

Differences?

TWICE A WEEK LAST YEAR, EDITORS READING THE Knight-Ridder/Tribune wire were jolted into consciousness by a Woman-Advisory, alerting them to incoming "women's stories." Though it's now been suspended—for raiding stories from the daily lifestyles budget—management is searching for ways to revive the system.

At newspaper chains large and small, editors are engaged in an unprecedented display of soul-searching. Never have so many news managers worried so much, talked so earnestly, or strategized so deliberately about one group of readers. Like political parties, newspapers are holding special seminars, forming task forces, hiring consultants. And many have already plowed ahead with specially targeted feature sections and customized columns and news beats.

Why the sudden urgency?

The powers that be have lately concluded that women a) vote, and b) spend money. "Twenty years ago it used to be 'NOW is marching on us, what do we do?'" says Nancy Woodhull, a former Gannett executive who has built a full-time consulting business out of helping papers win back women readers. "The calls from publishers now are different. It's from a bottom-line point of view."

The bottom line for publishers is that women have been abandoning newspapers just when their demographics and buying power are most commanding. "Women are enormously valuable customers," says Rena Bartos, a former J. Walter Thompson advertising exec and author of *Marketing to Women Around the World*. "We've come a long way from assuming that only men are interested in the big-ticket items and that women are only interested in food and fashion."

Ridder, Scripps Howard, and others. "The consumer advertisers are trying to reach," says Woodhull, "is slowly but surely going away."

If the danger is clear, the explanations for the growing gender gap are still hotly debated. Theories run from the wishful (readership declines as people age, says NAA research director Al Gollin, making women—who generally outlive men—seem like they're reading less) to the futile (more women than ever are managing both job and family, leaving them little time to read). While

that's no doubt true, Knight-Ridder's Women Readers Task Force discovered that women who work full-time are more devoted newspaper readers than those who stay at home. On top of that, circulation at the new generation of women's magazines is rising, and women currently purchase 54 percent of all new books.

"I don't buy it when a woman says she doesn't have enough time to read the paper," says Mindi Keirnan, managing editor at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and a member of the Knight-Ridder task force. "It's a polite way of saying it's not interesting enough for me to set aside." The problem is not with women, she and others insist, but with newspapers themselves. If editors really want to stem the decline in women's readership, they must look within—and be prepared to make some sweeping reforms.

Instead, the debate largely has centered around women's sections, a onetime newspaper mainstay that disappeared with the feminist movement. Last year, after spending \$200,000 and two years on a major study of disenfranchised readers, ASNE unveiled its brand-new prototype for luring women readers: a section called "You" created for the *Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader*. The planning committee focused on such concerns as whether women would prefer graphics to photos, a tabloid to broadsheet, or would enjoy interesting color and graphic devices. "Adding 'You,'" ASNE concluded in its report, "would impress readers that the paper is 'on the move' and fun to read."

**WITH WOMEN
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BY SUSAN HANSEN

Given this new-found clout, it is no wonder newspapers are nervous. Last year—when women bought half of all new cars sold in the United States—the Newspaper Advertising Bureau released a bombshell study showing an almost 18 percent drop in daily readership among adult women between 1970 and 1990, compared to a 12.5 percent decline among male readers. It's a finding supported by in-house surveys at Knight-



Whether edgy like "Womannews," or more traditional, the sections stir controversy.

Some female ASNE members—who account for less than 10 percent of the organization—find the whole approach simplistic and frustrating. "It's been my experience that some men think of appeasing women readers by giving them a section," says Narda Zacchino, associate editor at the *Los Angeles Times* and a member of ASNE's future of newspapers committee. "I find women saying we need to do more in the rest of the paper. We should start on the front page—make women feel this entire newspaper has something of interest to them."

Female reporters further argue they don't need any studies to define the problem—it stares them in the face every working day. At a July meeting of the newly formed Citywide Newswomen's Caucus in New York, some of the city's top reporters related their ongoing struggles to get news about women into their papers. Fresh from the Democratic convention, they complained that even in this 'year of the woman' editors ignored the story of women's growing political clout and obsessed on whether Jesse and Jerry would come around. Clinton's speech to the National Women's Political Caucus—widely characterized as having "raised the roof"—was either buried or spiked in the

local papers.

Business as usual, claim many reporters. At the *New York Daily News*, political writer Barbara Ross recently confronted her city desk on a release from the consumer affairs department charging that women face discriminatory pricing from area merchants. It cited discrepancies in dry cleaning charges as well as other injustices relevant to the lives of readers, yet the story hadn't made it to the day's budget. The two men on the desk looked at the item, says Ross, "and one of them said to me 'they discriminate more against men.' He was very quick to feel threatened." It eventually did run, having been coincidentally assigned by a female editor.

The obvious problem is that not enough women are sitting in top newsroom positions. "I think newspapers from the front page to the back page reflect a white male editorial content and bias," says *Washington Post* columnist Judy Mann, an advisor to the Women, Men, and Media Project at the University of Southern California. Indeed, women hold only 10 percent of the editor and executive editor slots at papers with circulations of more than 250,000, according to a recent study by the National Federation of Press Women.

It would be hard for that statistical imbalance not to have a profound effect on coverage. "I could give you countless examples of news meetings where, if you don't have women and minorities present to give their perspectives, the process is going to suffer," says the *L.A. Times's* Zacchino. While the recent front-page play given to breast implants signals that the increasing numbers of women journalists have made a difference, she notes, there is still far to go. "People see things through different sets of eyes. Where it matters to have women and minorities around is when stories aren't so obvious."

Male dominance of the editorial decision-making process also gives papers a masculine face that is difficult for women to embrace. As proof, critics cite the Women, Men, and Media Project's survey of front pages at 10 major-market and 10 small newspapers during February 1992: Women claimed just 34 percent of all bylines, and accounted for only 13 percent of those referenced or quoted and less than a third of the photos.

Look even at the breast implant story, says Junior Bridge, whose Unabridged Communications conducted surveys for the project. "This is something that could be considered a woman's issue, but the majority of quotes were from men," she observes. "Where they did quote women, it was as victims. If you get a steady dose of these, what's registering is you don't count. Are you going to continue to wear a pair of shoes that pinch your toes? Maybe for a little while, but chances are you're going to get a new pair."

To many researchers, though, the problem is larger than how many times women are quoted or pictured,



and more an issue of differences in how men and women interact with and perceive the world around them. Those differences translate into varying views of what information is important and into discrepancies in how they respond to what a paper presents as "news." According to Deborah Tannen, a Georgetown University linguistics professor and author of the 1990 best-seller *You Just Don't Understand*, boys are socialized from an early age to see the world in hierarchical terms. For them, communication is a means of negotiating status, challenging others, and establishing who's up and who's down. Girls, she argues, learn that cooperation is essential, and use language as a way of establishing connections and closeness.

Overgeneralization, perhaps. But given her assumptions, it would make sense that women often find the stuff of front pages—rebel movements, company takeovers, and who's on top in politics—less than enthralling. It would also be no surprise that many dearly held assumptions about what makes for good journalism—controversy, provocation, getting quickly to the bottom line—often don't hold great sway for them.

"The male style is so hierarchical and so confrontational," says the *Washington Post's* Mann. "If you read the words, it's the language of conflict and controversy. Women tend to feel uncomfortable with that approach. They are much less interested in a blow-by-blow account." At last year's ANPA convention, then-*Vanity Fair* editor Tina Brown tried to articulate that female sensibility for an overwhelmingly male audience. Women, she said, are "turned off by the endless stream of coverage that presents news as unconnected unassimilable, static bits of information." They want "the story behind the story, the repercussions of the story, the people at the heart of the story" and are "interested in the constructive uses of information, not in being informed for the sake of being informed." For newspapers truly interested in facing up to their readership problem, Brown suggested, the answer isn't more of the same "hairy-chested and follow-the-pack" reporting.

Even newspapers' harshest critics would allow they've made great strides in hiring women reporters and bringing more of them into the editing process. And though few hold much hope that Brown's lofty vision will be realized anytime soon, they take heart in the fact that their concerns are soaking into the industry's consciousness and that many papers are taking steps to heighten appeal to women.

Of these, the most visible and controversial has been the revival of the women's pages. Since ASNE's presentation last year, about 10 newspapers—including the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, the *Arizona Republic*, and Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot*—have risked scarce editorial dollars and feminist ire to launch weekly and monthly sections aimed specifically at women. At

many other papers, serious discussions about following suit are underway.

One source of inspiration has been the success of the *Chicago Tribune's* weekly section, "Womanews." Aimed at a younger, hipper audience than predecessor "Tempo Woman," which folded last year, "Womanews" has been generating enthusiasm with stories ranging from advances in fertility treatments to the trials of a lesbian minister. In one early in-house study, according to editor Marjorie David, 71 percent of women readers who were aware of the section said they found it appealing. Among 18- to 40-year-olds, the appeal was more than 80 percent. "Womanews" has also quickly won the admiration of other newspapers—about 60 of whom signed on to syndicate it in the section's first year.

"It's not just a bunch of articles on new hairstyles or how to take care of your kids," says *Tribune* reporter Laurie Goering. "There's been some really thought-provoking stories that wouldn't have gotten into the paper anywhere else."

To skeptics, though, one early radio ad in which a female voice coyly admonished her husband to stay away from her "Womanews" was hardly reassuring. And readers and *Tribune* reporters alike say they continue to cringe when the section's how-to column offers faintly patronizing instructions on changing motor oil. One reader in a recent letter to the editor also questioned the value of putting an article on parenting and workplace issues in the women's section. "May I suggest that next time you publish such an article—and I hope you will publish many—you will put it in the business section or in the general section of the newspaper," she wrote. "It's the men and employees who need to be educated, not the women."

The concern among even those who welcome the ex-

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tra space for women's coverage—and many do—is that editors will end up ghettoizing serious issues and will mistakenly believe they've now addressed their women problem. Even consultant Woodhull, a fierce advocate of the sections, concedes there are risks. "The strongest sections have immediacy, a different spin on some issues," she says. "There are a couple of papers that are taking the fifties approach, and that's wrong."

What's more, many women bristle at being treated as outsiders or a special interest group when they ac-

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How would women do it better? We put that question to 10 newswomen, giving them free reign over two front pages that heavily influence news budgets across the country. The consensus: Focus on real people, with the point plainly relevant. Replace those torpid foreign pieces with enterprise. And give women a presence. Almost all the panelists chided N.Y.'s single female byline and quotation (L.A. did better, but quoted no women). "The truth about why women are leaving newspapers is self-evident," says *Washington Post* columnist Judy Mann. "I don't exist on these front pages. That's why I find

A refreshing change in a spot "reserved for white men," says Bayé, reflecting the majority. But a few groaned over the unfortunate cropping. "The decapitated woman is an irresistible symbol of the reasons newspapers are alienating women," says Bernstein. "Nowhere on the front page do we hear a female voice."

Though many preferred this modest version to L.A.'s, no one really liked either. "While most people want to see some semblance of tranquility restored to the Middle East," says Mann, "they don't want to read about every arcane turn of diplomacy it's going to take to achieve that."

An even split on this attempt to personalize an eye-glazing subject. Most liked the concept—and the "universal themes," says Loth—but half found the writing distant. "Promise me anything, but give me details," says Banaszynski. "Make me feel the story as well as understand it. On stories that lack that element, tell me soon and tell me straight why I should care."

A winning photo, most felt. Relaxed, informative, inviting. "There's important symbolism in this picture," says Mann. "I'd put it at the top of the page."

With reports of a possible new virus and chilling stats on female victims, the AIDS conference story belonged on page one, the panel agreed.

Nearly half the group cheered this new twist on an issue vitally important to women—but even more were irked by the all-male quotes. "I could not believe we don't hear from any of the women here," says Askari. "Or their kids." And why no photo? "It had an impersonal look for a personal story," notes Varon Brown.



Several panelists challenged the placement and handling of this dry roundup. "A classic case of boilerplate thinking," says Bernstein. "Only readers acting out of obligation or special interest will read past the jump." Using numbers in the lead is "an immediate turnoff," adds Loth.

"What a bore," says Abcarian, capturing the sentiments of her colleagues. Most objected to covering the insurance giant as an institution while ignoring the implications for millions of policyholders. "A tease to a piece inside telling me if I should worry?" suggests Eisman. "A paragraph out front telling me if I should worry? Or, when I have to start worrying?"

Right technique, wrong execution, says the panel. Though they commend looking at a distant story through one person's eyes, they need details to draw them in. "I want to see that guy sitting in his house, spinning those dials," says Banaszynski, "while life and war go on around him."

This slice of Japanese business culture got a thumbs up from half the panel, who applauded its focus on workers' lives rather than numbers and products. But Eisman and Bernstein thought such a timeless piece could hold for a day with fewer foreign stories crowding the page.

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them uninteresting and irrelevant. That's why I'm not reading newspapers anymore."

The panel: bureau chief Deborah Howell of Newhouse News Service; editors Jacqui Banaszynski of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* and Amy Eisman of *USA Weekend*; reporters Nina Bernstein of *New York Newsday*, Emilia Askari of the *Detroit Free Press*, and Renée Loth of the *Boston Globe*; columnists Mann, Robin Abcarian of the *L.A. Times*, and Betty Bayé of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*; and graphics director Laura Varon Brown of the *Detroit Free Press*.

"Boring and static," Howell says, with agreement from all. "Middle-aged white men standing before microphones mouthing the usual words about peace." Like Howell, several panelists would have rather seen art with the Utica, leisure time, or Moscow stories.

This breezy, personal look at crime in Russia is a winner, the panel felt, with a female byline to boot. "It lets me see life there," says Banaszynski. But why only quotes from men, asks Askari? "Personal safety is very much a women's issue."

Several panelists appreciated this quick hit on the question of the moment, though Mann wanted to push it inside. "The Perot story comes from the Sunday talk show circuit," she says, "and I'd be more inclined to give my front page over to enterprise reporting than to television transcribing."

Not worthy of the cover was the majority view. "I am a political junkie," says Loth, "but even I thought three page-one stories on the campaign was too much."

"This is the kind of story that gives foreign news a bad name," says Bernstein, getting no argument. "A political official arrived somewhere and had a meeting that accomplished little. Why should we care?"

An issue that should resonate with women, but without anecdotes or quotes, this piece rated a split decision. "I'd be more persuaded, and more interested," says Mann, "if it started with kids who used to have pickup games at the local rec center but now spend their afternoons shoplifting."

No fans of this old standby, most panelists thought it deserved only minor play. "The diplomatic dance of hints and signals generally makes deadly reading," offers Bernstein.

Though some would've chucked the enervating lead ("The chairman of the eighth International Conference on AIDS on Sunday issued . . ."), all were glad to see this important and relevant story treated more seriously than in N.Y.

With seven international stories or refers, says Eisman, the page cries out for something "that relates to my home, my town, my family, or my life." Adds Abcarian: "We are asking readers to understand that their needs don't come first, that they need to suffer through stories about people half a world away before we will address their concerns."

A first-person take on a campaign trail story? Many were engaged by the technique—"most newspapers are too squeamish about using it anywhere but in columns," Loth submits—but they agreed it needed art and a feature look. "Don't tease me with a news story that isn't," says Banaszynski.

A good idea to refer the smoking ban, says Eisman ("I go right to health stories"), and a bad one, says Askari, to give Nick Faldo a scarce photo spot. "I have never read a golf story in my entire life," she protests, figuring golf lovers will turn to the page anyway. "Why not use the refer box to draw in people like me?"





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count for more than half the population. It's a separateness that sections with names like "You" might as well set in neon. "I don't think the answer is simply to give women a section with 'Women' across the masthead," says the *L.A. Times's* Zaccchino. "You can't lump women into one category. And I think you risk alienating male readers who now read your features section."

If resurrecting the old women's pages is not the answer, the question remains: What kind of changes do women readers want? Those who have researched the matter—such as Knight-Ridder's task force, which held individual interviews nationwide last year—report they hear strikingly similar answers: Women want more on education, social welfare, safety and health, personal finance, parenting and family, and ethical issues; more profiles on successful women; and shorter and more useful stories throughout the paper.

Some papers, who believe abandoning hidebound ways of defining news will help boost their standing with female and male readers, are taking the advice to heart. The *Charlotte Observer* now has a full-time day care reporter and a new family page. At the *Rocky Mountain News*, an effort is underway to bolster coverage of women's

sports and put more stories on personal finance and women entrepreneurs in the business section. And the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, whose newsroom was run by a woman, Deborah Howell, until mid-1990, and whose current managing editor, Mindi Keirnan, is female, recently cut back its local political coverage, doubled the number of education reporters, added a new reporter to cover women's health care, and started up consumer and local transportation beats.

According to Keirnan, the changes were welcomed once she forced line editors and reporters to personally interview women readers and nonreaders. "They had to stare them in the eyes and listen to what they had to say," she says. "When people say to you 'I read the paper while I blow dry my hair,' you get religion."

Changes are occurring not just in story selection, but in how stories are written. At Knight-Ridder, one of the task force's goals is to encourage more vivid and detailed writing that "gets people" and not just quotes, and emphasizes who and why, not only what



and when. "We need to refine the lost art of storytelling," says Jennie Buckner, Knight-Ridder's vice president for news.

At the same time, Buckner and others agree the most critical step newspapers can take to win back women readers is promoting more women to upper management. "A newspaper is put out from the gut of the editor," argues Woodhull. "If the editor's gut is not in tune with the issues of some readers, they're not going to get in the paper."

With newspapers only recently having awakened to the problem, it is too soon to tell how much they'll be willing to regroup to get in sync with women readers. But at some papers, all the consciousness-raising—and the grim reality of recession—has clearly left a mark. After serving on Knight-Ridder's task force, for instance, *Charlotte Observer* managing editor Frank Barrows says he has instituted what is essentially an affirmative action photo policy to ensure that more women are pictured on the front page. At the *Rocky Mountain News*, women have taken over the business editor and photo editor slots. "A lot of us are conscious of not having been fair to women," says editor Jay Ambrose, "and hurting ourselves in the process."

In the end, success will likely be measured by how much editors are willing to put on the table. Cosmetic adjustments and a few dedicated pages aren't going to cut it anymore; the call is for a sea change in how news is defined. That may entail rethinking a lifetime of assumptions, or instituting a fast track for women managers, or chipping away at the tyranny of distinctly male news desks—or all of the above. Clinging to tradition is about the only non-option. ■