

# WHAT WOMEN WANT ON TELEVISION: DOREEN STEPHENS AND BBC TELEVISION PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN, 1953–64

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**Doreen Stephens (1912–2001), editor of television programmes for women at the BBC between 1953 and 1964, is now almost entirely absent from histories of the BBC and, more generally, histories of early television.** This article uses archive research, which brings together programme reconstruction and institutional and biographical research, to look at Stephens' role in leading the expansion of women's programmes, and to examine available traces of the difficult professional negotiations encountered in her attempts to broaden the range and quality of programmes that addressed women. Further, the article highlights the crucial importance of feminist archiving policies in ensuring both the preservation of women's programmes and developing critical histories of television for women.

**KEYWORDS:** archives, BBC, feminist, Stephens, television, women

# WHAT WOMEN WANT ON TELEVISION: DOREEN STEPHENS AND BBC TELEVISION PROGRAMMES FOR WOMEN, 1953–64

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Doreen Stephens (1912–2001) was the first editor of BBC television women's programmes at a time when the provision of television programmes for women had become a particular priority.<sup>1</sup> She built up a specialist women's programmes unit, creating and producing a highly diverse and ambitious weekly roster of television for women. Stephens and her team made television programmes which both acknowledged and addressed the complex post-war nexus of changing public and private roles and responsibilities which contemporary women faced, all the while defining and developing ideas around what television for women could and should be.

Gerry Holloway's *Women and Work in Britain Since 1840* identifies significant social and economic discourses around women's lives in the 1950s and early 1960s which Stephens' programmes for women sought to articulate:

The period was characterised by the centrality of the family, the notion of the companionate marriage and the reinforcement of the notion of the male breadwinner. However, it was also punctuated by the debate around equal pay as well as the debate around married working women. Changes in the education system meant more girls were progressing to colleges and universities and consequently were looking for more fulfilling jobs than their mothers had been engaged in. (Holloway, 2005, 194)

In her introduction to her study of 1950s British cinema's engagement with women of the period, *Femininity in the Frame: Women and 1950s British Popular Cinema*, Melanie Bell further nuances our understanding of the '1950s' woman for whom Stephens strove to create relevant and useful women's television:

The social and economic history of women in the 1950s is more complex and contradictory than the mythological image permits as it was shaped by, and fed into, wider concerns about postwar reconstruction and the emergence of a new social order. Whilst the popular consciousness may be dominated by the figure of the housewife, women's experiences in the public realm were throughout the decade varied and diverse; shaped by age and generation, the availability of childcare, support given or withdrawn from husbands and family, and the type of work available to them. (2010, 2)

Further 'transition, instability and negotiation were features of gender roles in this decade, with women and the wider society poised between traditional modes of thinking and the emergent new social order' (Bell, 2010: 10).

Stephens is now almost entirely absent from histories of the BBC and, more generally, histories of early television. Her achievements in her time at the BBC – most noticeably her importance in pioneering and managing a new strand of BBC programming, and

her position as one of a very few prominent female television executives in this early period of the post-war television service – are almost entirely undocumented.<sup>2</sup>

The main purpose of this article is to reinstate Stephens' professional story, and, in particular, her period as editor of BBC television programmes for women, in both scholarly and popular histories of the early BBC and of early television. The virtual absence of Stephens from historical records means that, until this point, any concentrated analysis of the early history of the development of television programmes for women is to all intents and purposes non-existent. As Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley write:

In order to make convincing arguments about contemporary women's programming television scholars need to be able see where the address, format, representations, and concerns of 'the new' originate and how they have developed. We need, in other words, to pay attention to 'the old' of television, as well as to 'the new.' (2008, 152)

The need to pay attention to 'the old' as well as 'the new' of television is critical in the establishment of any truly rigorous scholarly analysis of the development of contemporary television programmes for women. As this article reveals, many contemporary television formats for women can be traced back to programmes created and established by Stephens and her department in the mid and late 1950s. Furthermore, exploration of both BBC institutional production files, and Stephens' own writing about her work, demonstrate an engagement with discourses surrounding television for women customarily considered to have emerged as late as the 1980s and 1990s, rather than, as is suggested in this article, in the very earliest period of television's post-war re-emergence.

That is, as this article will demonstrate, programmes which, for example, invite audience participation, whether by making written or 'phone contact or attending a broadcast as part of a studio panel or audience are not new. Equally, programmes which give viewers a chance to talk about the daily challenges they face as wives, mothers and citizens, and then receive expert advice, are not new developments brought about by the greater societal and broadcast freedoms of the post-broadcast television innovations of the 1990s and beyond. Such programme formats and approaches already existed, firmly integrated into the strand of women's programmes being produced by the women's unit in the early 1950s.

### **Doreen Stephens Joins the BBC**

I've done my stint in Trafalgar Square flanked by the lions at the base of Nelson's Column adding my voice to women's demands for fair and equal treatment not privilege both inside and outside the home. I can see no anomaly in my position as Editor of women's programmes in television. (Stephens, 1954a)

Stephens joined the Television Talks and Features Department in October 1953 in response to an *Evening Standard* advertisement which sought an editor for women's programmes. Her background was, broadly, in politics and social campaigning and journalism, particularly on women's issues. Her 2001 *Guardian* obituary provides a brief outline of her professional and personal interests and activities prior to her appointment to the BBC:

Stephens married at nineteen and had two children, divorcing five years later. She worked as a medical assistant in the Red Cross during the Second World War, meeting her second husband while helping in an underground air raid shelter. During the late 1940s and early 1950s she studied and wrote about social issues and took an active part in politics, all with a particular focus on women's lives and opportunities. Whilst taking a diploma in Social Studies at the University of London she wrote a prize winning thesis on the National Health Service. In 1945 she stood for election in Hackney as a Liberal candidate. In the same year she became involved with both the Married Women's Association, and the Equal-Pay-For-Equal Work Organisation. In 1950 she became president of the Women's Liberal Federation. She continued throughout the 1950s to be actively involved in the promotion and promulgation of women's rights. (*The Guardian*, 2001)

It is this personal and professional background that was to inform the kind of television that Stephens set out to produce in her role as Editor of Women's Programmes. Joy Leman points out: 'Doreen Stephens was to have a major influence on the direction of women's television. Her social and political interests therefore offer a useful insight into the programme policies which she pursued' (1987, 83). It is very much worthy of note that Stephens' explicitly 'feminist' outlook differs from that of the handful of other women executives then working in BBC television. Her colleague Grace Wyndham Goldie, the extremely powerful and highly successful Assistant Head, and latterly Head, of Television Talks and Features during the 1950s and 1960s, for example, had no particular interest in topics of special interest to women, and notoriously had little time or encouragement for other women colleagues (see Irwin, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Stephens, in contrast, was very interested indeed in women's lives and experiences, as evidenced by the scope and content of the programmes that she produced, and the archived production files reflect her active encouragement of the women producers who worked within her department.

Stephens' considered agenda for the way in which she intended to tackle her new role as Editor of Women's Programmes and her reflections on what she had achieved thus far are described in detail in a series of three consecutive articles she wrote for *The Star* on 13-15 December 1954. She had at this point been in post just

over a year. The first article, entitled 'What Women Want on Television' (Stephens, 1954a), considered what she had set out to achieve in the job. The second, 'My Search for New TV Stars' (Stephens, 1954b) looked at the practical considerations of putting women's television programmes together, providing detailed examples of the challenges that producers of live television magazine programmes for women had to consider. The third, 'Wives Get a Look-in on Evening TV' (Stephens, 1954c), examined in greater detail the diet of programmes then currently on air and Stephens' plans for new programmes.

This sequence of articles provides an extremely valuable, first hand account of Stephens' blueprint for the provision of television for women, one interestingly clearly congruent with the BBC's public service remit to inform, educate and entertain viewers. Stephens sought, in her programming strategy, to consider the practical domestic responsibilities that sat at the centre of most women's lives, while at the same time to provide programmes which gave women the chance to engage with the arts and current affairs and discover possible new hobbies or ideas for leisure activities.

It is in the first article that Stephens puts her case for the importance of providing television specifically for the needs and interests of the women who were watching at home. She points out that, factually, the women who were predominantly involved with managing home and family life made for 'the largest occupational group in the country', continuing, 'It is fair enough that the BBC Television Service should appoint someone to take care of their interests' (1954a, 7). She is, however, conscious of the needs of working women. In her second piece she asks, 'But what of the needs of the women who go out to work? Is there [sic] to be no evening programmes for them?' (1954b, 7). She cites the experimental two half hours that her department were to receive in January and February 1955 as a possible solution.

These articles evidence a nuanced understanding of the complexity of women's lives and roles in the early and middle 1950s. Women's television, for Stephens, had to cater for women in a wide range of life situations. Importantly, she shows particular sensitivity to the isolation that women could feel at home when they might previously have had access to education and jobs. In her first article she writes:

In this day and age when boys and girls receive similar education and grow up to share and enjoy the sense of independence which a job and career can give it's not surprising that many women experience a great sense of loneliness and isolation during marriage. (1954a, 7)

To counter such potential feelings of loneliness, television for women could serve in Stephens' eyes as a kind of 'virtual' community in which women have the opportunity to join with other women and share something of their lives and

experiences. The article concludes 'Television has an exciting and useful contribution to make in home and family life [...] afternoon programmes are "club programmes" which the regular members delight to share with us' (1954a, 7).

For Stephens, television had the potential to augment and enrich women's lives. Of course, that said, it is a very 'BBC' kind of television community imagined, for as she asserts in this first article, 'There is no passive, lazy viewing of these programmes' (1954a, 7). Television for women clearly still had to justify itself as worthy and self improving: a constructive pursuit rather than an opportunity to just slump back in an armchair and relax. In *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Lynn Spigel supplies a useful commentary on this notion of encouraging women's 'active' television consumption in this period: 'Representations of television continually addressed women as housewives and presented them with a notion of spectatorship that was inextricably linked with their useful labour at home' (1992, 75).

So what were these programmes like? What were the new programmes and formats that Stephens brought in, and what topics did they cover? The next section of this article will focus more closely on the range of programmes that were produced under Stephens' editorship, with a particular concentration on programmes that expanded and developed provision of women's programming beyond the areas that it had explored up until the early 1950s before Stephens came to the BBC.

### **Programmes for Women**

*About the Home* (1951–8) and *Leisure and Pleasure* (1951–5) were, at the time of Stephens' appointment, the two established programme formats for women. They were the latest articulations of formats which were established at the return of television in 1946 and both broadcast in an afternoon slot.<sup>4</sup> *About the Home* was an updated reworking of the original 1948 *For the Housewife*, which provided cookery tips, demonstrations and practical home repair and maintenance advice. As the programme had emerged in the very early years of post-war austerity, its focus was very much on how women could manage and make do amidst the after-effects of war – continuing rationing and scarcity. *About the Home* still concerned itself with the domestic, but items now reflected the improvement of living conditions and the availability of more material and consumer goods in the increasingly affluent 1950s.

*Leisure and Pleasure* too, extended and developed the live magazine formula of the very first weekly programme for women, the 1947 *Designed for Women*, which had combined entertaining and instructive items on hobbies and pastimes, books and the arts.

In 'What Women Want on Television', Stephens describes the then current provision of *About the Home*:

New electrical appliances and gas appliances are demonstrated; upholstery, dressmaking, cooking, and how to make and mend all manner of things are featured to help women in the home to keep in touch with all the latest ideas and developments. (1954a, 7)

The description covers well the programme's continued mix of very traditional items alongside the programme's adjustment to the new developments in domestic technology and lifestyle which took place throughout the 1950s.

*Leisure and Pleasure* under Stephens continued and built on the diverse offering that the programme had provided since its inception in 1951. A look at contemporary *Radio Times* listings shows that invited guests in 1953, for example, included Madge Garland, professor of fashion at the Royal College of Art, fashion designer Norman Hartnell, former suffragette Mary Richardson, John Newsom, county education officer for Hertfordshire, actor John Laurie and Mrs Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the president of the United Nations General Assembly.

The range of items covered topics not generally associated with women's programmes of the early 1950s. April 1954, for example, saw an item on the Australian tour of the Stratford upon Avon Shakespearean Company and a preview of their new season. This month also saw an edition focused on Ceylon, hosted by the people of Ceylon, with the Association of Ceylon Women in Britain demonstrating dancing, singing and their national costume. Lady Corea, the wife of the High Commissioner for Ceylon was interviewed.

As Stephens herself writes, in a short *Radio Times* article on 26 September about her plans for programmes, *Leisure and Pleasure* would continue to offer 'as lively an assortment of items featuring music book reviews current affairs and personalities as can be drawn together in the available time' (Stephens 1954d).

Throughout the mid and later 1950s and into the early 1960s Stephens continued to build up and develop the roster of programmes for women in a strand eventually straddling the five weekday afternoons and known as 'Mainly for Women' – creating for her and her department a remit which continued to cover women's practical needs and interests, while expanding ever further into new areas. In the archived production files there is a substantial quantity of documentation charting Stephens' plans and ideas for possible new themes and topics and suggestions for new programmes and programme formats.

Thus, new programmes produced considered a wide range of different subjects. *Radio Times* listings of the period provide a useful guide to some of the new programmes on offer. *Look and Choose* (1955–7) was a consumer guide programme which concentrated on the merits of various types of a particular product, with invited experts, viewers and viewers' questions. *Come and Join Us* (1958–60) was a discussion programme in which invited national women's

groups discussed issues of civic importance such as rural transport or care for the elderly. *Years of Confusion* (1959), another discussion strand, tackled issues around adolescence. *Story on Your Doorstep* (1958–9) was a local history strand, while *Our Miss Pemberton* (1957–8) was a serial drama about life in a small country town. *Your Turn Now* (1958–60) was an audience participation talent contest, which invited housewives from around the country to come into the studio and perform.

*Signs of the Zodiac* (1955) delivered light-hearted entertainment, dealing with star signs and associated personality traits, while *I've Just Been Reading* (1956–8) provided ideas about new books and introductions to new authors. *Keep Fit* (1957–61) was also on the agenda, with instructor Irene Fowler being brought in to develop what became a very popular exercise session, offering women the chance to exercise alongside Fowler. There was even a segment on the 'male viewpoint' – *Man's Eye View* (1956) – which comprised a panel of three or four men with a woman chairman, and a woman guest who had a special knowledge of the subject in question.

The discovery of such formats exemplifies Moseley and Wheatley's argument that to make a case about 'new' television we need to look at 'old' television. Thus in Stephens' development of new programmes for 'Mainly for Women' we see early versions of formats such as keep fit, customarily traced to 1980s breakfast television, or audience discussion and participation formats which are often considered to begin with the talk shows of the 1990s.

Additionally, such evidence accords with Su Holmes' work on the traceable roots of current television forms in 1950s television. In *Entertaining Television: The BBC and Popular Television Culture in the 1950s*, Holmes considers, for example, *Is This Your Problem?* (1955–7), which 'showed members of the public appearing on television to present a problem to an expert panel' (2008, 126). Holmes makes connections between the latter and the contemporary talk show: 'It is also true that 1950s television in both the UK and the US has been largely ignored in explorations of televisual precursors to the talk show' (2008, 149).

Two other new programme slots were particularly interesting as they fine-tuned the magazine format for women. *Your Own Time* (1955–8) was for younger women, and strove to provide a mix of items suited to the concerns and interests of this age group, assumed by its makers to be recently married and at home with young children. It was 'a lighter programme for young married women. In their busy life this programme caters for things they have time for only in their own time – fashion, beauty, ideas on interior design, interesting exhibitions, personalities and light music.'

*Twice Twenty* (1955–8) was aimed at women 'forty and above'. It was 'a general interest programme – fashion, beauty, interests that can be taken up outside the home, silver wedding anniversary, "Consulting Room" series which deals with subjects such as sleeping well, all angled to the point of view of the older woman'.<sup>5</sup>

The two formats are, from our contemporary perspective, extremely valuable for the insights that they offer us into then contemporary public attitudes toward women. They provide a fascinating glimpse of a set of hegemonic assumptions about where, in this historical period, women would be likely to be at particular stages in their lives. From the twenty-first century such divisions feel very distant indeed, with motherhood now taking place on average much later, and the age of 40 not being the same kind of chronological benchmark that it was in the 1950s. Yet resituated within their historical context the programmes set out a very clear agenda: to cater for the issues and concerns that would have been thought to have had genuine resonance for their contemporary audience, albeit within a set of very conservative assumptions.

Another new format, *Family Affairs* (1955–61) seems particularly close to the kind of issues which had occupied Stephens throughout her professional life. Here, clearly encapsulated, is Stephens' genuine practical interest in the conditions of women's lives and in the provision of information and advice to better deal with the issues they faced. In this respect, she is using the medium of the television programme for women to provide a 'public' forum for the discussion of issues related directly to women's lives and well-being.

The programme tackled what Stephens called the 'personnel management' side of family life. In 'Wives Get a Look-in on Evening TV' she talks in detail about what she wanted the series to achieve. The programme would in consecutive weeks cover pregnancy and birth, looking after toddlers and bringing up primary age schoolchildren. The final week of the segment would provide an open forum for viewers to debate more general questions about motherhood and family life. All the sections would include invited experts who would provide advice and answer viewers' questions.<sup>6</sup>

*Family Affairs* would above all be supportive, and provide the kind of help that Stephens felt had not been available in the pre-war period when she and her contemporaries were having their own children. From the article 'Wives Get a Look-in on Evening TV': 'Most of us went into labour blissfully ignorant of all that would happen. We were tense with fear and pain and thinking only of the old wives' tales with which our friends and neighbours had filled us' (Stephens, 1954c).

Importantly, the series would seek to tackle the fear and lack of information surrounding childbirth. It would highlight the work of the National Birthday Trust Fund, and its role in the research bringing into being a gas and air analgesic machine which offered women relief from the pain of childbirth and was now available for women through the National Health Service. The machines were to be demonstrated on the programme. The article illustrates the fear and ignorance that continued to prevail around childbirth, despite the provision made by the maternity services. Stephens cites letters from readers who had benefited from the advice that a preview of the series offered on the *About the Home* strand. The same practical

help would be offered on primary education, a question-and-answer session having already been held with a primary school head and similarly with a doctor about how to tackle the problems posed when bringing up older teenagers.

Cecil McGivern, Controller of Television Programmes, with whom Stephens was to exchange many memos about her work, commented very pointedly on the programme and what he saw as the unnecessary amount of 'gynaecological' details in some of the items produced by Stephens. In a memo of 7 February 1955 McGivern said:

The atmosphere of this programme [was] 'set' by discussion on stitches in first item on childbirth. Pregnancy and its consequential were overstressed. Childbirth and babies are important in women's programmes but surely there is no need for overall atmosphere to be so obstetrical [sic].<sup>7</sup>

It could be argued robustly that it would be very difficult to 'overstress pregnancy and its consequential'. Neither would it be unfair to say that it seems only reasonable that a programme aimed at women and talking about childbirth would focus on obstetrics. McGivern's comments serve well to illustrate very precisely just how innovative and groundbreaking Stephens was in tackling such a topic. Her starting point is clearly that of a woman's perspective, and the issue is presented from the point of view of a pregnant woman, rather than simply that of a detached and professional expert.

For Joy Leman the approach taken by Stephens' invited panel, and indeed the ideological construction of the series as a whole, is that 'the norms of family life and the standards of good practice adhered to were middle class, as were the criteria for making judgements' (1987, 84). It is understandable from Leman's cultural and historical context of the late 1980s that she makes these kinds of judgements about the more conservative social, cultural and political climate of the early 1950s. It is also undeniable that the BBC's address, particularly at this period of early television, was solidly middle and upper class.

However these programmes must be considered against the backdrop of their own particular historical television context and what they do achieve. The experts may be middle class, and assumptions made about family life may come from a middle-class perspective. However, crucially, in a television service where the address and concerns of programmes was implicitly and explicitly masculine, *Family Affairs'* primary concern was to foreground women and issues central to their lives.

The final programme strand to be considered in this article is *Wednesday Magazine* (1958–61), which has all but disappeared from any histories of BBC programming – over 30 production files related to its contents have not been consulted in the more than 50 years since the programme's inception.

*Wednesday Magazine* was produced by Monica Sims, with Lorna Pegram later assuming overall charge.<sup>8</sup> It was, broadly, a general magazine review programme which, notably, contained some excellent arts coverage.

There is little extant film footage readily available to view, apart from two clips – one with actress Margaret Rutherford and a filmed excerpt of comedian Spike Milligan. Particularly regrettable is the fact that *Radio Times* did not always list the individual programme items, so that the only way to gain any real insights into the richness of the programme's contents is through a process of reconstruction, using the production files.

Janet Thumim observes that: 'In *Wednesday Magazine* a broad spectrum of items were offered – there are clearly comparisons to be made with the much more successful and highly regarded current affairs magazine *Tonight*'<sup>9</sup> (2004, 90). Given the quality of the arts items featured, comparison might also be usefully made with Huw Wheldon's arts documentary magazine *Monitor* (1958–64). *Monitor* has left a well established legacy.<sup>10</sup>

*Wednesday Magazine* contained interviews and film clips with, regularly, the calibre of guests that one would find on Wheldon's celebrated flagship. Yet, in contrast to *Monitor*, *Wednesday Magazine* is an example of programming that has been lost to history precisely because of a lack of interest in archiving and exploring programmes made for and by women and produced within a women's programmes unit – the kind of programme, indeed, that would have benefited from an explicitly feminist archiving strategy as proposed by Moseley and Wheatley. The fate of the programme 'draws attention to the ways in which archiving practices affect and produce the kinds of histories that can be written' (Moseley and Wheatley, 2008, 153).

The additional factor of women's programmes being placed in an afternoon slot, rather than being broadcast along with what was seen as important and prestigious material in the evening, may well have meant that the programmes were largely judged on the criteria of being lightweight, disposable afternoon fare, and that the category of 'women's programmes' was very much a secondary classification. That is, they were not archived simply because they were made for women, but were seen as part of a more general category of expendable, ephemeral television programming.

Exploration of the production files for *Wednesday Magazine* reveals much of interest to the contemporary television historian. In the production files related to the programme we find a memo entitled 'A Short Survey of Women's Programmes April 58–June 59', by an unnamed author whom it seems reasonable to assume is Stephens reporting on her department's work over this period.<sup>11</sup> This gives a fascinating snapshot of the contents and organization of *Wednesday Magazine*.

The report summarizes the programme thus:

Each programme has between six and eight items.... There is at least one specially shot film in each programme and usually one other piece of film. Every edition closed with a story. Personalities who have appeared include – Flora Robson, Sue Ryder, Margot Fonteyn, Joyce Grenfell, Dora Bryan, Wolf Mankowitz, Sam Wanamaker, John Betjeman, Pete Schaffer, Shelagh Delaney, Sir Hugh Casson, Gloria Vanderbilt, Lillian Hellman and John Berger.

The report points up the programme's interest in film: 'We have shown nineteen extracts from films either with studio interview with one of stars, or Dilys Powell in the studio.' It continues:

*Wednesday Magazine* succeeded in twice obtaining clips of notable films before the world premieres and before any other television programmes: *Room at the Top* and *Look Back in Anger*, as well as the first television showing of clips from Donald Duck's early and latest films to celebrate his twenty fifth anniversary.

The report then concludes with theatre, highlighting the fact that they covered the *Evening Standard* Drama Awards, including a studio interview with the winners.

Other special features in the programme included interviews specially filmed in Berlin at the time of the crisis between 1958 and 1962, interviews specially filmed in New York, and a series on women in art. In fact the series is singled out for particular praise in comments by McGivern recorded along with the report: 'There is considerable improvement in the field. I have myself watched a great many more programmes than previously. The *Wednesday Magazine* in particular is developing very well.'

The spread of programmes examined above shows that television being made for women in the 1950s could be intellectually stimulating and creative, socially useful and cover areas well beyond those which normally would be assumed to be part of the women's department output. All this was done without the back-up and resources of the mainstream magazine programmes such as *Monitor and Tonight* (1957–65).

### **Producing Programmes for Women**

Stephens, as evidenced by the substantial quantity of detailed, adroitly argued memos, reports and lengthy drafts of programme ideas to be found in the production files for women's television, was passionately and actively engaged in trying to produce the best and most innovative programmes possible, in often difficult circumstances. The daily reality was the gruelling production of four or five live afternoon magazine programmes a week with limited resources and staff.

The resource question was a continual problem, and 'Women's programmes were markedly underfunded relative to the allocations for other departments supplying the more prestigious evening schedules' (Thumim, 2004, 84). Additionally, women's programmes were perceived neither as particularly important nor significant in comparison to the department's much admired current affairs and documentary output.

From the time that she took over women's programmes, Stephens was very aware of the necessity of establishing her unit's position both within the Talks and Features Department, and with her viewers. In a memo of 3 December 1953, Stephens, then newly appointed as editor of women's programmes, wrote:

A decision [needs] to be taken as to the importance of the status of the Women's programmes since they will never command real respect in the country, whatever their content, if they are treated as of little account within the service and subject to casual cancellation in favour of this or that sports or other event. A decision to change their regular time of transmission might assist in solving this problem.<sup>12</sup>

Stephens here addressed the recurring situation that occurred when women's programmes would be moved or cancelled for outside broadcast of sporting events such as Wimbledon or cricket. The programmes would also be rescheduled to make way for schools' broadcasts which began in 1957.

The archive files document the numerous practical production difficulties that Stephens had to tackle and resolve in order to produce television programmes. Simultaneously they reveal her own developing plans and ideas for programmes and departmental strategy. Together they create a rich, complex record of the delicate balancing act she performed as she worked to establish her vision for women's programmes, all the while supporting those programmes and her staff in overcoming an array of practical, financial and institutional obstacles.

It is very important to understand that Stephens and her team produced their programmes in often difficult conditions, and in a climate where the perception of women's television was that it did not have the importance and significance of other genres of television.

In March 1955, and by now well established in post, Stephens wrote a long, detailed memo to Controller of Programmes McGivern which very comprehensively covered the key issues with which she had to come to terms in the period since she had taken the job, and which continued to cause difficulties throughout her editorship of women's programmes.<sup>13</sup> She made clear the barriers to producing good programmes: 'We have really no film allocation – limited staff, facilities and rehearsal times are definite handicaps.' She highlighted, in particular, the fact that she and her colleagues had to contend with guests on the show who were unused to being on television in the first place. For staff, such guests 'entail breaking almost

entirely new ground with amateur performers in every weekly transmission’.

She cited *Panorama* and *In Town Tonight* as comparable programmes: ‘*In Town Tonight* – no visual presentation other than seeing people being interviewed but it has more assistants. *Panorama* runs fortnightly with a staffing ratio unlike anything women’s programmes ever had.’ The memo also mentioned *Panorama*’s extensive use of film, something for which women’s programmes had to fight very hard.

Interesting parallels can be drawn here with the challenge of the production of radio programmes for women in this period, as highlighted in Kristin Skoog’s work on the BBC Radio programme *Woman’s Hour* (1946–) drawn from her doctoral thesis. When talking about the success of the programme, Skoog also makes clear that ‘behind the scenes *Woman’s Hour* was really an overworked and understaffed team of producers that were often throughout this period fighting for internal appreciation and acknowledgement’ (2010: 138).

Indeed Skoog says of the early period of the programme’s development ‘one of the main issues throughout the period was a lack of resources’. She continues ‘reluctance to supply the programme with an editor holding full editorial seniority and responsibility led to internal disorder and argument’ (2010: 138).

Yet Stephens’ memo also displays very clearly the highly ambitious plans that Stephens had for her unit, and her original thinking on the way in which television for women could reach out to the widest possible audience and capture their interest and imagination. In the fascinating extract below Stephens outlines one of her plans to give women’s programmes the broadest possible popular appeal:

[It] will need [the] hire of special short films, domestic comedies, serialised romantic novels which have been best sellers to women. Large part of our audience love these but their introduction will break right across the approach to BBC Television women’s programmes as established in [the] past.

She also suggests: ‘Documentary talks feature programming and series specially devised for women –will require special research script writing and cameramen together with film.’ Alas such innovative and plans were not in the main to be realised, though they do provide ripe ground for retrospective speculation; the idea of documentary features aimed at women in particular seems particularly farsighted prefiguring feminist strategies of the 1970s, rather than emerging from the climate of mid-1950s Britain.

A 1958 memo from Stephens to Head of Talks Mary Adams shows how tough things continued to be three years later, and how plans for the expansion of women’s television into more mainstream slots remained unrealised:

Women's programmes on TV only serve the women who are at home in the afternoon. At whatever level I have asked for money, staff, resources – whatever has been given with one hand seems to have been taken away with the other, inside the service there has never been an honest attempt to appreciate the scale of the achievements of women's programmes where staffing facilities and money used are also compared.<sup>14</sup>

Stephens also had to contend with the very detailed critique of her department's output from Cecil McGivern. His primary concern was the quality of their programmes. His main criticism focused on the standard of production achieved by Stephens and her staff. He often felt that what they produced was, though well intentioned, frankly amateurish, rather rough round the edges and he was loath to offer Stephens the extra programme time that she sought for women's programmes. The situation was clearly very frustrating for Stephens. She constantly sought extra resourcing for her department to improve, well aware that she could improve her output with this: such resources were clearly not forthcoming.

Fairly typical of comments in memos from McGivern, is this one, from 22 March 1955, which begins: 'I've been watching our programmes for women with a view to various decisions about the future. I'm not satisfied with present position.'<sup>15</sup> He continues, saying of the programmes:

On the whole rather dull, pedestrian and unimaginative. Your own desire and drive to please and interest seems to be stopped at the studio door. There is little feeling of gaiety and pleasure and in having everything well dressed. Till recently caption cards [were] penny plain and frequently handled clumsily. The standard of presentation cannot bear comparison with, for example, Children's programmes.

*About the Home* comes in for particularly harsh criticism. Of one edition, and specifically of an item called 'Housecraft', McGivern says in the same memo, 'An out and out bore,' and goes on:

Complete reversal of everything [we] have learned in the presentation of personalities and a *showmanlike* presentation. The Easter bride introduced and promptly dismissed – it is a complete waste of an idea and of money. For heavens sake the Easter bride should have been doing all this, not the competent but completely dull lecturer. This sort of presentation tends to make me despair.

A 12 November 1954 memo to Joanna Spicer<sup>16</sup> from Stephens on the production of *Leisure and Pleasure* sums up clearly the problems of producing a weekly series:

As these programmes are run on a weekly basis there is a cumulative pressure on producers resulting in fatigue and an erratic standard of production, *Leisure and Pleasure* being the most difficult. At the moment it is humanly impossible to get a polish on *Leisure and Pleasure* although we have now succeeded in improving it so it regularly rates an appreciation figure in the 60s.<sup>17</sup>

Despite all these difficulties and criticisms however, provision of women's programmes continued, grew and prospered, and Stephens and her team built on and developed their programme making expertise, further expanding notions of what women's television could be. Yet by 1964 the department was gone and there were to be no more specialist programmes for women.

### **The End of Programmes for Women**

The Women's Programmes Department amalgamated with Children's Programmes in 1964 to form the Family Programmes Department. However, the decision to end the department's autonomy must be understood from within the particular cultural and institutional context in which the decision was taken. The reasons for the redevelopment of Stephens' prolific and successful department were complex, and stem, with historical hindsight, as much from Stephens and her staff's own sense of their direction and purpose and the practicalities of the prevailing economic climate, as from the policy-making strategies of high handed senior management. That said, the professional treatment that Stephens received in this period, particularly the relative lack of recognition of the work she had done and the expertise she had built up in her role as department head and women's programme's specialist, now seems brutal, unprofessional and short-sighted.

The success of Women's Programmes was, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, evident. Stephens had established a solid roster of afternoon programming which was firmly embedded in the daytime schedules. In fact, such appeared to be the department's confidence and ambition that their output rapidly expanded from the late 1950s, developing programmes well beyond the 'traditional' areas which women's television had previously covered. These programmes had a broader general appeal and address, attracting a wider audience who were available to view television at this time of the day. The feeling seems to have been that the department's work was such that it no longer needed to be restricted to one particular segment of the viewing public.

By 1960, the afternoon slot was no longer branded as 'Mainly for Women'. Lorna Pegram, who latterly produced *Wednesday Magazine*, summed the situation up thus in an article on 17 November in *Radio Times*:

'At first it was mainly for women but it was born of the conviction that women were interested in more than so-called women's subjects. Eventually afternoon programmes dropped the specific feminine label and the *Magazine* developed its intention to stimulate and entertain anyone who had a little time to relax on Wednesday afternoons.'

Stephens herself noted changing attitudes to afternoon television programmes in a short survey of afternoon programmes from 1960:

During the year letters, personal comments and press notices made it clear that although housewives form the large majority of the afternoon audience, men (shift workers) and women not attracted by the woman's magazine label found the programmes interesting but that the label embarrasses them. From Jan 1st 1961 the title *Mainly for Women* is dropped.<sup>18</sup>

By 1961 the afternoon slot was rebranded, and a new schedule of programmes produced by the Women's Department was rolled out in October. Running five days a week, the programmes were consecutively *Table Talk*, a discussion format, *Home at 1.30*, a women's magazine, *Wednesday Magazine*, *Perspectives* dealing with social issues, and *Let's Imagine* which looked at interesting careers and lifestyles. All bar *Home at 1.30* were hosted by men. Herein lay the catch. The department had now, in effect, no unique selling point – if its job was not to make programmes specifically for women, what was its reason for being? Realistically, this was now just another group within Talks and Features making broadly based general interest programmes. Managerial attitudes were against preserving the notion of a separate women's department. Kenneth Adams, Director of Television, said in a memo on the department:

I dislike the title of Editor of Women's programmes more and more. It helps to keep alive the myth that women are only given a limited responsibility in the TV service. It is even less appropriate than it used to be now that we are going for a lunchtime mixed audience. I think the title has become an affront both to the new audience, which will build I am sure as we persevere and to Miss Stephens herself. (She has not raised this herself.) It should not be beyond the wit of man to devise an alternative.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, money saving measures taken in this period meant that there was a contemporary political decision made to restrict the broadcast of, and then terminate, afternoon television – a significant blow to a unit which made afternoon programmes.

In the archived exchange of increasingly heated memos we can trace Stephens'

struggle both to maintain her managerial position and continue to pursue her and her team's interests, set against a managerial desire to find somewhere else in the organisation to put her. Stephens' position becomes increasingly unstable, and solutions presented seem to ignore her particular areas of specialism and expertise.

A memo from Stuart Hood, then Controller of Programmes, presented three possible solutions to the problem: (A) transferring the whole department, to be managed by senior management in Talks; (B) transfer only the production staff; or (C) leave things as they were:

(B) would make Miss Stephens redundant with no prospect of any satisfactory alternative job for her. (C) would merely perpetuate the present anomaly. (A) would work if Miss Stephens would accept or could be persuaded to accept her subservient role to [Alasdair] Milne or Grace [Wyndham Goldie]. Possibility seems doubtful but on balance might be right thing to do in spite of risks. I am loath to let things stagnate and eventually become an even worse staff problem in the culture.<sup>20</sup>

The solution offered eventually by Hood was for Stephens to become head of an amalgamated women's and children's department – the Family Programmes Department. Stephens was very unhappy with this solution. 'The programme needs of small children lie in a highly skilled technical field. I have not got this specialised knowledge or the desirable degree of dedication.'<sup>21</sup> She continued: 'It would have to be made clear throughout the Service that this is not just a wrapping up operation of lost causes, but a positive move to add essential ingredients to the output of television.'

Stephens did take on the role of Head of Family Programmes in 1964. It did not work out well, however. In a memo to Wheldon, now Controller of Programmes, in August 1965, she sets out the problem, contesting the decision to discontinue the adult output of Family Programmes. 'It [Family Programmes] was given responsibility for providing programmes for children (other than drama and Light Entertainment) and programmes for adults of Home and Family interest.' She continues, 'The opportunity to carry out this mandate has been gradually nibbled away,' concluding:

If the adult output of my department is completely abolished, all the experience, expertise and goodwill that has been built up in the field of women's and family programmes will be dissipated and it will be impossible to contend that the BBC devotes special attention to these interests.<sup>22</sup>

The Family Programmes Department was in fact to last only three years and in 1967 Stephens left the BBC to join Thames Television.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

In exploring Stephens' work at the BBC, this article makes a substantial contribution both to an understanding of the early history of television for women and, significantly, its relationship with contemporary television. The consideration of her period as editor of women's programmes has unearthed a whole new range and diversity of previously undiscovered programme strands and formats. The discovery of such material has significant implications for recent and current scholarly work on contemporary women's television. The deep roots of recent women's television in formats which, as has been demonstrated, stretch as far back as the early 1950s and beyond, need to be acknowledged and accorded their full importance in any analysis of, and commentary on, 'new' developments in women's television.

That any meaningful trace of so many of the women's programmes discussed here has now all but disappeared from record, in contrast to, for example, the assiduously curated *Monitor*, *Tonight* or *Panorama*, points to an urgent need for feminist archiving policies which actively seek to preserve and value women's programmes. The current absence of significant programmes for women in the established canons of British television history means that the histories that currently exist can be at best only partial, and do not allow for a full understanding of the rich, complex history of British television.

Of course, the erasing from television history of Stephens herself is a prime argument for the deployment of feminist historiographical strategies in the creation of broadcasting histories. Stephens' reinsertion here into the narrative of BBC television history allows us now to examine the creation and development of television's earliest address to women, as imagined and developed by Stephens. Such a reconsideration, afforded by access to the detail of her achievements, shows how much now established frameworks of women's television programmes owe to her work in the 1950s.

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1. The establishing of Editor Women's Programmes, with similar control of resources and money as a head of department, marked BBC acknowledgement of the importance of programmes for women in the run-up to the start of ITV in September 1955 (Leman, 1987, 82).
  2. Joyce Leman (1987) considers Stephens' role as Editor of Women's Programmes, as does Janet Thumim (2004) in her chapters on 1950s and 1960s factual television in *Inventing Television Culture: Men Women and the Box*. In neither, however, is Stephens the main focus of the writers' analysis.
  3. As part of the author's PhD work, she carried out interviews with Catherine Freeman and Ann James, who had worked under Wyndham Goldie in the Television Talks and Features Department (Irwin, unpublished thesis 2008). The opinions are taken from these interviews. Freeman: 'Grace was not thought to particularly favour young women; James: 'She had her favourites – bright young men from university.' Further, in John Grist's biography of Wyndham Goldie, *First Lady of Television*, he writes, 'she was horrible to women' (2006, 218).
  4. All women's programmes discussed in this article were broadcast in an afternoon slot running at various times and at various lengths between 2 p.m. and 4 p.m.
  5. BBC WAC T32/362/TV Talks/Women's Programmes/General, 1951–4, Stephens' description of programmes for 1955.
  6. The expert panel were educational psychologist James Hemming, psychologist Phyllis Hostler, Dr Winifred de Kok, Reverend Arthur Morton the director of the NSPCC and John Watson JP.
  7. BBC WAC S322/113/1/Women's Programmes 1954–6, memo from McGivern to Stephens, 7 February 1955.
  8. Both went on to have very successful careers at the BBC. Lorna Pegram, most notably, worked as a producer on Robert Hughes' critically acclaimed series on modern art *The Shock of the New* (1980). Monica Sims, another producer, became controller of BBC Radio 4 in 1978.
  9. *Tonight* was an extremely popular and lively current affairs magazine programme which ran from 1957 to 1964, five nights a week. It marked a break from the very formal approach to news that had characterized the corporation's approach up until this point. This change was in part prompted by the challenge to the BBC's audience share which came with the arrival of independent television.
  10. *Monitor*, which ran from 1958 to 1964, was an arts documentary strand which featured specially shot films, studio interviews and studio performances. The connection to the programme of Huw Wheldon, former director of BBC Television, has assured its status. Wheldon produced a book on the programme, *Monitor: An Anthology* (1962). *Monitor* is in Paul Ferris's 1990 biography of Wheldon, *Sir Hugu: Life of Huw Wheldon*. It has been the subject of significant critical attention, most recently in John Wyver's *Vision On – Film, Television and the Arts in Britain* (2007) and in Dickinson (2007).

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- 11.** BBC WAC S322/113/3Women's programmes/ contributors and schedules 1954-7, memo (probably by Stephens), A Short Survey of Women's Programmes April 58-June 59.
- 12.** BBC WAC R34/617/Policy/Programme Policy/Women's Programmes 1953-5, memo from Stephens to Controller of Programmes, Television, 3 December 1953.
- 13.** BBC WAC T31/220/2/TV Staff/Women's Programmes, memo from Stephens 23 March 1955.
- 14.** BBC WAC/Teli/c/ 1548/ 13666/1957-9, memo from Stephens to Mary Adams, dated 1958.
- 15.** BBC WAC S322/113/1/women's programmes 1954-6, memo from McGivern to Stephens, 22 March 1955.
- 16.** From 1952 Joanna Spicer was BBC Television Programme Organiser. She later became Head of Television Programme Planning.
- 17.** BBC WAC S322/113/1/women's programmes 1954-6, memo from Stephens to Joanna Spicer, 12 November 1954.
- 18.** BBC WAC T31/220/2/TV Staff/Women's Programmes/File 2/1954-1963, short survey on afternoon programmes, by Stephens, 1960.
- 19.** BBC WAC T31/220/2 TV Staff/Women's Programmes/File 2/1954-1963, memo from Director of TV Broadcasting Kenneth Adams to Controller of Programmes Television, 'Change of title Editor, Women's programmes', 17 October 1961.
- 20.** BBC WAC T31/220/2/TV Staff/Women's Programmes/File 2/1954-1963, memo form Controller of Programmes Television to management team, 27 April 1963.
- 21.** BBC WAC T31/324/TV Staff/Family Progs/ dept 64-65, memo from Stephens to Controller of Programmes Television, 3 December 1963.
- 22.** BBC WAC T31/324/TV Staff/Family Programmes Dept/1964-5.
- 23.** BBC WAC T31/324-TV Staff/Family Programmes Dept/1964-65, 26 August 1965.

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