As a female broadcaster, I know how 'lookism' holds women back

The ridiculous idea that women become socially, professionally or aesthetically redundant after a certain age has not gone away

Every woman who works in broadcasting has stories about how her physical appearance is judged. When I first worked in TV, I learned a female colleague was – in a senior male's opinion – "eating herself off the air". For many onscreen women, the advent of high definition (HD) television was less about improving viewing quality for the audience, and more about a new level of scrutiny of their looks.

Warpaint-like makeup does not fly on HD, so there is nowhere to hide the multitude of sins it used to cover. And by "sins" I mean perfectly natural blemishes, wrinkles or signs of ageing. In theory, this could have presented an opportunity to change attitudes. Instead, I have witnessed women feeling new pressure to have cosmetic procedures, or even plastic surgery.

I doubt the proponents of HD were thinking about the fate of older women when they rolled it out. But it's just one manifestation of the deeper problem the broadcaster Libby Purves lamented this week, when she accused the BBC of "lookism" towards older women. Midweek, the show that she fronted for 33 years, ended its run in 2017. Purves, 70, pointed out that other older women – including Sue Barker, 64, who has been presenting BBC One's A Question of Sport for 24 years, and Woman's Hour's Jenni Murray, 70 – have also left their fixtures in recent weeks. Those middle-aged women who do remain, Purves pointed out, "must struggle to look youthful". This is true even for radio, now that video clips are used on social media and photography on the BBC Sounds app

The appearance of women on TV has always been policed, and current affairs content has been no exception. A two-decades-old study of 128 female US TV anchors finding that they struggled with perceptions of their physical appearance was followed up in 2018 with research that found that little or no progress had been made. In fact, some things have been getting worse. In an academic paper last year with the self-explanatory title "I Always Watched Eyewitness News Just to See Your Beautiful Smile" , researchers found the requirement to interact with viewers in real time opened up new avenues to harassment and scrutiny of women based on their appearance, to seriously detrimental effect.

Of course, the reason we are watching television is so that we can see something visually stimulating. But the idea that this needs to be in the form of a young woman, or one who is thin, has perfect teeth, or is generally age-defying, is demonstrably nonsense. A cursory glance at the physical appearance of many of the older men who remain staples of our TV schedules eviscerates that notion.

That many of the women Purves is talking about work in radio is extra-ironic. If having a "face for radio" is one of the richest insults you can pay someone in the broadcast media, it seems the current expectations mean older women don't even meet that low bar.

I have skin in this game, and I struggle with it. I spend a lot of time on camera, and in the last two years making documentaries which required intense, long days being on camera over an extended period of time. Filming the same series over months or years

means attempting to look consistent in spite of all the physical changes that inevitably take place when the seasons are changing. Your weight is fluctuating; and you are, of course, getting older.

I wanted to rebel against the pressure, but instead I arranged the same strategic hairstyle for every shoot, and got up long before our dawn calls to apply extra under-eye concealer. I didn't want to challenge our expectations of how women should look on camera; I wanted people to think I looked good. I am not at the age that the kind of ageism Purves describes kicks in. But one day I will be.

If you wonder why anyone should care about the fate of female broadcasters, it's because what happens to us is not just a symptom of what happens to women in general, but also a cause. The images of women we consume in the media shape our perceptions of value. Seeing what Purves described as "grey and stout" women hosting popular programmes reinforces the fact of their expertise, their generational and lived experience, and a beauty standard that includes them. The BBC makes a big deal about keeping Mary Beard and Kirsty Wark on our screens, but when many older women are being dismissed from their roles it normalises the idea that they are socially, professionally or aesthetically redundant.

These attitudes are prevalent in many other professions as well. Research shows that notions of physical capital remain highly gendered in professional services firms such as law and accounting, where women who conform to a rigid set of expectations may succeed where those who don't are crowded out. These expectations are linked with whiteness, thinness and being "feminine" in appearance, while endorsing masculine norms in their approach to work.

It's not surprising that the women Purves named are all white, because so few older black women have been afforded the kind of longevity that exposes them to the problem of ageing on air in the first place. Writing this, I noticed that a highly Googled search term right now is "too many ethnic minorities on TV" – revealing a backlash even to the inadequate progress that has been made. But if white female broadcasters with national-treasure status are at risk of being discarded the minute they no longer conform to ideas of youthful female beauty, it looks less than peachy for everyone else.