Women of the Washington Press

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Today women journalists constitute a growing number of Washington women journalists, holding high-profile as well as more mundane jobs. The last forty years have brought them success undreamed of by their predecessors and allowed women to lay the groundwork for playing ever more significant roles in the rapidly changing field of journalism. Barbara Cochran, president emeritus of the Radio–Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), voiced aspirations for young women now entering the ranks after she received the Giants of Broadcasting Award from the Library of American Broadcasting of the University of Maryland, College Park, in October 2009.

Cochran looked back over her own twenty-eight-year career in Washington, which included her working as managing editor of the Washington Star newspaper, vice president for news at National Public Radio (NPR), executive producer of NBC’s Meet the Press, and vice president and Washington bureau chief at CBS News. Before retiring in 2009, she had directed RTNDA for twelve years.

“With so much change roiling the news business today, a lot of journalism students wonder whether they’re making a good career choice,” Cochran said in an alumni publication of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she received her master’s degree in 1968.1 “I envy them because they have the opportunity to participate in a revolution—a revolution as exciting as the one I experienced when I started my career just as newsrooms were opening up to women and people of color. They will
get to design the new journalism, to figure out how to use new technologies to have more impact. They will need to master and defend the traditional standards—journalism that is accurate, ethical and meaningful. But they can be the pioneers who will invent the way to tell news in the future."²

Her comments implied that women have both professional capability and responsibility. Few today would argue otherwise. As the first decade of the twenty-first century unrolled, staff members at the U.S. Senate estimated that half of the five thousand correspondents accredited to the Capitol press galleries are women.³ But for years that was not the case. Women journalists in Washington, like their counterparts in general, faced gender discrimination and stereotyping that made it difficult for them to be (1) employed and (2) taken seriously, particularly as political reporters, for most of the twentieth century.

Even today gender matters, leaving women to deal with the fact that they are not simply journalists but women journalists. Maureen Dowd, the caustic New York Times Washington columnist who won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for column writing that dissected the Clinton White House, referred to the social costs paid by women who challenge prevailing authority. Promoting her book, Are Men Necessary? When Sexes Collide, she commented, “Any woman who criticizes men for a living—which I do because politics is still male-dominated—may have a harder time getting dates,” although she quickly added that she “gets plenty.”⁴

Bringing to journalism experiences different from those of their male colleagues, women have offered an array of voices to both circumvent and uphold the dominant power structure of both politics and mass media. This book tells the story of what they did and how they did it in the midst of technological change and shift-
ing ideas about gender relationships. It questions to what extent women have been able to combine their professional and gender identifications. It also asks, based on historical experience, to what degree Washington women journalists will be in a position to do what Cochran suggests—defend the ideals of traditional journalism based on perceptions of accuracy, fairness, and balance.

As is well known, the whole idea of a professional journalism dedicated to finding that elusive substance called truth has come under increasing attack in recent years, with opinion and the celebration of celebrities themselves substituting for what once was considered political news and discourse. Numerous pundits have mourned the loss of what has been called mainstream journalism with its emphasis on public service and what one sociologist has termed altruistic democracy, which leads it to identify winners, losers, and bureaucratic mismanagement in the political process. In past decades women journalists in Washington fought for a chance to participate in this news process. Now that they have proved themselves and arrived in force, the old idea of news itself is under attack. New forms of media have produced new forms of communication, among them social networking, and a consuming thirst for insider looks at sports, entertainment, and the lifestyles of superstars. Even in Washington, the political capital of the nation, if not the world, as some believers in American hegemony contend, political news seems stale and bombastic, riveted to polarized positions.

Yet, historically, Washington women journalists have viewed news differently and more broadly than their masculine competitors. Due to their own roles, engendered by societal expectations, they had to move beyond the limitations of a journalism that focused on reporting and commenting about conflicts and contro-
verses chiefly of interest to a male-run world. If journalism today has to move outside the box of customary topics and practices, it might start by examining the careers of Washington women journalists, who saw events through a different prism than their male colleagues.
WOMEN OF THE WASHINGTON PRESS