

**Gender, Radio Broadcasting and the Role of the Public Intellectual: The  
BBC Career of Margery Fry from 1928 to 1958**

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# **Gender, Radio Broadcasting and the Role of the Public Intellectual: The BBC Career of Margery Fry from 1928 to 1958**

This article addresses the issue of gender and the role of the public intellectual on the BBC in the middle of the twentieth century through an examination of the broadcasting career of S. Margery Fry (1874-1958). Scholars such as Hugh Chignell have emphasised that, with very few exceptions, speaking to the nation was pre-eminently the work of men in this period. Margery Fry was a well-known personality, connected to the Bloomsbury Group, with expertise in higher education and penal reform. She also served a brief term as a Governor of the BBC. The article argues that Fry was somewhat exceptional as a woman who was able to establish a reputation in the period 1928-58 as a broadcaster and pundit, which to some extent at least, transcended gendered boundaries. However, it acknowledges that a great deal of her broadcast output was directed at female listeners and that she possessed plentiful social and cultural capital which made her an attractive contributor to broadcasting executives.

## **Introduction**

The gendered role of women in the early history of the BBC is becoming better understood than hitherto. Recent research by scholars such as Kate Murphy and Kristin Skoog has focused particularly on the women employed by the corporation as producers of its programmes - the figures 'behind the wireless'. In contrast, Maggie Andrews has focused on the women who made up the majority of listeners.<sup>1</sup>

However there has been less attention to the on-air talent, especially those women who made up the small, female minority in the genre of talks and current affairs programming which, as much of the academic literature asserts, was dominated by male voices.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, broadcasting (at first radio and later television) was the arena where reputations were made by cultural commentators and public intellectuals. As Andrews and Sally McNamara point out, the first half of the twentieth century saw an increase in the level of women's participation in the public sphere.<sup>3</sup> This change was exemplified in political life

via the enfranchisement of women in 1918 and 1928 and the gradual – albeit slow – increase in the number of women elected to parliament. Yet the numbers of women invited onto political and cultural discussion programmes remained generally low and female contributors were most likely to be found on programmes aimed at female listeners such as *Women's Hour* in the 1920s and *Woman's Hour* from 1946.

In the course of examining the role of the British intellectual in the twentieth century Stefan Collini points out that a crucial attribute of a public intellectual was 'cultural authority', a term which encapsulates much more than mere expertise. An individual could only really aspire to the status of intellectual when they were allowed to comment publicly (including on air) on matters outside their own field, being deemed both capable of commenting widely upon 'art, morality, culture, manners' and trusted to do so.<sup>4</sup> Collini discusses – at his own admission – very few women because, he suggests, they were not 'the most widely heard' voices in the period he considers. Collini's contention is literally correct where BBC radio was concerned, as producers and executives not only routinely regarded women and their voices as problematic but even questioned whether women broadcasters had 'authority to speak' to the nation, let alone to men. As Chignell remarks, the 'central question [was]... who has the right to speak' to the nation?<sup>5</sup>

This article examines the broadcast work of Margery Fry, one of the few women able to break through the gendered barriers and establish a reputation as an intellectual and cultural commentator on the BBC, as well as serving for a brief period as a BBC governor. It demonstrates the extent to which Fry's cultural capital and reputation as a public intellectual transcended her gender. Without question, by the time of her death in 1958 Margery Fry was a familiar public figure, largely due to her regular appearances on radio and television. Her public profile was so high by the time of the Second World War that she was allegedly featured on a blacklist of British public figures compiled by the Nazi high command.<sup>6</sup> In

common with many contributors to broadcasting, Fry was employed as a freelance. Although less well-known today than some of her male equivalents or her friend, Virginia Woolf, Fry does fit Chignell's criteria of a 'celebrity' who 'held dangerously radical views' yet was apparently welcomed onto the airwaves.<sup>7</sup> Her broadcasting career is well-documented in the 'talk' scripts held in her papers and at the BBC Written Archives Centre as well as in the *Listener* and other journals, documentation which demonstrates the extent of her exposure to the listening (and later viewing) public.

After an initial section detailing her early experience as a public intellectual, commentator and media figure up to 1935, the article highlights her contributions in the following areas: as a BBC governor, in male-dominated panel discussions such as *The Brains Trust*, and in post-1945 programming on radio and television, some of which was women-orientated. The conclusion addresses the question as to whether, as a woman on the BBC, Fry can be said to have possessed cultural authority not only within the confines of women's programming, but more generally.

### **Fry's expertise and early media work**

Fry was an expert in two quite distinct fields, higher education and penal policy.<sup>8</sup> Born in 1874, she was a member of a large, prosperous Quaker family. Alone among her six sisters, she was permitted to study at University and she entered Somerville College, Oxford in 1894 where she became friends with several other women students who were to develop notable careers, including the future member of parliament, Eleanor Rathbone. Fry's education career began when she was appointed librarian at her former college in 1899 and blossomed when she became Warden of University House, the women's hostel at Birmingham University, and a specialist in female education for Staffordshire County Council. In 1919 she was the only

woman appointed to the University Grants Committee (a new body which advised governments on the distribution of public money to higher education institutions) and in 1926 she returned to her alma mater, Somerville College, as its principal. Meanwhile, at the end of the First World War she took over a small pressure group named the Penal Reform League, building it in a few years into a high-profile campaigning organisation, the Howard League for Penal Reform. Thus by the mid-1920s she not only had the necessary public profile to qualify as a commentator on her two specialisms but also a lively – if amateur - interest in a wide variety of intellectual pursuits ranging from natural science to art, ballet, music and drama. Moreover, she had strong, left-wing political opinions, a love of travel, plentiful legal knowledge acquired as a magistrate, and had studied mathematics. She was well-integrated socially into the nation's acknowledged intellectual elite, being a very close associate of the Bloomsbury Group through her brother, Roger Fry.<sup>9</sup> Combined, these skills, connections and attributes suggest strongly that she should qualify for the description 'intellectual', but there was one important measure on which she was lacking: she was not a man. Nevertheless, as this article demonstrates, Fry was able to break through and establish a reputation as a broadcaster, not only within the confines of *Woman's Hour* and female-orientated programming, but beyond these boundaries, even becoming the 'token woman' on popular discussion programmes.

By the late 1920s Fry was well-known to readers of the quality press which covered the activities of the organizations she was involved with, not only the Howard League, but also the Magistrates' Association and the National Council Against the Death Penalty. Newspapers also covered important moments in Margery's career, such as her appointment and later resignation as Somerville Principal, and her membership of government committees. She frequently wrote letters to major press titles such as the *Times*, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Spectator* and signed many 'round robin' letters put together

by groups with whom she sympathised. Coverage of Fry's activities also appeared in the popular press: the *Daily Mail* even described her renovation of a common room at Somerville when she was principal there.<sup>10</sup>

Fry probably made her first appearance on the BBC in 1928 when she debated the proposition 'Should capital punishment be abolished?' with a member of parliament, Captain Arthur Evans.<sup>11</sup> Fry presented the case for abolition in this broadcast, the topic of which lay clearly within her expertise. It is likely that the invitation to appear on this debate came from Hilda Matheson, a former student of Fry's close Somerville friend, Lettice Fisher, who became the first director of talks at the BBC in 1926.<sup>12</sup> Matheson, who has been described as 'on the fringes of the Bloomsbury group,' gave radio debuts to many leading intellectuals of the time, including Fry's friends, Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster and Fry's brother, the art critic, Roger Fry.<sup>13</sup>

The BBC Written Archives Centre only has full records of Fry's dealings with the Corporation from c.1940 onwards, but some idea of the scope and content of her broadcasting during the second interwar decade can be gleaned from newspaper programme listings, the *Listener*, and surviving scripts. In May and June 1933 she gave five talks in a series entitled *Pioneers of a Humane World* about a group of 'lesser-known reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', Mary Wollstonecraft, Florence Nightingale and Lord Lister (combined in one talk), Lord Shaftsbury, Sir Samuel Romilly, and Robert Owen.<sup>14</sup> This does not appear to be programming specifically aimed at women nor did the subjects fall within a narrow definition of Fry's expertise. The following year the BBC drew on Fry's penal reform specialism - and perhaps, her gender - when she was invited to speak on air about 'Women in Prison' and she also gave a talk about the education of the masses in China (entitled 'A Chinese Experiment'), in which she told listeners about the educational developments she had witnessed in that country while touring it on behalf of British universities.<sup>15</sup> The absence

of a BBC personnel file from this time means that it is not known whether these subjects were Fry's suggestions or were proposed by Corporation employees. Records do indicate that in the late 1940s Fry was pitching her own ideas for broadcasts to producers, but this was obviously an earlier period. However the topics certainly fitted well with Fry's personal interests but not just her narrow specialisms. So these broadcasts represent a limited extension of her expertise-based authority beyond its established confines.

Evidence suggests that Fry was able to master the softer, more conversational style of speech which was promoted by Matheson and her successors.<sup>16</sup> Her talk on Robert Owen began when she drew on the listener's imagination: 'let us imagine ourselves in the town of Shrewsbury more than 150 years ago. The night coach is starting for London...' <sup>17</sup> On Florence Nightingale and Lister, she started with a brief comparison of infant death rates in the time of Wollstonecraft, Nightingale, and in 1930, and asked rhetorically 'how many of us would have died in our cradles if health matters had stood still for a hundred years?' Reviewing *Pioneers of a Humane World*, the *Manchester Guardian* complimented Fry for her 'alert and capable manner at the microphone'.<sup>18</sup> A 1936 internal BBC memorandum described Fry as a 'brilliant woman speaker... witty, fluent, good debater, good voice, attractive appearance'. She was said to be 'interested in social reform, education and social questions'.<sup>19</sup> The comment on her 'good voice' probably alludes to more general concerns on the part of broadcasting executives that the pitch of women's voices were not as suited to microphones as men's, while 'attractive appearance' was not only a highly gendered remark, but one which seems rather irrelevant to radio work.<sup>20</sup> However, after this run of appearances in 1933-4 there appears to have been a hiatus in Fry's broadcasting career between 1935 and 1940. For part of that time she was a BBC governor.

## **BBC Governor**

Fry's invitation to become a governor of the BBC came towards the end of 1937.<sup>21</sup> She was asked to fill one of the few places allocated to women: effectively to be a token woman on the governing body of the national broadcaster, representing roughly half of the population and potentially an even higher proportion of the listening public.<sup>22</sup> She was appointed in the place of another Labour woman, the former MP, Mary Agnes Hamilton, who herself replaced Ethel Snowden, yet another socialist and feminist who had been made the first woman governor of the BBC in 1926.<sup>23</sup> Fry was clearly filling an established 'left-wing woman' slot in a board on which men and Conservatives formed the majority: her role was thus to represent not only women but also socialists. The *Manchester Guardian* noted that Lady Bridgeman became a governor at the same time, replacing her husband (who died in 1935) so that there would be henceforward be two women governors, and the paper hoped that this level of representation of women would continue since 'women listeners are taking an increasing interest in the BBC programmes'.<sup>24</sup> Lady Bridgeman was the widow of a former Conservative MP and also a leading figure in the Conservative Party's women's organisation. The other governors in 1938 were Herbert Fisher (historian and husband of Lettice Fisher); JJ Mallon (Warden of Toynbee Hall); Ian Fraser (a Conservative MP); CHC Millis (managing director of Barings Bank); and the chairman, Robert Collet Norman (a former chairman of London County Council and brother of Montagu Norman, Bank of England governor).

Fry revealed the news of her appointment in a letter to one of her sisters marked 'private'. She confessed that she had been trying to decide whether or not to accept and was particularly concerned about the five year term, but had been reassured by the postmaster general that it was possible to resign before the end: she was, in her own words, unsure if she would 'stick it' for that long. According to Fry the position was 'a sinecure as you get £1000 a year doing very little'. 'This is one of the things that sticks in my gizzard,' Fry – who had a



private income - told her sister, as 'there are so many people who want the cash more than I do'. Another problem was Fry's political leanings, for her as much as for the Corporation: 'they know that I am "left", but I feel [the BBC post] may give me a sense of lessened liberty, of responsibility without real power', she wrote.<sup>25</sup> Given that the governors had 'all authority, power and responsibility [for the BBC] vested in them', one can perhaps understand why Fry hesitated, despite the governorship being a desirable – and paid – position.<sup>26</sup> As a prominent left-wing intellectual, she perhaps feared co-option by the establishment. But she undeniably had extensive official committee experience and had long been regarded as a 'safe pair of hands' in Whitehall, so it is not hard to understand why she was chosen.<sup>27</sup>

Despite Fry's misgivings, she agreed to take the job. In response to the news, her niece drew a cartoon showing Fry in her armchair surrounded by lobbying figures. One suggests that 'the BBC is in the hands of the gov[ernmen]t', another that it 'is in the hands of the Reds', while a third claims that 'the music is much too classical' and a fourth that 'the BBC is most immoral'. Other figures ask Fry for 'better music' and 'brighter broadcasts', while a man at her feet says 'I am sure that you would like me to give some talks on the BBC'. Next to him is a cat, supposedly requesting 'more broadcasts for cats.'<sup>28</sup> The overall effect of her niece's loving portrait is of a roughly drawn, but charming cartoon, with Fry situated domestically with her armchair and cat, yet besieged by insistent campaigners because of her new power. However the cartoon also encapsulates the seriousness of Fry's responsibility, the competing interests of listener groups, and the pressure she was likely to come under because of her appointment. According to the BBC's official historian, governors were supposed to be 'persons of judgement and independence' who should 'inspire public confidence by having no interests to promote other than the public service.'<sup>29</sup> Yet, inevitably even such paragons were likely to have their own predilections.

The most important decision facing the governors in 1938 was the replacement of Sir John Reith as Director-General. Reith had run the BBC for nearly sixteen years but had decided that he did not want to remain in post for much longer. He tendered his resignation at the governors' meeting on 8<sup>th</sup> June. The governors immediately commenced the job of finding a successor.<sup>30</sup> The board of governors' minutes tell us little about the process of appointment (neither regarding how the choice of a new director-general was arrived at, nor who made the decision), although there is a list of candidates, who were considered for the job without being informed. The chosen successor to Reith turned out to be FW Ogilvie, vice-chancellor of Queen University, Belfast. What part, if any, Fry played in this decision is a mystery, but it is interesting to note that Ogilvie, like Fisher and Fry herself, had strong Oxford connections.<sup>31</sup>

Fry's part in some other board discussions and the attitudes she adopted can be ascertained from governors' minutes. At her fifth meeting, on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1938, Sunday morning broadcasts were a topic of discussion. A minute reported that:

Miss Fry would have liked something for discussion groups. It was explained that there would need to be an alternative programme of a light entertainment type and that this would cost too much money. Discussion group would not serve the purpose of the extension of hours, i.e. competition with [Radio] Luxembourg. Lady Bridgeman would have preferred silence during morning service hours.<sup>32</sup>

It was not surprising that Fry, an agnostic, was advocating a discussion programme, while the keen Anglican, Lady Bridgeman wanted to encourage church-going by keeping the airwaves empty on Sunday mornings. In the event Bridgeman's view prevailed as - following the recommendation of the Religious Advisory Committee - it was agreed not to offer secular alternatives to the religious programming on Sundays. Nevertheless, the minutes noted that the governors received the advice 'with regret' and wanted to reconsider the matter as soon as a 'convenient opportunity' arose.<sup>33</sup> In other meetings Fry expressed strong support for the Sadlers Wells opera company; relayed complaints she had received about a radio play; asked

about the assigning of rights for the popular comedy sketch show (and biggest new hit of 1938) *Band Waggon*; and inquired as to the legal position regarding television broadcasts shown in cinemas.

Perhaps Fry's most characteristic (and idiosyncratic) intervention came in January 1939 when she complained about a proposed broadcast involving astrology. She 'expressed the hope that the BBC would do nothing to encourage popular support' for something which she clearly regarded as not only unscientific but also dangerous. The explanation from the controller of programmes - that the subject would not be treated seriously in the programme - did not seem to mollify her outrage or that of Fisher, who expressed his agreement with her point.<sup>34</sup> In addition to raising the issue in a meeting, Fry wrote to the director of talks, Sir Richard Maconachie, but in reply he pointed out that the programme in question was the responsibility of the variety department and not of his section. In the same letter Fry also objected to a talk on egg-collecting, a matter on which she received the significant support of Julian Huxley, secretary of the Zoological Society. 'Unless you happen to be, as I am, very much interested in birds, you will hardly believe the lengths of iniquity to which egg-collectors go, or the number of species they have either completely or nearly stamped out of the country', she explained.<sup>35</sup> Taken altogether, Fry's interventions as BBC governor seem to range from incisive questions on legal issues, to the flogging of her personal hobbyhorses. They do not seem to equate to any notion of representing 'women listeners'.

I could find no record of any scripted on-air appearances by Fry during her tenure as governor. However, although the appointment was ostensibly for five years, she only served for one-and-a-half. The ending of her governorship was controversial. In 1935 Reith made a secret agreement with the General Post Office (then the government department that oversaw broadcasting) that should war break out, the BBC board of governors would be taken 'out of commission' and replaced by the Director-General and his deputy in sole command, albeit

with enhanced power for a Minister of Information. However, it was not until September 1938 – at a meeting held in the midst of the Munich crisis – that the governors were told of this plan and they clearly did not like it. The board evidently felt that the agreement had been made ‘behind their backs’ and argued that ‘the total eclipse of the independence of the Corporation would be widely regarded as a serious blow to liberty...’<sup>36</sup> After a meeting with an advisor to the Prime Minister, a compromise was reached which amended the proposals for the BBC’s wartime command to a reduction in the size of the governing body to two: the chairman and vice-chairman (by then Sir Alan Powell and C. H. G. Millis respectively). All the other governors - including the two women on the board – were to lose their posts.

The plan was put into operation on 5 September 1939, following the official declaration of war, but was not announced until late September. The five unwanted governors duly resigned. Fry and Mallon both made statements which suggest their support for or acquiescence with the change: Fry was quoted as pointing out that since the government bore ‘the whole responsibility for the publication of news’ in wartime ‘it would have been difficult for private persons to exercise any real control’, while Mallon compared the arrangement to ‘the emergency policy of the London County Council and virtually all the London boroughs’ who had all agreed to have their operations run by small groups of members. Mallon claimed that the only viable (and to his mind, undesirable) alternative ‘would have been to hand the BBC over lock, stock and barrel to the Government’. At least with the chosen arrangement, some of its independence would be maintained: it was ‘still a free body’, he said.<sup>37</sup> However, not all the displaced governors were as sanguine. Following a prime ministerial statement on the matter in the House of Commons demanded by the Labour Party, Fisher revealed in the *Times* some of the behind-the-scenes manoeuvres, including the fact that the original, secret agreement would have had the effect of ‘eliminating the Governors altogether’ and that ‘it was only as a result of an energetic protest

from the Governors...that the present arrangement was arrived at'. As far as Fisher was concerned, he was merely acquiescent: 'Governors were naturally anxious to fall in with any plan which could be represented as making for greater efficiency in wartime' although 'it would not have occurred to them to suggest it'.<sup>38</sup> Fry's friendship with Fisher and his wife might suggest that her views on the matter may not have been so different from his. Margery Fry's brief tenure as a BBC governor was ended. When the board was enlarged once more in 1941 she was not to be a part of it (despite the backing of the *Manchester Guardian* which urged the new prime minister, Winston Churchill, to bring back Fry, Mallon and Fisher to keep 'the Corporation broadly in touch with the national temper').<sup>39</sup> However, by then she was involved in a very different aspect of broadcasting work, as a regular participant in *The Brains Trust*, a panel discussion programme.

### ***The Brains Trust***

*The Brains Trust* was pre-eminently a programme whose panellists could lay claim to the label, 'intellectual'. Launched on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1941 this innovative discussion programme had the brief to be 'serious in intention, light in character', balancing 'intellectualism' with 'entertainment'.<sup>40</sup> *The Brains Trust* had three regular panellists: Julian Huxley; Professor CEM Joad of Birkbeck College, London; and Commander AB Campbell (a former naval officer who had previously proved a successful broadcaster on a programme called *Men Talking*). The three men respectively represented science; philosophy; and the 'ordinary', plain-speaking man of experience. They were supplemented each week by a succession of guest fellow-pundits. The entire panel gave unscripted answers to questions submitted in letters from members of the armed forces or civilians. Sample questions included: 'What is art?'; 'Why do we cry?'; 'Why are there so few, if any, women of genius?' and 'Why does

music have an effect on the emotions?’<sup>41</sup> Although it was initially given the title, *Any Questions?* the programme was generally known as *The Brains Trust*, and proved to be very popular, not only with the armed forces for whom it was originally devised but also with the public in general. It was promoted to a better time slot, made to have an extended run and given extra minutes on air for each episode.<sup>42</sup>

Fry was invited to be a panellist during the programme’s first season and the evidence suggests that her reputation and cultural capital ensured that she was soon trusted to be a capable contributor to these innovative, unscripted discussions.<sup>43</sup> Like all other ‘brains’ – there was no extra money for the regular ‘stars’ or more pay for men than women – she initially received a fifteen guinea fee for each appearance, plus lunch at a top London restaurant such as the Café Royal or the Dorchester before the recording. The fee increased to twenty guineas after the programme was lengthened to 45 minutes and promoted to a better time slot.<sup>44</sup> Fry became a regular panellist, appearing in each of the next six seasons.<sup>45</sup> Her initial appearance was no doubt facilitated by the fact that she appeared on the 1936 BBC list of approved ‘talkers’ who could be trusted with a microphone, but without a script, and could talk fluently and ‘with discretion’. The list was clearly still in current use in 1941 (a copy being in *The Brains Trust* file in the BBC archives).<sup>46</sup>

It is significant, however, not only that *The Brains Trust* producers consistently felt that they had a problem with women panellists, but also that they were clearly under some pressure to ensure that women’s voices were heard, if not every week then at least on a regular basis. Suggestively, the BBC files include a letter from Fry’s old friend, Lettice Fisher, wife of her former fellow-governor, complaining that there was never more than one woman on each panel. Yet producers felt they were hard pressed to even supply one woman per programme who could be regarded as competent.<sup>47</sup> In 1945 a BBC executive noted that ‘we are very badly off for women and young people. We made a drive for women in 1944

and had more than ever before. Few of them made good.’ In the 1944-5 season there had been 39 appearances by women in the 38 programmes, as opposed to 35 in 45 the previous year. The 39 appearances were shared between eleven women, as the producers were no longer – at their own admission - being ‘venturesome’ by trying out new women, but were ‘building up’ the ones that they already had on their books. This policy was clearly to the advantage of established, reliable women’s representatives and Fry made four appearances that year, which was roughly the average share for a female ‘brain’. Another Corporation executive placed Fry alongside Mary Agnes Hamilton (also a former governor) in joint first place on his list of suitable women.

[They are] in every way as competent as the male members..... I hesitate to bracket Fry and Hamilton on one ground only. They both seem to me admirable, but Hamilton’s voice is stamped so strongly with the public’s idea of an intellectual, that it is inclined to prejudice her performance to some slight extent. Fry, on the other hand, might well give an impression of a woman of forty or fifty years of age, and I think it is remarkable that she is able to conceal her years vocally. In my view, both belong to what I have called Class I in the male list.<sup>48</sup>

This was high praise. Audience research, meanwhile, placed Fry roughly in the middle of the league table of ‘trustees’ [sic] with only Edith Summerskill, Jennie Lee and Barbara Ward out of the female broadcasters achieving a higher ranking.<sup>49</sup> In a survey of listeners Fry was rated ‘very good’ by 64 per cent of respondents.<sup>50</sup> An analysis of the programme’s postbag for the 1944-5 series demonstrated that more letters were received in support of Fry, than against her. However, she attracted a much smaller quantity of correspondence than Joad: a total of five letters (three for and two against) as opposed to Joad’s 173, most of which objected to him.<sup>51</sup>

*The Brains Trust* more than any other series introduced Margery Fry to a wide section of the listening public and helped her to become a household name. According to Asa Briggs, the programme reached 29 per cent of the sixteen-plus population on 21<sup>st</sup> December 1943 and was still in the top five of programmes on the Home Service two years later.<sup>52</sup> It is

regarded as one of the BBC's greatest successes of the war years, and prompted many imitations such as local 'brains trust' question-and-answer evenings organised in village halls, schools, social clubs, and in army units. *The Brains Trust* arrived at a unique historical moment, when not only within the armed forces but also among the general population, there seemed to be hunger for education and political debate, evidenced in the work of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs and in the enthusiastic reception accorded the 1942 Beveridge Report by many commentators.<sup>53</sup> But with such an influential radio programme as *The Brains Trust*, inevitably there were tensions and disagreements behind the scenes. The choice of both panellists and questions became sensitive matters, with the BBC under attack regarding the perceived political bias and/or religious views of panellists and an argument with 'the titanic proportions of a schoolgirl quarrel' between two (male) producers on whether a question about dialectic materialism should be posed.<sup>54</sup> As early as May 1941 the governors and the director-general were expressing unease about chosen panellists' political views, and in 1944 a bishop wrote to complain that the BBC was encouraging sexual promiscuity, since Joad had allegedly used the term 'birth control' on air.<sup>55</sup> The BBC's management attempted to ban altogether questions about politics, religion and even 'vague generalities about life' until the 'brains' collectively wrote a letter of objection.<sup>56</sup> Producers fretted not only about finding suitable women panellists but also about a dearth of right-wing intellectuals, and there was a great deal of sensitivity about the allegedly atheistic opinions and left-wing bias of many 'intellectuals'.

In the midst of this political, cultural and ethical maelstrom, Fry – an agnostic, whose own views certainly could be controversial - did well to gain a reputation with BBC bureaucrats as 'a good standard woman [panel] member [who] answers brightly and good-temperedly'.<sup>57</sup> To adopt the language of the period, she was a 'highbrow' who nevertheless could communicate effectively to the nation's 'middlebrow' listeners.<sup>58</sup> The public visibility



of her *Brains Trust* appearances must also have contributed to her profile as an intellectual broadcasting personality with proven ability to communicate with the general public. The essence of *The Brains Trust* - a blend of intellectualism and populism - suited her very well. As the show's co-creator, Howard Thomas recalled, the programme was designed to 'win a reluctant audience, a generation which was learning how to think'.<sup>59</sup> What better platform could there be for a public intellectual?

### **Fry on the BBC, 1947-57**

During the last decade and a half of her life Fry made numerous appearances on programmes, primarily either for the BBC's schools department, or the world service, or the Light Programme's new magazine for female listeners, *Woman's Hour*, launched in 1947. She also made several appearances on television, even though she was in her late seventies when she first appeared.<sup>60</sup> In addition she made contributions to one of the fixtures of the Sunday morning radio schedule, *The Week's Good Cause*, in which a well-known figure made a public appeal for donations to a specified charity. Among the charities Fry championed on air were the National Association for Mental Health and the Mary Macarthur Holiday Homes for Working Women.<sup>61</sup> In 1956 she was interviewed for a programme about her friend, Virginia Woolf.<sup>62</sup> Although many of her appearances were the result of invitations from producers, some were initiated when Fry pitched the programme idea herself.

As in her less frequent appearances on the radio in the 1930s, Fry's post-war broadcasts drew on her strengths and interests as an educator and a feminist, as well as on her expertise in social questions and penal reform, and her wide experience of the world that she had gained through travel. However, she was evidently hired to address specific audience

groups, especially young people (perhaps remarkably for a woman aged over seventy), women, and overseas listeners.

A typology of Fry's radio appearances does suggest increased emphasis by producers on specific audience segments to which she was suited. For the schools service, Fry's generally gave talks aimed at school-leavers (those aged 14-15), with titles such as 'When one is grown up' and 'When we started work,' and she was also brought in to chair and/or summarise discussions for this age-group. In 1952 she spoke in a series called *For the Fourteens* about her – by then deceased - college friend, Eleanor Rathbone, featuring the latter's work for women's suffrage and the importance of citizenship.<sup>63</sup> Young people were often involved in Fry's broadcasts, either as a topic or in a more active role, such as asking her questions, for example in a 1941 discussion with 'young workers' entitled 'When are you grown up?'<sup>64</sup> In a not dissimilar vein, she took part in a programme called *Question Time*, on the Light programme in 1955, in which the proposition 'The Law – Friend or Enemy?' was explored by Fry, together with a retired police officer, a 'distinguished man of law', and a group of young people from Pimlico. The previous year she participated in a television show called *Asia Club*, answering questions on 'family relations' posed by an audience of 'young men and women from Asian countries'.<sup>65</sup> A still photograph from this broadcast appeared in the *Listener*.<sup>66</sup> A common theme of transition to adulthood and full citizenship seems to lie behind many of these broadcasts.

Although *The Brains Trust* had demonstrated Fry's appeal beyond the confines of women's broadcasting, many of her appearances in this period were on programmes aimed at female listeners. She appeared on the one hundredth edition of *Woman's Hour* in 1947, and in the following year spoke about the publication of Sir William Beveridge's report on voluntary action and parliament's consideration of a criminal justice bill on the programme.<sup>67</sup> Not all Fry's appearances on the strand concerned current events: in 1951 she took part in a

partially scripted interview alongside one of her sisters, Isabel Fry, for a *Woman's Hour* strand entitled 'A Tale of Two Sisters'.<sup>68</sup> The same year Margery Fry was asked to appear in a pioneering television broadcast called *Women's Viewpoint*, 'an unrehearsed discussion by women, for women, about problems of special interest to women'.<sup>69</sup> This was a live, unscripted panel discussion, broadcast in the early afternoon, which has been described as providing 'an implicitly feminist perspective on ... current social and political issues'.<sup>70</sup> Importantly, the all-women panel were regarded as 'experts' not only in their individual fields, but also as representatives of women as citizens in the public sphere. As Mary Irwin points out, Fry and her fellow panellists were presented in this programme as 'women in the role of acknowledged and well-represented public figures'.<sup>71</sup> However, notwithstanding its innovative presentation of women as political figures, the programme remained part of the women-only 'ghetto' of female-orientated broadcasting, and it was soon cancelled.

Fry also broadcast to overseas listeners. The BBC World Service invited her to speak on its Asian, Indian, North American, Pacific, Commonwealth, Australian and European radio services from time to time; not only on topics such as penal reform, prisons, and juvenile delinquency, but also on social change and voluntary service. This wide range of topics underlines her suitability not only as a cultural commentator, but as an interpreter for foreign audiences. Fry was an accomplished French speaker and she made several broadcasts intended for listeners in France, including a talk in French on juvenile delinquency. Unsurprisingly, she was invited to take part in overseas versions of *The Brains Trust* (as well as the television version launched in the mid-1950s).

It has been argued that some of Fry's Bloomsbury friends expressed distain towards popular culture.<sup>72</sup> This was not the case for Fry herself, who despite her decidedly upper-middle class personal tastes, was not an elitist. While the small freelance income from her appearances was undoubtedly welcome, she maintained that media work attracted her mainly

because broadcasting was a 'potent factor in extending the freemasonry of knowledgeable thought and reasoned ideas which used to be the almost exclusive possession of a relatively small (and emphatically social) class'.<sup>73</sup> Among several 'pitches' Fry made to producers was a proposed talk on the higher education of women. Her correspondence with producer Elizabeth Rowley reveals the gestation and growth of a programme idea. Rowley initially warned Fry that there was a need to 'convince' the home service controller that the talk would be 'interesting'.<sup>74</sup> To BBC executives, Rowley explained that the broadcast would be about nineteenth century women's 'empty lives', examining three types of middle-class women in the Victorian era: '...the women who needed to earn... the women who wanted to learn [and]... the women with an urge to "action"' on either imperative.<sup>75</sup> In other words, the proposal was to broadcast a feminist history of women's campaigns for higher education and access to professions: clearly a topic dear to Fry's heart. Following this pitch, a thirty-minute programme was commissioned for a late evening timeslot and Rowley arranged for books (including works about women's education pioneers such as Emily Davies, and novels by the Brontë sisters and Anthony Trollope) to be sent to Fry to help her in her research. A fee of thirty guineas was proposed because of the preparatory work involved. In the event, the programme had a long gestation. In October 1949 it was postponed until the following spring in order to coincide with the centenary of the opening of the North London Collegiate School for Young Ladies. Later in the year Fry submitted her script, but Rowley told her it was too long and would have to be cut. Rowley and Fry also corresponded over the title, both still clearly sharing doubts that the talk would be attractive to listeners: Fry feared that 'the great figures of the past do tend to be obscured by the fact that they are just so far behind the present day as to appear incorrigibly dowdy'.<sup>76</sup> They therefore jointly requested that the talk be billed simply as 'Goodbye to the Parlour' rather than having an 'off-putting' title that contained expressions like 'higher education' and 'position of women'.<sup>77</sup> The correct

packaging of women's history for radio listeners must have been a tricky issue in the early 1950s: it had to be interesting, but not too highbrow or too overtly feminist.

In 1952 Fry proposed a talk for *Woman's Hour* about the unmarried woman, or 'spinster' which would not only utilise her own, personal experience but assert her conviction that single women had a vital, if neglected, role in society. While many women of her generation had remained unmarried, by the 1950s this status was becoming increasingly rare among young people.<sup>78</sup> Fry's intention was to talk to women across the generations about her state of being, and undoubtedly to increase the visibility and worthiness of the 'spinster'. Eventually the talk became a three-part series: an opening broadcast called 'Shall I get married?' followed by a second titled 'The Maiden Aunt' and a third on the theme of growing old alone. Although originally planned for *Woman's Hour*, the series evinced a positive reception, to the extent that there were complaints from 'businesswomen' who had missed the afternoon broadcasts, whereupon the BBC commissioned an evening version.<sup>79</sup> This was very significant, since the evening airwaves were presumed to need to contain programming suitable for men. A forty-minute slot in December 1952 was made available and Fry – perhaps mindful of the different audience composition than for *Woman's Hour* - suggested a wide-ranging discussion by a group of experts. The BBC management rejected her proposal as 'too solemn' and 'less interesting', instead insisting that she give a talk similar to 'Goodbye to the Parlour', using much the same material as she had in *Woman's Hour*.<sup>80</sup> In the event, it was agreed that she would deliver revised versions of the original three broadcasts under the title 'The Single Woman'.<sup>81</sup>

Not all Fry's BBC work in the 1950s was quite so women-orientated. She participated in the television revival of *The Brains Trust* (1955-7) and a philosophical radio series called *A Stake in Society* (1951), where she appeared with two male academics. She continued to make documentaries on prison reform, give reflective, autobiographical talks, and contribute

to unscripted discussion programmes right up until her final illness. Her varied output demonstrates that her contributions were not confined within gendered limits and that she possessed not only the authority to speak to the nation as a whole but also the freedom to generate some programme ideas of her own.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of this article the question was posed whether Fry's reputation as a public intellectual transcended her gender. The answer seems to be a qualified affirmative. By the time of her death in 1958, she was a recognisable personality for BBC viewers as well as listeners. In the sense that she was free to pontificate on subjects outside her specific area of expertise, Fry's broadcasting career demonstrates that it was possible for a woman in mid-twentieth century Britain to attain the status of public intellectual through the medium of broadcasting, and not merely within women's programming.

Fry was certainly a favourite with male critics, which suggested that her appeal was not confined by gendered prejudices. Reviewing her talk 'Fear of the Dark' in the series 'Horrors of Childhood', the *Listener's* Critic on the Hearth, Martin Armstrong said 'Margery Fry... gave us not only a charming impression of mid-Victorian upper-middle class family life but, as all good broadcasters inevitably do, of herself.' Another *Listener* reviewer claimed she 'redeemed' a programme about old age 'from the commonplace'. Referring to the *Asia Club* TV discussion in 1954, the *Manchester Guardian's* critic praised her 'characteristic wisdom, charm, and humour which have made her one of the *best women speakers* on television, as on sound radio.' The critic continued:

What is so remarkable about Miss Fry is the combination of acute common sense with kindness and humanity; her view of life is at once near and far; she can see a problem with detachment but never forgets it is people who matter.<sup>82</sup>

BBC executives were also generally complimentary about Fry's talent for broadcasting. Jean Rowntree – who as a Somervillian may not have been entirely objective – claimed that even aged eighty, Fry still was 'a good broadcaster... with a good hard mind'.<sup>83</sup> Another producer (also female) mentioned her 'verbal magic'.<sup>84</sup> But it is significant that gendered terms such as 'charming' crop up in the critics' reviews and she was labelled a good '*woman speaker*', almost as if this was a specific category. Moreover, the producers and reviewers who praised her probably inhabited a not-dissimilar upper-middle class milieu to Fry, while the reaction of other listeners is harder to assess unless there is audience survey data (which there was for *The Brains Trust*).

Few, if any, recordings of Fry's broadcasts have survived: there are merely some typewritten scripts and documentary evidence of her success on radio and television. In any case, our expectations of what makes a good programme on radio or television have inevitably altered a great deal in the last sixty to eighty years yet one wonders how many women in their eighties are regular participants in panel discussion shows or similar programme types today. However, the evidence is clear that Margery Fry built a solid reputation as a broadcaster from the early 1930s onwards, a reputation that must have made her a very well-known personality in all the places where BBC programmes were received, and that she was at last partially able to transcend people's gendered expectations of women as public intellectuals. Her broadcasting career therefore provides an important corrective to the assumption that only 'talks men' could 'speak to the nation' and that women were confined to programming aimed at their own gender. As Murphy has demonstrated with regard to Hilda Matheson and several other early women employees and contributors at the BBC, Fry was a woman who was in a position to exercise individual agency, for example by successfully offering ideas for individual talks and multipart series, albeit as a freelance contributor rather than staff member.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, certain women had the attributes to prosper

in the predominately upper-middle class world of early British broadcasting, and Fry was one of these. The BBC as an organisation was institutionally receptive to her social and cultural capital - her Oxford education, policy expertise and Bloomsbury connections – to the extent that her gender was less of a structural barrier to success as a public intellectual than might be expected.

Acknowledgements: I am grateful to the Somerville College Library and the BBC Written Archives Centre for access to archive material on which this article is partly based. BBC copyright material is reproduced courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation. All rights reserved.

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: a History of Early Women at the BBC* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Kristen Skoog, 'Striving for Editorial Autonomy and Internal Recognition: The Setting Up of BBC's *Woman's Hour, 1946-1955*', in *Women and the Media: Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to Present*, ed. Maggie Andrews and Sally McNamara (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014); Maggie Andrews, *Domesticating the Airways: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity*, (London: Continuum, 2012), 99-112.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Hugh Chignell *Public Issue Radio: Talks, News and Current Affairs in the Twentieth Century*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) 28.

<sup>3</sup> Maggie Andrews and Sally McNamara, 'Introduction' in Andrews and McNamara, *Women and the Media*, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Stefan Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 47-8.

<sup>5</sup> Chignell, *Public Issue Radio*, 14.

<sup>6</sup> 'Himmler's Blacklist', *Daily Mail*, 14 September 1945. Fry's political work would have contributed to her notoriety with the Nazi regime.

<sup>7</sup> Chignell, *Public Issue Radio*, 28.

<sup>8</sup> For Fry's life and career, see Enid Huws Jones, *Margery Fry: the Essential Amateur*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965) and Anne Logan, *The Politics of Penal Reform: Margery Fry and the Howard League*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 67-8.

<sup>10</sup> 'A Woman about London', *Daily Mail*, 5 November 1928.

<sup>11</sup> Margery Fry Papers, Somerville College (hereafter MFP) 41/3, radio script, 22 November 1928.

<sup>12</sup> Fred Hunter, 'Matheson, Hilda (1888-1940)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. <http://www.oxforddnb.com.9780198> (accessed 16 April 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Kate Murphy, 'From Woman's Hour to other women's lives: BBC talks for women and the women who made them' in Andrews and McNamara, *Women and the Media*, 31-45; Kay Whitehead, 'Broadcasting Bloomsbury', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 20 (1990): 121-31; Chignell, *Public Issue Radio*, 32-6.

<sup>14</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 27 May 1933. Articles adapted from the scripts appeared in the *Listener*.



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- <sup>15</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 7 June and 22 August 1934.
- <sup>16</sup> Chignell, *Public Issue Radio*, 14.
- <sup>17</sup> *Listener*, 7 June 1933.
- <sup>18</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 7 June 1934.
- <sup>19</sup> BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter WAC), R34/888, policy on talks, 1936-7
- <sup>20</sup> Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, 225.
- <sup>21</sup> WAC R1/6/1, governors' minutes, 17 January 1938.
- <sup>22</sup> Hilmes points out that BBC executives were wary of appealing to 'specialist' sections of the audience – including women – before the 1940s. Michele Hilmes, 'Front Line Family: women's culture comes to the BBC', *Media, Culture, Society* 29, no. 1 (2006): 9.
- <sup>23</sup> For Snowden, and her poor relationship with the BBC Director General, John Reith, see June Hannam, 'Snowden, Ethel (1881–1951)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/48517>, (accessed 11 June 2015).
- <sup>24</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 1 January 1938. The size of the governing body had been raised from five to seven a year before: see Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom Volume II: The Golden Age of Wireless*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 434.
- <sup>25</sup> MFP Box 15/3, Margery Fry to Agnes Fry, 3 December 1937.
- <sup>26</sup> Briggs, *History of Broadcasting*, 424.
- <sup>27</sup> For Fry's career as a government advisor, see Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, Chapter 5.
- <sup>28</sup> MFP, 24/3, insert in letter from Pam Diamand to Fry, n.d. [1938?]
- <sup>29</sup> Briggs, *History of Broadcasting*, 424.
- <sup>30</sup> WAC R1/6/1. Fry attended meetings on 13 April, 25 May, 8 June, 22 June, 29 June, 13 July and 27 July 1938.
- <sup>31</sup> Briggs, *History of Broadcasting*, 634-7; BBC WAC, R1/6/1.
- <sup>32</sup> WAC, R1/6/1, Minute G.31/38, 30 March 1938.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 8 March 1939.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, board of governors' minutes, 26 October 1938; 11 January, 22 February, 8 March, 31 March 1939.
- <sup>35</sup> WAC RCONT 1 Fry, Margery file (hereafter RCONT 1 Fry), Machonachie to Fry, 12 January 1939.
- <sup>36</sup> Asa Briggs, *The BBC: the First Fifty Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 180.
- <sup>37</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 30 September 1939.
- <sup>38</sup> *The Times*, 23 October 1939.
- <sup>39</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 21 March 1941.
- <sup>40</sup> Howard Thomas, *With an Independent Air* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977), 58.
- <sup>41</sup> BBC WAC R51/23/1, questions for 4 May 1941.
- <sup>42</sup> Thomas, *Independent Air*, 59. For the popularity of The Brains Trust, see also Briggs, *First Fifty Years*, 200.
- <sup>43</sup> Chignell notes that the unscripted discussion was an innovation of the war years. *Public Issue Radio*, 54.
- <sup>44</sup> WAC RCONT 1 Fry; Thomas, *Independent Air*, 73-85.
- <sup>45</sup> WAC RCONT 1 Fry. Her final appearance on *The Brains Trust* was in 1949, the year the series ended on radio.
- <sup>46</sup> WAC, R34/888, policy on talks, 1936-7.
- <sup>47</sup> WAC, R41/22/2, letter from Mrs HAL Fisher. Programme listings however suggest there were occasions when two women were on the panel.
- <sup>48</sup> WAC R51/22, 'Women in the fourth series of the *Brains Trust*'; report on fifth series of *The Brains Trust*. Fry was in her seventies at this point.
- <sup>49</sup> WAC R51/23/4, report on second series of *The Brains Trust*.
- <sup>50</sup> WAC R51/23/5, listener research 1945-6.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, analysis of criticisms of trustees [sic], 1944-5. Joad was consistently the most controversial panellist.
- <sup>52</sup> Briggs, *First Fifty Years*, 200 and 231.

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- <sup>53</sup> For a critique of wartime proponents of social reform and the role of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, see C. Barnett, *The Audit of War* (London: Macmillan, 1986) 44-5.
- <sup>54</sup> WAC, R51/22. The disagreement was between the original co-producers of the show, Howard Thomas and Douglas Cleverdon. The latter, the Oxford-educated representative of the features department, also championed the ‘highbrow’ panellists against the more populist instincts of Thomas who introduced celebrities, such as the actor Leslie Howard ‘to attract women listeners’. See Thomas, *Independent Air*, 78.
- <sup>55</sup> WAC, R41/22/1, letter from the Bishop of St Albans.
- <sup>56</sup> Briggs, *First Fifty Years*, 200fn.
- <sup>57</sup> WAC R51/22.
- <sup>58</sup> For a discussion of the contemporary usage of terms such as ‘highbrow’ and ‘middlebrow’, see Collini, *Absent Minds*, 113-6.
- <sup>59</sup> Thomas, *Independent Air*, 59.
- <sup>60</sup> There are two photographs in the *Listener* of her television appearances: *Listener*, 12 April 1951 and 30 December 1954.
- <sup>61</sup> *Radio Times*, 9 April 1948 and 18 January 1957.
- <sup>62</sup> WAC scripts, ‘Portrait of Virginia Woolf’, 29 August 1956.
- <sup>63</sup> MFP 41/4, Radio Script: *For the Fourteens: Eleanor Rathbone*, 18 March 1952.
- <sup>64</sup> Logan, *Politics of Penal Reform*, 140.
- <sup>65</sup> *Radio Times* listing, genome.ch.bbc.co.uk (accessed 15 June 2015).
- <sup>66</sup> *Listener*, 30 December 1954.
- <sup>67</sup> MFP 41/3, *Woman’s Hour* scripts.
- <sup>68</sup> WAC RCONT 1 Fry, invitation dated 7 November 1951.
- <sup>69</sup> *Radio Times* listing for 3 April 1951, genome.ch.bbc.co.uk (accessed 15 June 2015).
- <sup>70</sup> Mary Irwin, ‘Women’s Viewpoint: representing and constructing femininity in early 1950s television for women’ in Andrews and McNamara, *Women and the Media* 113-126, at 116.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>72</sup> Chignell, *Public Interest Radio*, 32.
- <sup>73</sup> WAC Press Cuttings file, P290, *Glasgow Herald*, 28 June 1951.
- <sup>74</sup> WAC RCONTI Fry, letter from Elizabeth Rowley to Fry, 28 April 1949.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, memorandum from Rowley, 6 May 1949.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, letter from Fry to Rowley, 12 October 1949.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, memorandum from Rowley, 28 February 1950.
- <sup>78</sup> S. Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1999), 131.
- <sup>79</sup> WAC RCONT 1 Fry, Publicity Department memorandum, nd [September 1952].
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, letter from Eileen Malony to Fry, 12 November 1952.
- <sup>81</sup> Scripts for these programmes are in MFP 41/4.
- <sup>82</sup> *Listener*, 28 October 1954 and 23 August 1956; *Manchester Guardian*, 21 December 1954, emphasis added.
- <sup>83</sup> WAC RCONT 1 Fry, memorandum from Jean Rowntree to TS Gregory, 12 March 1954.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, memorandum from Malony to Rowntree, 15 July 1954.
- <sup>85</sup> Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*.

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