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**Selling Ourselves Short:  
Individual Versus Collective Power Of Young Women In The  
United States Media\***

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Each year in the United States of America more young women graduate from college than men, and more women enter the field of media. Whether women reporters are conscious that as 48% of the reporters in the United States, according to the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), they have the critical mass to influence mainstream media, or whether they believe that women's news is missing from the headlines, is not apparent.

Though the numbers of women in upper management are low, many women reporters say they work in equal-opportunity workplaces. According to Sharyn Obsatz (age 31), reporter with the Multi-Cultural beat at the *California Press-Enterprise*, "Journalism used to be only a few women writing for the society or culture pages, now we have women in some of the most important beats. There is no longer the perception that women can't do hard news."

Even if all newsrooms are not equal opportunity, young journalists say it will take a lot more than gender bias to stop them from doing what they love. "It will take more than being female to slow me from working up the food chain, masters, PhD, I won't stop until I am one of the head cheeses," said Sandra Baltazar Martinez (age 24), reporter at *La Prensa*, a Spanish weekly in California.

Martinez's determination is common in young professional women, but she also represents a new rising generation in the United States; "Latina women always aim at being the best, we don't aim at being *a* reporter, we aim at being *The Reporter*. We always struggle to take criticism as much as possible, our feet are well set on the ground and we work hard." This resolve, while inspiring, may indicate a generation of women going ahead in what may seem a million individual struggles.

Today's young women are not inhibited by a conception of future career limitations, but neither are women ages 22-26 at the stage where they are considering marriage or having families. Since the women's movement for the last 20 years has been relatively quiet, many young women think there is no longer anything left to do for the advancement of women.

Still, climbing the ladder is not a clear objective for this group as it may seem. "I hope I can continue to find niches where I can simply be creating content and articles and work that I love. That is the ultimate luxury, it matters more than a paycheck and climbing up and gaining notoriety," said Twilight Greenaway (age 26), editor of *Wiretap*, an online magazine for young people based out of San Francisco. "When it starts to look like climbing up into an area of work I don't actually enjoy, I think twice."

Melissa Mansfield (age 22), Editorial Assistant for the *Associated Press* in New York, shares Greenaway's professional idealism. "I knew that going into it that money would never be plentiful, but I still honestly believe that by writing you can change the world. I went to Baltimore and met a man who wrote a series of articles that basically saved the lives of dozens of children living in a polluted area. I knew then that I wanted to write and make a difference, even if it was just for one kid, it was worth it."

So do Mansfield and Greenaway have the opportunity to create content according to their values? It depends on where they work. "I sat in on a *Washington Post* editorial board meeting

when I interned in D.C. It was a bunch of white men, one black man sat at the table; he was a sports photographer. The women did not sit at the main table, but in chairs behind it. It was such a shock to see it so obviously in front of me. Here at the *AP* a majority of the office is women, our bureau chief is a woman and the reporters are half and half. There are males in good positions, but I feel like as long as you work hard here, anything is possible,” said Mansfield.

Truly, for Mansfield anything is possible, but the likelihood of career advancement for one woman with a degree from a middle class background does not mean things have improved for all women in the United States. Mansfield’s drive contrasts a survey released by the American Press Institute, which reports that only 1 in 3 women expect to move up at their current paper. As a new reporter, the chances of Mansfield’s continuation or success in the field are roughly 2 out of 3 – the API survey also reveals that 27% of women in the newspaper industry believe they would prematurely leave their jobs, compared with 6% of men.

Greenaway, as the editor of a web magazine for young people that has more young female writers than male, attests to the growing presence of women in alternative media. “My experience is that young women are not interested in mainstream media, but in media that is more likely to have social change and influence.” *Wiretap*, as alternative media in form and content, is an example of a growing sector of public information. “When the internet came about young women were quick to jump on and try and do exciting things, like SheWire which got really big really fast and then disappeared, like a lot of online magazines.” Alternative media may be a great environment for women reporters and women’s coverage, but the field provides little pay, and is not seen by the mainstream public.

Coral Davenport (age 26), an American freelancer in Greece who writes for the *Christian Science Monitor*, says that it is a diversity of skills that have helped her find a job. “It’s unique to have someone here that knows the language and knows both [the American and Greek] worlds. I did need specialized skill in background language, I needed guts and stupidity to jump in on my own.”

Davenport says that she sees other young women in the field of international journalism, and although she does not look up to women in the Greek media because “objective reporting does not exist and facts are not high priority,” she does look up to many female foreign correspondents.

Gender roles in Greece are deeply ingrained, and being female does affect her reporting, but according to Davenport, can be taken advantage of. “The other day I talked to the Minister of Culture and I smiled sweetly and I am a cute young girl and he’ll talk to me. Here the authority figures are all male, but they are willing to spend time with me because I am a young attractive woman. I’ve gotten over that, it’s not going to last forever. If that attitude is going to be there and it can help me with my work, then I don’t care.”

While the “smile sweetly” strategy may work, it only plays into sexism and ageism. Being female may help Davenport’s career for a few years, but according to the American Press Institute, sexism is the reason why 68% of 1 in 3 women do not expect to move up at their current paper.

The presence of foreign correspondents in countries like Greece means the international journalist community has the potential not only to model fair and responsible reporting, but that women reporters could reach out to women in other media cultures and work together to advocate better coverage of women's issues. How to create a culture where this sharing exists is not up to governments, but up to women themselves, training programs and women's media organizations.

Organizations like the Freedom Forum in the U.S. gave Martinez and many other minorities the training that gives them an edge entering the field. Mansfield credits her position at the AP to the training from the Environmental Journalism Academy and the Fund for American Studies on Political Journalism more than to her degree. Trainings in environmental and political journalism give reporters not only the tools they need to do fair and responsible reporting, but also help them understand concepts like environmental racism that they would not have necessarily learned about in school.

Mansfield says she does write about politics and the environment, but most of all the knowledge from the trainings has helped her with other topics. Life experience, according to Mansfield, is most important. "Unfortunately journalism students are never told to at least minor in something else. They learn how to write really well, but they know nothing about the world they are writing about. They need history, international relations, urban studies, other languages and biology to make themselves different, and better than the rest of the potential candidates in the field."

As competition in the industry increases, it is important that it does not further serve sexism by dividing women. According to ASNE, nearly 2,000 journalists left the industry this year. Despite this sharp drop, minority representation in the newsroom was maintained and the percentiles of women in each job categories remained the same.

Training has left Mansfield and Martinez with skills they each draw from on a daily basis. Young journalists in school or other networks are offered various trainings on a fairly regularly, but media workshops that help journalists propose stories that will move women's coverage from the back to the front pages, outline how to create more male/female balance in story sources, or tell them about resources like *Women's E-News*, are not prevalent. Women may have the sheer numbers as reporters, but that does not mean women work together to help each other advance, or understand the concept and necessity of women's news coverage.

Besides opening journalists' eyes to gendered perspectives, key to training is the sustaining of Mansfield's "anything is possible" outlook. Training must teach and support women in exposing stories such as the lack of emergency contraception in New York City or the neglect of thousands of women in the U.S. welfare system, as well as international women's news such as the 5,000 Israeli and Palestinian women holding hands for peace in the Middle East, or the disproportionate affect AIDS is having on girls in Africa. This training would also serve the function of providing women with a press community. For example, through the training at the International Women's Media Foundation, women from around the world made contacts, and kept connected in online discussion groups. As a result, when a female news editor in Namibia faced demotion there was an international community of women to rally around her.

There are many women's groups, even women's media groups in the United States, but young women are not necessarily aware of their existence, or aware that they may need support in the professional barriers women face. Young women may feel comfortable entering the job market because they have a college education, but that points to a bigger class issue in the United States.

For young women who believe they can succeed based on their own strength, and who likely will, it seems far too futile in a world rife with sexist media images and giant gaps in the media representation of the general American population. According to the ASNE study in 2002, women make up 49% of reporters and 37% of newsrooms. Therefore, theoretically, women should have significant media influence. However, one's gender alone does not elicit the understanding that women's coverage is missing from the media. Nor does the high percentile of female reporters mean that if one journalist were to mainstream women's issues, there would be someone there to back her up. There may be thousands of female ears in the U.S. media, but how can they hear what needs to be represented if the voices are quiet?

Women journalists do reach out to each other, but whether they fully utilize the power of their numbers in the United States is a choice, and an understanding, many women are yet to recognize. A discussion of gendered media coverage needs to be held in newsrooms across the U.S., and men need to be included.

On the other hand, a mass movement or formal women's organization does not tell the story of one journalist helping another. Davenport said she had always thought about what advice to give a young woman entering the field: "Work very, very hard, you'll never make a lot of money and take the work very seriously. Don't be intimidated, be able to sit down and call the president of the company or the guy in government and don't beat yourself up. Assume a role of power and comfort and have an authoritative voice, that's still my biggest stumbling block, also the one for a lot of women I know – not to talk yourself down."