

DEVELOPING STYLE: How *The Washington Post* Discovered Women's Issues

An exploration of how the social movement toward women's equality affected traditional journalism during the 1970s.

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In 1969, the *Washington Post* was the first major American newspaper to replace its women's pages with a lifestyle section. Introducing the Style section was one of the most lasting legacies of famed Post editor Ben Bradlee. As he later described the launch of Style, "We wanted to look at the culture of America as it was changing in front of our eyes. The sexual revolution, the drug culture, the women's movement. And we wanted to be interesting, exciting, different."¹

That part of the story is known. Less known are the stories behind the women who turned the Style section into a pioneer and prototype for narrative writing in daily newspapers. As part of my dissertation "Rediscovering Narrative: A Cultural History of Journalistic Storytelling in American Newspapers, 1969-2001," I documented the first decade of the Style section's evolution and examined in how far it helped to challenge preexisting gender roles in the practice of daily journalism in one of the country's leading newspapers.

Thanks to a CSWS research grant, I was able to spend a month in Washington, D.C. in the fall of 2015. There I conducted oral history interviews with more than two dozen veterans of the Style section. As a result, this research shows how women reporters in the *Washington Post* Style section used narrative journalism as a tool to undermine representations of gender during a time of great societal change. Overall, the *Washington*



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Post Style section serves as a critical example illuminating how traditional newspaper journalism was affected by the social movement towards women's equality in the 1970s.

One of the first reporters specifically hired for the section was Myra McPherson. Her professional biography reflected the constraints that women reporters were faced with during the postwar years. After having worked on the student newspaper at Michigan State, she went looking for a reporting

job on the city desk but only got offers for writing for the women's pages. At the *Detroit Times*, she covered a wide range of topics including sports. Reporting on the Indy 500 in 1960, she was neither allowed in the press box nor the gasoline alley. Bradlee offered her a position in the women's section, assuring her that after three months the section would change into the Style section. McPherson told me about the conversation she had with Bradlee. When she told Bradlee that she could not work full time because of her two young children, Bradlee responded, "For Christ's sake, the last thing those kids need is you around the house full time."

As I examined the newsroom culture at the Style section, I came across documents that showed how internal conflicts reflected the intertwined dynamics of office rivalries, gender issues, and generational tensions. For example, in one internal memo a young reporter summed up her impressions as she was leaving the paper. Comparing the two people in the leadership team—one man, one woman—she wrote, "I think the section needs a man with children and a well-adjusted family life instead of sexually f**ked up or barren women." This and other episodes illustrate how the Style section was a place that simultaneously encouraged women reporters to speak out while also creating an environment that pitted veteran women editors against young women reporters.

It was also interesting to examine how female readers reacted to the new style of Style. Early letters to the editor illustrate how polarizing the new section turned out to be. For instance, reader Edith Fierst was not happy with the Style section. She wrote, “For many years it has

besides debuts, weddings and diplomatic receptions.”³ It became obvious that the one-size-fits-all approach of the women’s pages had lost its appeal while it was not clear yet what the alternative would be. In this context, these letters to the editor reveal more than individual

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been my ungrudging custom to surrender the first section of *The Washington Post* to my husband when he arrives for breakfast about five minutes after I do, and to read the Women’s section instead. Now this tranquil arrangement is threatened, as morning after morning I find nothing to read in the Women’s section.”² In contrast, in a letter published in response to Ms. Fierst’s, Margaret E. Borgers praised the new section as a “daily treasure” and added, “I, for one, am greatly flattered by *The Post*’s innovation, with its implicit statement that women might be interested in something

attitudes to the Style section. They illustrate a larger trend in the transformation of the readership, highlighting competing attitudes, not least towards women’s role in society.

The particular focus of my dissertation was narrative journalism. Narrative news writing broke with conventions, practices and rules of traditional news writing and advanced a particular form of storytelling as a format for journalistic information delivery. With its emphasis on scenes instead of events, people instead of sources, and sequencing

instead of a straightforward delivery of news, narrative journalism redefined the purpose, the practice and the possibilities of journalism in daily news production. As I’m revising my dissertation for publication now, I will explore how and to what extent this narrative turn also constituted a “feminization” of journalism. Often derided as “soft news,” this form of storytelling subverted norms, representations, and practices of “hard news,” challenging the notion of a masculine news logic based on professional detachment. ■

—Thomas R. Schmidt earned his PhD from the UO School of Journalism and Communication. He was awarded a 2015-16 CSWS Graduate Student Research Grant in support of this research toward his dissertation.

END NOTES

1. Ben Bradlee, *A Good Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 298.
2. Edith Fierst, “Woman’s Point of View,” Letters to the Editor, *Washington Post*, April 25, 1969, A26.
3. Margaret Borgers, “Flattered by Style,” Letters to the Editor, *Washington Post*, April 30, 1969, A26.