

Brains Have No Sex

By
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WQXR News Commentator Lisa Sergio wrote the following article for the WQXR Program Guide in April, 1943. As a woman in the almost exclusively male domain of news commentary, Sergio distinguished herself as the only woman *Variety* included in its 1945 analysis of 30 popular radio news commentators. Her essay is a brief reminder of just how far women have come in the field of journalism. The guide prefaced the piece with this introduction:

Because many people wonder how it feels to be a woman radio commentator, we asked Miss Sergio to write the following article. She need no introduction to the WQXR audience, which listens to her regularly at 7 o'clock every evening, Monday through Friday, nor to her morning audience at 10 A.M. on Monday and Friday.

"Brains have no sex," Madame Chiang-Kai-Shek told a press conference in Washington when asked her views on the Equal Rights Amendment. Everybody agreed with her, it seems. Everybody present, that is. But in radio broadcasting, experts will tell you that listeners classify brains according to the speaker's sex. The woman commentator who deals in current events does not come out on top. This is what the experts say: men don't like to have a woman tell them what's what; they want he-man stuff or nothing. Women, they continue, don't like to take it from another woman, for they also demand the stern voice of male authority when they

learn the war news and the political issues that perplex and confuse this man-made world.

I am one who agrees with the brilliant lady from China and who takes little stock in the findings of those obliging experts. I will admit that one man in my audience, who signs his name in full and gives me his address each time, accuses me at regular intervals of being a female parrot who belongs in the kitchen. I can also boast one woman listener who remains anonymous in the mail, and who, with the same frequency, bids me get off the air and let a worthy man fill in the time with brains and common sense. However, I am glad to say that these two specimens are not typical of my audience, for thousands of others write in their criticisms, good and bad, without reference to petticoats or pants. And that is the way it should be.

Woman commentators are the product of the last few years. In the beginning sing as they would, fiddle as they would, women in radio were confined to the class known as "fillers". Eventually women broke into the cereal and macaroni game, and their cooking schools conducted over the radio called for all the mental agility of the housewife, combined with persuasive tones and convincing words. They made a hit and still retain their high-ranking place in this field. But they have also broadened out, bringing their measure of intuition, common sense, appreciation of particulars, analytical faculty, in brief their brains, to the discussion of other, graver subject.

Here, too, women can claim and hold a place. If men and women are equally needed in the war effort, as they indubitably are, if men and women the world over are bearing the tragic burden of a war without quarter, as they are, it follows that men and women can equally contribute to the understanding of issues at stake and of the sometimes baffling trend of the events which affect us.

It so happens that I have been on the air for just ten years, a decade in which both radio and the world have revolutionized themselves. I began in Europe, commenting on the news of the day--the first assignment of this kind, it seems, ever given to a woman over there. Perhaps it was a tough one. To me it was exciting and unique. Ten years of familiarity with current events and with the microphone on both sides of the ocean, have neither dulled the excitement, nor bred contempt of the matter I deal with nor of the medium through which I reach the audience. And in all these years rarely, if ever, have I had reason to feel that being a woman was a handicap in this field. That is why I prefer not to believe the experts.

The quickened pace of the last few years, the broader freedom which America offers as compared to most countries of pre-war Europe, the stimulating contrast of opinions and clash of reactions in the heterogenous American audience, and the growing suspenses which the state of war brings into our lives, are factors that have unquestionably increased the responsibilities I recognize in the work of a commentator. But I do not believe that, as a woman, I recognize them less clearly nor accept them less honestly, than my male colleagues. Women as a whole, make a smaller fuss about accepting responsibilities, of whatever nature, than men. That is probably why they get less credit for fulfilling them, and more criticism if they fail! That is why they have to work harder to make a place for themselves and to hold it.

Frankly, the commentator's business boils down to this, I think: in hectic times it is a hectic marching step one has to keep. One must have mental energy, and some physical stamina too: a mind free from prejudice and stocked with as many facts and realities as it will hold. Whether it is a man or a woman collecting material, analyzing it, writing it up, making deductions and presenting the picture to the unseen audience, the most important single factor is sincerity. On the strength of that the audience, forgetting the sex, will condone the inaccuracies and errors when they occur, because the microphone has a strange and impolite way of sending over the air waves not only what the commentators say, but also what they think in the silent recesses of their minds.

[Editor's Note] Lisa Sergio was a pioneer radio broadcaster in Mussolini's Italy who became a dedicated anti-Fascist and news commentator for WQXR and other American radio stations. Known as "the Golden Voice of Rome," she translated Mussolini's speeches into English and French almost simultaneously on the air until her changes to propaganda commentaries got her fired from Rome radio. Facing arrest and internment in 1937, she was smuggled aboard a trans-Atlantic liner by radio inventor and family friend Guglielmo Marconi. Settling in New York City, she became a guest observer for NBC radio and the host for broadcasts including Metropolitan Opera performances and Berkshire music festivals. She then became one of the few female news commentators with her own weekday Column of the Air on WQXR from 1939 to 1946.

According to the scholar Stacy Spaulding, pressure from the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) led to Sergio's firing from WQXR and later blacklisting from radio.[1] In WQXR's defense, the decision to fire Sergio was part of a move dropping all news commentaries and anticipating *The New York Times* takeover of all news programming at the station. It is also argued that the action

was an effort to avoid violating an earlier FCC decision (1941) prohibiting station editorializing.[2] Sergio, a fervent advocate of democracy, free speech and feminism, died in June, 1989.

[1] Spaulding, Stacy, "Off the Blacklist, But Still a Target: The Anti-Communist Attacks on Lisa Sergio," *Journalism Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 2009, pg. 789.

[2] Ibid., pg. 793.

*The center photo of Lisa Sergio is courtesy of the Library of Congress, NYWT&S Collection.

LISA SERGIO STRIKES BACK

ONCE MUSSOLINI'S OFFICIAL SHORT-WAVE BROADCASTER, THIS ITALIAN GIRL NOW FIGHTS FASCISM AS A NEWS COMMENTATOR

LISA SERGIO can put her heart into the anti-Axis news broadcasts she does every weekday at 7:00 P.M. over New York's WQXR. She really knows about fascism—from the inside.

Her background is truly Italian, for her father was the Baron Agostino Sergio and she herself was born and educated in Florence, Italy. Her mother, however, was an American—the former Margaret Fitzgerald of Baltimore.

Her fluency in English gave her a start in radio. With the help of Count Guglielmo Marconi, she obtained the position of English translator of Mussolini's speeches in 1933. In the next few years, she made history as Europe's first woman commentator and was widely recognized in fascist circles.

Nevertheless, her contacts with American and British newspapermen made her uneasy, and she gradually lost confidence in Mussolini's regime. By 1937 she had been dismissed from the government-controlled radio, and, with Count Marconi's help, escaped from Italy on the day an order was issued for her arrest.

Upon her arrival in this country, she devoted herself to fighting against the principles she once spoke for. It was she who coined the term "Axis"—a word she hopes won't be needed long.

Article from Tune-in Magazine, January 1944.
(Courtesy of Americanradiohistory.com)