

Press Corps Demographics— A Few Good Men

If you think the legislature is dominated by white males, check out the demographics of the capital press corps. Of 34 reporters assigned to cover the 1993 General Assembly, only seven were females, and none were African-Americans. Among print journalists, only one female, yours truly, covered the General Assembly regularly, and I did it part-time for *The Virginian-Pilot*.

What difference does this make? Consider how hard it was determining who would take what role in the press corps' annual skit roasting the General Assembly. Who would play the state's highest ranking black official, House Speaker Dan Blue? And who would take the women's roles? Well, white men, that's who.

"I think it says something when there are no women to play women's parts in the press corps skit and Ken Otterbourg (now assistant city editor of the *Winston-Salem Journal*) puts on a blue face to represent one of the state's leading African-American politicians," says Ruth Sheehan, a reporter and editor for *The News & Observer* of Raleigh, N.C.

What it says is that the press corps is headed in the opposite direction of the General Assembly. At a time when the General Assembly is at its most diverse, the press corps increasingly has become a bastion of white males. And nearly all of those involved in the process of making and gathering news—from reporters to editors to public information officers to the legislators themselves—say the make-up of press corps affects the range of issues it chooses to cover.

"I think the press corps would definitely benefit from having more women and people of color," says Sheehan. Sheehan covered the General Assembly from 1989–1991 for the five-newspaper Freedom Newspapers publishing chain and was the last female to cover the legislature full-time for a major newspaper or

newspaper group. "It's not necessarily a bad thing," says Sheehan. "Having white men covering the legislature doesn't mean they can't cover women's issues. But having more women would only make the press corps better."

Of the seven female reporters listed by the capital press corps as covering the General Assembly during the 1993 session,¹ five work in the broadcast media, four of them with public television. Of the remaining two, one covered the legislature part-time, and the other worked for *The Insider*, a news summary and daily calendar of legislative activity delivered via FAX machine by *The News & Observer*. No black reporters regularly covered the General Assembly, even though about 15 percent of the General Assembly's membership is black.

"The reporters here do a good job, but maybe they don't view issues the same way that a more diverse press corps would," says Chris Fitzsimon, Speaker Blue's press secretary and policy assistant. "Just as the rise of women has made a difference in the general atmosphere in the legislature, a more diverse press corps would further continue the trend of moving this place away from the 'good ol' boys' club."

Says Roslyn Savitt, lobbyist for the N.C. Chapters of the National Organization for Women and the National Association of Social Workers: "I personally feel there should be more females represented in the press corps, and there are no minorities. That's been a problem for awhile."

With five reporters listed on the press corps roster, *The News & Observer* of Raleigh maintains the largest full-time newspaper staff covering the state legislature. All are white men. "I think diversity is good," says Van Denton, president of the capital press corps for the 1993 session and a *News & Observer* reporter. "I think there are possible stories that I might not

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Fundraising Less an Obstacle

One barrier—fundraising—is apparently less an obstacle for female candidates than it once was. Female candidates say they are becoming more comfortable asking for money, and, as the number of female candidates has grown in recent years, various partisan and non-partisan political action committees (PACs) have organized to help these candidates.

In 1992, winning female House candidates raised more than males—an average of \$17,975 compared to \$17,375 for winning male candidates. The difference was wider in the Senate, where successful female candidates raised \$35,177 on average, compared to \$30,379 for winning men.²⁹ In the Senate, three of the top 10 money-raisers were women, while an unsuccessful female candi-

“The public perceives women less negatively, and they are not smeared with that brush that says politicians are bad.”

—SEN. BETSY COCHRANE (R-DAVIE)

date had the 10th highest fund-raising total in the House.³⁰

“I had no trouble raising money or getting support,” says Rep. Berry. Berry says women have become more active in politics and promot-

Press Corps, continued

see just because I’m a white male.”

The UNC Center for Public Television maintained the largest *broadcast* presence at the General Assembly and the most diverse staff. “In the beginning, I sort of felt outnumbered,” says Maria Lundberg, a four-term legislative veteran. “But sometimes I think that being one of the few women that are down there really is an advantage in talking with the legislators.”

Lundberg says the three women who covered the General Assembly during the nightly broadcast of *Stateline: Legislative Reports* helped give the telecast “as many different viewpoints as possible. The feeling has been very strong that all parts of society are represented—to try to have as much diversity as possible.”

Still, there was more criticism of the press corps’ composition than of its coverage of female legislators. “Women legislators are treated, by and large, fairly by the press,” says Sheehan. “Their problems are more with their colleagues.”

Rep. Erin Kuczmariski (D-Wake) says her first-year efforts drew little media attention, but she did not question journalists’ judgment. “Reporters go to the person who is making the news,” Kuczmariski says. “They probably have

not been as interested in me because I am a freshman and still learning. They get their stories from the leadership—like [Speaker] Dan Blue and [Senate President Pro Tempore] Marc Basnight.”

Bruce Siceloff, *The News & Observer’s* state government editor, says even though its legislative reporters all are white males, the newspaper employs a large number of female reporters and is taking steps to hire more people of color. “In hiring or in a promotion—in a staffing decision—diversity should be considered,” Siceloff says. “It’s an important consideration that I weigh in making these decisions.” Siceloff says the newspaper occasionally assigns women to cover the General Assembly when issues are being debated in an area normally covered by a female reporter.

Siceloff agrees that having a woman or an African American reporter assigned to the General Assembly on a regular basis “would broaden our sensitivity to things and make us better.” On the other hand, he says, “I’m not aware of any stories that have been missed” by having all white males cover the legislature.

Sheehan says there were a few occasions, particularly in coverage of political campaigns, when she would write stories about issues ignored by her male colleagues. One such article

ing women's issues, and that translates into more dollars for candidates. "They're out there, and they're active now," she says.

Rep. Connie Wilson, a Charlotte banker, says her business background has helped her raise money. "I'm used to working with people and their money," she says. "A lot of politicians—not just women—are afraid to ask, but I'm not afraid to ask."

In recent years, statewide political organizations such as the Pine Needles Network, N.C. NOW (National Organization for Women), the Women's Political Caucus, and Women Elect have become more active in contributing to female candidates. The Pine Needles Network, for example, was founded in 1990 with the specific goal of helping elect women to the state legislature. "Our

sole function is to raise money and give money away," says Jan Parker, the network's 1992 treasurer and now a Hunt administration official.

While many women's PACs contribute on a non-partisan basis, the Pine Needles Network contributes only to Democratic female candidates who are waging tight races in the general election, Parker says. In 1992, the PAC contributed \$10,500 to 21 female candidates for state legislature.

Senate Minority Whip Cochrane says she knows of no such group that exists strictly to promote female Republican candidates. The Federation of Republican Women's Clubs contributes to female candidates, she says, but its mission is broader than electing women to office. "The Republicans have looked for a strong candidate with the best potential to win," says Cochrane. "If she

concerned a derogatory remark Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Bo Thomas made about women in front of a reporter for *The Independent Weekly* newspaper during the 1990 Democratic primary campaign. Aside from *The Independent Weekly's* Barry Yeoman, Sheehan says she was the only reporter who thought the incident worth reporting.²

If female reporters bring an additional perspective to state government reporting, why don't more women get the assignment? Denton says it may be that women who prove proficient at covering state government—like Sheehan and Elizabeth Leland, an award-winning reporter for *The Charlotte Observer*—quickly move up the ladder to larger papers and more glamorous assignments. Ann Peters, one of two women who covered the 1985 General Assembly for the now-defunct United Press International Raleigh bureau, got promoted from reporter to state editor to foreign desk editor to foreign correspondent in the news agency's Jerusalem Bureau in a dizzying three-year span.

It usually doesn't happen *that* fast. Sheehan joined *The News & Observer's* Orange County Bureau when she left her post with the Freedom newspaper chain. "At the time, I thought it was the only thing to do," says Sheehan of her

legislative reporting experience. "But once I left, I discovered that the world was larger than just the halls of the legislature."

And some legislative observers say gender makes less difference than it used to in the coverage of what were once viewed solely as women's issues. "Most [reporters] have children and most have wives working outside the home who are involved in their own careers," says Rachel Perry, Governor Jim Hunt's communications director. "They are involved in day care for their children and other family issues more so than 10 years ago." Still, the consensus seems to be that more females in the capital press corps would broaden legislative coverage and result in more articles about issues important to women.

—Betty Mitchell Gray

FOOTNOTES

¹ The seven women and their employers are: Betty Gray, *The Virginian-Pilot*; Erika Alderson, *The Insider*; Susan Samples, WECT-TV; and Jane Madden, Beth Hardee, Amy Green, and Maria Lundberg, UNC Center for Public Television.

² Barry Yeoman, "Bo Knows . . . How to Take on Big Business and Jesse Helms, But Does He Know How to Keep His Foot Out of His Mouth?," *The Independent Weekly*, Durham, N.C., April 26, 1990, p. 7.