

Women in Journalism

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

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Muncie, Indiana

May, 1991

August, 1991



While the field of journalism has traditionally been dominated by men, female students make up a majority of all journalism classes. Yet some of the early forms of discrimination still exist.

United States census reports indicate that in 1870 less than .06% of journalists were females with the number increasing to 4% in 1890 (Beasley and Theus, 1988, p. 7). Although so few women were actually employed in journalism, in 1886, Martha Louise Rayne created the first journalism school in the world to give training to women. She advertised her school as educating in the "preparation of manuscript, words and how to use them, the art of saying things...reporting, essay writing, reviews, sketches, short stories..." (Beasley and Theus, 1988, p. 6).

While Rayne's school began in 1886, it was not until 1908 that the University of Missouri became the first officially recognized journalism school. Although the school admitted women into the journalism program, they were not mentioned in the curriculum plan which called for a training of men in the field

(Beasley and Theus, 1988, p.8). While men were trained not only for the writing aspects of journalism, but also the technical and managerial aspects, women received training much like that offered at Rayne's school. Such training allowed women to write articles for the women's pages.

Early women's pages were made popular by Joseph Pulitzer who began running columns for women in his 1886 New York *World*. The articles included information on social events, food, fashions, homemaking and stories of women in the public arena (Marzolf, 1977, p.6). Women's pages provided a means of writing for female journalists, but offered little in the way of reward. Florence R. Roys, women's page writer and wife of an editor who created some of the first such pages, said writing for the women's pages was by no means a profitable endeavor (Beasley and Theus, 1988, p.9). Yet women who graduated from journalism programs were expected to write women's page material, doing work subordinate to that of men.

By 1901, American women felt insulted by the

content of women's pages. Women journalists longed for a chance to write stories comparable to those men wrote. Women, in general, grew tired of recipes, fashions and homemaking tips and wanted stories with substance.

After women were granted the right to vote and more attended college, the women's pages began to reflect a more professional and scientific stance (Marzolf, 1977). Change continued after World War I when stories focused on women's roles in wartime factory work and their support of the war effort. In the Depression era, however, women's news turned once again toward homemaking (Marzolf, 1977).

World War II not only brought women into the workplace in business, industry and the military, but it also brought women into the spotlight. Stories of women taking the place of men who had gone to war highlighted the women's pages alongside the traditional features (Marzolf, 1977). It could be argued, however, that stories of women succeeding in areas previously dominated by men should have been placed nearer the

front page.

As in many other occupations, women who had taken the place of men in the newsroom during wartime were quickly fired as the war ended (Edwards, 1988). While women performed well in the absence of male reporters, editors argued that women were not well-suited for the job on a permanent basis. Editors felt women were "too undependable and emotional for beats like sports, politics, business, labor, agriculture, and finance or for copy editing and rewrite" (Beasley and Theus, 1988, p.31). Although such narrow-minded thinking drove many women away from journalism and toward a family life or alternate careers, others felt a challenge to make a place for themselves in the field.

Working in a male dominated profession was no easy task as journalists faced the problems of inferior pay for equal or superior work, lesser job assignments, and on-the-job stress. All of which are problems women journalists must still deal with today. When not confined to women's pages, female reporters were not allowed jobs on any of the Washington D.C. papers,

denied admittance to the congressional press gallery and refused membership in the National Press Club (Roper, 1985). Katharine Graham, a 1939 *Washington Post* reporter and its president in 1963, said of early journalists, "men thought they were better than women-- and the sad part is, a lot of women thought so, too" (Roper, 1985).

Often women experienced difficulty convincing editors of their abilities and qualifications for the job. Editors tended to cling to the idea that women were too emotional for covering hard news. As the position of women changed in American society, so did the position of women in journalism.

In earlier days of the profession, women were grateful to be employed and willing to work for low wages. Increasingly, however, such practices are no longer acceptable, especially among young journalists (Rich, 1987). In addition, as women begin to dominate the field some scholars fear low pay and a lack of status in the profession will lead to journalism becoming a "pink-collar" ghetto, a low paying field

dominated by women such as nursing, teaching and social work (Beasley and Theus, 1988). While enrollment is increasing in journalism schools, the field may no longer attract the best and the brightest students due to lack of status and low salaries.

Money and social position are not the only concerns of women journalists. Many are plagued by job stress related to a Type A personality in which a person is nervous, competitive, aggressive and unable to relax. Stress can cause physical ailments such as headaches, back pain, ulcers, depression and insomnia (Rich, 1987). While male journalists experience some the same disorders, the problem is magnified for women due to their dual role as professionals and mothers.

In other cases, women are dissatisfied with their work in journalism because they feel a sense of frustration with the manner in which their work is treated. Female journalists are tired of "a lack of serious commitment to giving women... the good assignments they have earned and promoting them to jobs they would have if they were men" (Mills, 1990). Such

mistreatment leads some women to leave the profession early in their careers. In a study of 821 journalists at 12 mid-sized dailies across the nation, 62% of the women thought about leaving journalism, while only 52% of the men had similar thoughts (Rich, 1987). One woman in the study worked a year and a half at the paper and regretted ever getting into journalism, stating that \$16,000 was not worth personal and professional sacrifices required of her.

In addition, as more women work in journalism, there exists a growing concern about child care and pregnancy leave policies within newspapers. Because journalism requires unstable hours and a tremendous time commitment, women journalists are finding it difficult to manage a family and a career.

In 1939 R.E. Wolseley, a male journalism professor at Northwestern University, said, "women cannot become journalists. Men will not let them. And the men cannot be blamed" (Beasley and Theus, 1988. p. 21). Wolseley spoke of a need for men to keep women in the home and out of the workplace, especially the newsroom.

He felt it was the job of men to support wives and not vice versa, a view still widely held by editors.

In some instances, however, a family needs the support of two incomes, whereas in others, the woman works in journalism because she enjoys her work. Some women journalists find that no matter how enjoyable the field is, balancing both a career and children is a difficult task. Some women feel they are forced back to work too soon after their children are born, not allowing them enough time to recuperate from the birth. While few papers have maternity policies, still fewer offer paid leave. The worst scenario for a woman journalist is to be fired rather than given leave, a common occurrence in the newspaper industry (Schoonmaker, 1988).

Some critics feel that as the number of women in top management positions increases, maternity and child care policies will change. Others stress that the traditions developed early in the industry will continue. In accordance with Wolseley's proposition that women belong with the family while men take on

jobs, many managers wish to continue such beliefs. According to Jean Gaddy Wilson, a researcher at University of Missouri, increasing the number of women in top positions may be of no help because those top women arrived at their positions without children and like their male counterparts view child care as an unimportant area of the industry (Schoonmaker, 1988).

A woman's role in the field of journalism has changed significantly over the years, but more change is expected for the future. While women have progressed from being confined to the women's pages to taking on jobs as war correspondents, they still need to move forward in many areas of journalism.

In the way of redefining the women's pages, since the 1960s, newspapers have turned to changing the name of the section to compliment its widened readership. In 1969, the *Washington Post* not only changed the title of its woman's page, but also adjusted its content to include stories on lifestyle, cultural and social problems (Marzolf, 1977). In addition, editors at the *Post* recognized that not all stories about women should

be placed in a woman's section. Such modifications in the format and content of the women's pages may be contributed in part to the women's movement (Marzolf 1977).

Nicholas Von Hoffaman, a *Washington Post* columnist, suggested when changing women's pages, editors should note that men and women do not have bipolar interests. He also suggested the staff of the new "women's pages" comply with the same standards as a city desk and be experienced in the areas of economics, legislative policy making and welfare (Marzolf 1977).

Women journalists have come a long way since the early days of journalism and so has the profession. The women's pages have been transformed into lifestyle pages, including articles of interest to both men and women, and the pages are no longer written solely by women. Women are now sent overseas to cover war and politics, whereas in earlier days they would have been chosen to cover the canning season.

Despite the fact that the role of women in journalism is constantly changing, they have made

greatest advancement during times when the rights or roles of all women were being expanded, such as in the times of achieving suffrage, war efforts and women's liberation. Many female journalists made outstanding careers for themselves during such times and contended with much male opposition. Although most women wrote for the women's pages, a few pioneered in the challenging, male dominated areas of foreign and war correspondence.

By 1987, nearly 20% of foreign correspondents were women. Most news agencies require journalists to have obtained two degrees, one in journalism, the other in an international relations field, and to have foreign language and overseas experience (Edwards, 1988, p. 246). These requirements allow women journalists to prove they are qualified to cover more than social events and homemaking in the women's pages.

Overcoming the stigma of the women's pages has been only one of many problems for women journalists. Being a majority in journalism schools does not guarantee equal treatment in the newsrooms. Women must

also deal with the stress of the competitiveness and aggressiveness of the field while trying to manage a family. Compounding these problems is the low pay that is characteristic of journalism.

Possible solutions to these problems can begin on the part of news managers. To keep female employees happy and on the job, managers need to take a close look at their newsrooms and find out what concerns the journalists. Managers may find they need to implement more regularly scheduled hours, rather than sporadic call-ins. Parental leave and equal pay policies may help to alleviate some of the stress experienced by female journalists (Mills 1990). To get such programs enacted women may have to work together to force the newspaper to establish a formal policy. Letting editors know they will lose quality journalists by refusing to enact policy may aid in implementation. In addition, managers could allow women decide for themselves if they are "man enough" to cover dangerous stories (Mills, 1990).

In working with women journalists with families,

managers may wish to look into adequate maternity leave, in many cases up to six months off rather than the six week usually allowed. Also, women want to be guaranteed to return to their specific jobs after leave without fear of being demoted or scheduled poor hours.

A three month, partially paid maternity leave is granted to women of all occupations in Japan, and some European countries allow women fully paid maternity leave (Schoonmaker, 1988). Management could also help further the careers and reduce the stress of women with small children by implementing company provided child care. Several newspapers across the nation have attempted to create child care facilities to aid their employees. Others such as *The Seattle Times* subsidize child care for their employees until the proper facilities are built (Cooney, 1988).

The advancement of women in journalism is not only aided by the work of managers in the field, but also by the work of educators. Journalism educators need to pay close attention to the needs of their students of both sexes. As more and more women enter the field,

however, they need to be educated on how to prepare for on the job and family/career stress and how to avoid the health hazards of such problems: heart attacks, depression, nervousness (Rich, 1987).

To aid in such education, schools may wish to offer health education classes for young women highlighting the benefits of healthy eating and exercise stress reduction. The program can be university wide since women going into almost any profession may be faced with the pressures of career and family. Also, journalism advisors may ask a the staff of a campus counseling center or local mental health facility to address the risks of stress in a classroom lecture for both male and female students.

In addition, women may need educators to act as role models who can offer realistic career advice. Since women constitute the majority in journalism schools, educators in these institutions need to encourage women to continue their education and aspire to top management positions (Beasley and Theus, 1988, p. 141).

Women also need to act to further their careers. While the number of women in journalism continues to increase, numbers alone will not help to advance the status of female journalists. Aggressiveness may be the key, however. At a National Press Club conference, John Seigenthaler, former president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, said "'the more good ol' boys like me are forced to face realities of equity in the marketplace, the more progress will be made'" (Mills, 1990).

Besides making their presence known, women need to gather at conferences to discuss the problems they face and offer solutions (Beasley and Theus, 1988, p. 141). Women must also refuse to pass up promotions, refuse to stay in unsatisfactory jobs and demand management give them job sharing and child care (Mills, 1990).

Despite the many changes seen in the role of women in journalism, much needs to be done to accommodate them in the areas of low pay and status, advancement to management positions, dealing with a family and career

and getting the proper educational training. Although many changes for women journalists have come during times of national change, wars and movements, women may not have time to wait for another historical moment to advance themselves. They may have to take the initiative and work toward higher pay, stress management, and top positions within newspapers. Doing so may involve breaking tradition in the same manner as early women journalists. Women may have to be aggressive to prove they can manage a family and a newspaper career, especially when others doubt their ability.

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