class?' You can become very self-conscious about being middle class, trying to please everybody, but it's not easy because a lot of working class people are becoming middle class anyway, and a lot of the good works that are going on — experiments and so forth — do tend to involve middle class people. On the whole one doesn't hear from the audience about class, it's usually our critics who tend to worry about it. We probably attract more working class people than the average Radio 4 programme because we are called *Woman's Hour*. Until 1973 we were on Radio 2 which got a different audience. We lost some listeners when we moved to Radio 4, but I think people listen to the programme because they prefer speech to music rather than because they're a member of one class or another.

*You are constantly pushing back the boundaries of what is considered acceptable radio, aren't you? For example you broadcast an interview with the wife of a transvestite man, in which you asked what he wore to bed. She said he wore baby doll pyjamas and when you asked if this turned her off she replied that she was turned on by it.*

Sue This is part of a three weekly series in which we're looking at some of the most intractable problems and what sort of aid is available. We did one programme about drug addicts and we're doing one on child molesters and one on incest. We've got another programme coming up about transsexuals. .

Dear Woman's Hour,  
I listened with interest to your  
feature on transvestism. Pretending  
"taboo" subjects in this way is,

Dear Woman's Hour,  
I am a married male transvestite in my  
forties. I lived in fear until I was  
in my thirties when I discovered I was  
a heterosexual transvestite. I telephoned a  
local C.H.E. group and for the first time  
I told another living person my secret. I was  
readily helped to contact a "Friends" group,  
the Beaumont Society, which I didn't know  
existed. I discovered my

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women's liberation. But we are coping mainly with women who have chosen to stay at home.

**Sue** But in a funny sort of way we do reflect the feeling perhaps among the greater number of women in Britain. When the movement first started some of us on the programme were very excited about it and did pieces about it but it was hard because they never wanted to speak to you in groups smaller than 12 and on radio you can't speak to 12 people at once. Eventually people like Juliet Mitchell and Germaine Greer did come forward.

**Wyn** We did identify the areas where women's liberation movement was doing interesting things, like talking about coping in supermarkets, and childcare, which nobody realised they were doing. The rest of the media concentrated on the bra burning image and didn't look at the useful things.

*Do you mean your programme to change people's lives or to entertain them?*

**Wyn** Not the usual way of man to woman but woman to man. We've done almost everything at one time or another over time but we haven't done them lately so we're having a little spate.

*What about other people in the BBC? Doesn't anyone dear their throat and worry before that kind of thing goes out?*

**Wyn** We don't get much interference. We don't ask anybody about anything nowadays except in certain political matters. I mean with the troubles in Northern Ireland, or whatever, naturally, if there's a BBC policy and they've got people out there one has to make them aware of what you're doing, so that kind of thing one might show them if they particularly ask us to.

**Sue** We've done quite a lot on the Greenham Common ladies

**Wyn** It's like everything. You are meant to give balance, and both points of view — not to be one-sided. So when someone complained to the Chairman of the BBC about our coverage of Greenham Common I was able to point out that we had only carried three items plus three or four letter sessions following these. One item was an initial visit to the camp which was followed up a month later by a second visit, and the third item was a very critical assessment from someone

who had just come back from Russia. On the whole though the letters we've received have been overwhelmingly in support of the women at Greenham Common. Indeed, whatever you think about their politics it's a very important thing that women are doing something for themselves and getting together in that way. So in a woman's programme you'd expect to have it covered.

*I was thinking less of political with a big 'P' questions than sexual questions.*

**Wyn** There used to be // *You Think You've Got Problems* which ran into trouble at one stage because the then controller didn't like the sort of items covered. I've known people who dislike the ideas of doing a phone-in on contraception but we did it and nobody moaned. But if it was felt to be tasteless you might be asked about it and have trouble afterwards.

*Would you acknowledge that the women's liberation movement has changed your programme?*

**Wyn** It's difficult. I don't think so directly because it was always fighting for the older established Fawcett Society and so forth and we've always carried items about these organisations. The tone may have changed because the climate everywhere has changed and that may be indirectly because of

**Wyn** A bit of both. On our anniversary celebrations we've asked people what they remember about *Woman's Hour*, and an overwhelming number have told us what we have actually got them to do, from dyeing their hair blond to starting a pressure group, to taking up a job or coping with a mastectomy. In the 1950s we discovered agoraphobia through listeners' letters and were instrumental in setting up the Open Door club for agoraphobics, and U&I club for cystitis sufferers and the Disablement Incomes Group.

*Would you describe yourselves as feminists, and how have your own ideas changed?*

**Wyn** Feminist is a difficult word because you immediately have a certain image. I've always been an equal rights woman but I intensely dislike feminism's extremes — the anti-male feeling, not wanting men at your meetings — and I don't like the idea that you read in some of the *Spare Ribs* and things that it is better to be a lesbian than not. But I'm all for the basic rights for women and I believe a lot of attitudes need changing.

**Sue** I would say I am a feminist, though I do not identify with a lot of what seems to me to be happening in the women's movement today. But I remember the early marches and the great sense of excitement we all shared then.