

# Conference 2014 Speaker Series: An Interview with Cathy Newman

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Cathy Newman is a presenter at Channel 4 News. Last year, she broke the story of allegations against life peer and former Liberal Democrat Chief Executive Lord Rennard of inappropriate behaviour towards women. Having been refused an interview with Nick Clegg on multiple occasions, her persistent attempts to get in touch with the Lib Dem party leader have attracted attention: [first on a radio show \(as “Cathy from Dulwich”\)](#) and more recently [when she asked him a question at a conference on mental health](#). Before going to Channel 4 News in 2006, she worked at the Financial Times as a media then political correspondent.

[Channel 4 News Team](#)

She will be speaking at next week’s Polis Annual Journalism Conference on a panel focused on discussing how journalists sometimes have to ‘cross the line’ in pursuit of a story to hold power to account. Free tickets, as well as information on our line-up, are available [here](#). Our keynote speakers are Alan Rusbridger, Editor of the Guardian, and Ian Katz, Editor of Newsnight.

*Interview by Polis reporter Emma Goodman.*

*The title of your session is ‘Crossing the line’ – have there been times as a journalist when you have actually thought, ‘I’m crossing a line right now’ or has it just happened more gradually?*

As a journalist, I feel I have to go out on a limb on stories with pretty much every investigation I do, because what makes a story a really good story is telling people something they don’t know. And if those stories are about people in power, or people in politics, then by definition you are challenging the conventional wisdom about those people in power or running the country.

If you take the Rennard story as an example – I had known Lord Rennard for years, as the guru of the party, the man who won the party all these by-elections, and I never had any inkling about the allegations against him until I first got the tip-off about the story. So a lot of people were very surprised when I broke the story because it wasn’t what they expected from him, and, like me, they had known him in a completely different light, as a man who was more powerful than the party leader. When I first got the tip off a few years back, I went to one of the women concerned and asked if she would speak to me, and at that point she wasn’t ready to speak so it was actually several years later that she came back to me and said yes, she was ready to speak. And that’s how I began piecing together the story, putting together all the facts. Because as a journalist, particularly if you’re doing investigative work, you have to just rigidly follow the facts and follow what you are told, rather than coming with any preconceptions to the story.

*How important is transparency in your work? Particularly in sensitive investigative work, I can imagine it’s sometimes very difficult.*

I did a fellowship with the Washington Post a few years back. I was at the Financial Times at the time working in the political [Lobby](#) and we would always write, “a source said,” “a government member said...” “a friend of X said...” or “an aide to the minister said...” etc. But when I went out to the Washington Post that was really frowned upon: everything had to be on-the-record sourcing. You basically didn’t quote someone unless they would speak on the record. Very occasionally you would say “a person connected to the State Department,” for example, “speaking on conditions of anonymity,” but that would be very much a last resort. That was really good training, because I think it’s really important that your audience knows where the information comes from. Obviously people have vested

interests and often have an axe to grind, and you need to be as open about that as possible as a journalist.

I suppose a good example of that is that when I first started the Rennard investigation I knew that the allegations were serious, and I knew from our lawyer at ITN that we wouldn't be able to broadcast any of this without getting several of the women on camera, on the record, which is a brave thing for them to do. They couldn't hide behind anonymity because people would say, "you're slandering a man, you're ruining his reputation and we don't know who you are, or where you come from or whether you've got an ax to grind." So when I two women agree to speak – one to go on camera, and one (for reasons to do with her career) speak off camera, that meant that the story would have that much more weight because people could see that these women had decided to speak out, they could see who they were and that they were credible. And that meant that it was much more difficult for the party to knock down their allegations.

*You wrote in [a Telegraph column](#) about your own experiences of sexism in Westminster and at work. Is it still difficult being a woman in journalism?*

I think that it's getting easier to be a woman and a journalist – I think now there's a situation where on TV there are lots of senior women in proper investigative reporting and presenting roles. In newspapers too. I would say the Lobby is still fairly male-dominated but I see things are improving. There's still a massive challenge though, particularly for women to be taken seriously. There are too many assumptions that the woman will be in the "autocutie" role and I think that the big battle for women is to be authoritative yet approachable. I think it's really hard to combine those two things, because if you're too warm and approachable people think you're fluffy, and if you're too authoritative and ballsy people think you're strident. So I think that's still quite difficult and I think that's to do with a lack of visible female role models in the media. Quite frankly, I think that people consuming the media aren't used to seeing women in the kind of roles that have traditionally gone to men.

*Do you think a man would have pushed so hard on the Lord Rennard story?*

On the Rennard story, I think that it took a woman to win the women's trust – I think it was all about trust. It took a very long time to persuade these women to speak out and I think it's unlikely that a man would have been able to win the same kind of trust. Also, there was a woman who said after the story broke that everyone had known about that for a while, but the point is, no one tried to actually stand it up and put the story out there. I think there is a new generation of women who are less prepared to tolerate this kind of sexism. I think that women journalists are more likely to challenge the prevailing assumptions of sexism than men.

*How significant a role would you say that online comments and social media have had in increasing the accountability of journalism?*

I find it very useful to get immediate feedback on Twitter on an interview or a story I have done. I read all my tweets and I try to respond to as many as possible. I don't read comments on my online articles and that really goes to the caveat here – while the instant feedback is useful, I don't think it's always accurate because people, for whatever reason, are much more likely to abuse you on Twitter than they are face-to-face. I think that you could get an unrealistic or distorted impression about what people think about a story you've done, because there's so much more abuse flying around on the Internet, and that's why I don't read the comments on my articles, or my Telegraph blog and so on. I've just got so used to the fact that it's people hiding behind anonymity to basically slander you. People are pretty vicious in those comments. I think people know that if they want to ask me a question on Twitter I'll always try to reply.

*Interview by Polis reporter Emma Goodman.*

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