

PUBLIC EDITOR

The Declining Fortunes of Women at The Times

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The Swiss psychiatrist Hermann Rorschach, acclaimed for his study of inkblots, might have enjoyed doing some field work at the most recent newsroom-wide meeting of The New York Times. Many in the audience saw before them top editors representing a bold new phase of digital innovation. Others, especially some women, saw a reality grounded firmly in the present: an all-male cast at the podium, the chief architects behind the most important strategic document since the celebrated innovation report in 2014. Was this a portrait of a newsroom's future or of the gender that will remain in charge of it?

One or both may be correct. But the optics that day highlight a piercing problem at The Times. Women have skidded down the power structure since Jill Abramson was dismissed as executive editor three years ago, with fewer females leading big news departments and fewer coming up the pipeline. Thus, fewer women decide what big stories are assigned, what broad coverage priorities are set, and what a re-envisioned Times should look like.

Just how grave the problem is depends, as with inkblots, on one's perspective.

In recent weeks, for example, three women were added to the masthead, placing them in the coveted ranks of the newsroom's top editors. In addition, women head up the Washington bureau, the arts and culture coverage, the book, photo and video

desks, as well as several smaller sections. There are probably more distinguished women in this newsroom than at most any newspaper in the country.

So where's the grievance? For one, men are No. 1 and No. 2 in command for the first time in 14 years, Dean Baquet as executive editor and Joseph Kahn as the recently named managing editor. Another male is first among equals driving coverage in the ranks below them, while men run the paper's national news, foreign news and metropolitan news, as well as both business and sports. The next editing tier is also heavily male, a climate that led one group of women to wryly fantasize one day about how differently a story might read if no man touched it throughout the editing chain.

Among reporters, men often outnumber women, in some cases by significant amounts: three to one in the Washington bureau and in sports, almost two to one in metro. Men claim a comfortable majority on the foreign staff, among the arts critics and on the opinion pages, where male columnists take up 10 of 12 spots. Around the room, testosterone is not in short supply.

It is no wonder that the bylines readers see every day are mostly those of men, although once again perspective matters. Men accounted for 61 percent of the bylines that appeared in the front section of The Times last year, according to data soon to be published by the Women's Media Center, a group that analyzes thousands of bylines across 10 top newspapers every year. That put The Times in the middle of the pack, which is a vast improvement over the previous two years, when it ranked last. (Partial credit surely goes to political correspondent Maggie Haberman, whose byline, I'm told, drew more page views last year than any other reporter at The Times — an eye-popping 141 million.)

The overall scarcity of women may contribute to the persistent complaints from readers who see a sexist tinge to elements of the news coverage.

Fury is often stirred by an incessant attention to a woman's looks. Theresa May's leopard heels. Hillary Clinton's signature pantsuits. Or, in an example that particularly riled readers last summer, the attire of a female concertgoer — miniskirt, sleeveless denim jacket, black leather boots — described in a story that mentioned no one else's looks, not even the performers'.

One reader, Maureen White of Boston, noticed that in the most recent *Year in Photographs*, only six of more than 40 photographs were credited to women in the print feature; another reader, Joan Tarbox of Rochester, N.Y., complained of obituary pages dominated by men. “I’d love to track the obits for a month so I could give you some hard statistics,” she wrote. Let me oblige. Last year, 75 percent memorialized the life of a man.

These may seem like small examples, but their collective effect is large, not only on the journalism but also on The Times’s audience. While the numbers are considered proprietary, internal research shows that more men than women read The Times, a gender gap that editors here say they are taking seriously. A team is being assembled to focus on a variety of gender issues, including those of particular importance to women. Meanwhile several top editors described active efforts to both hire more female editors and include women more in coverage. On the international staff, for example, an engaging documentary on the first elections in Saudi Arabia open to women was succeeded by a call-out to Saudi women that drew some 6,000 responses.

There are also pockets of the newsroom where females dominate — video being the most prominent. This fast-growing department is led by two women, Alexandra MacCallum and Nancy Gauss, and 60 percent of their staff are female. Balancing the ranks in departments like sports could be more difficult. The top editor there, Jason Stallman, says job openings can sometimes draw 500 male candidates for every female one.

Gender issues plague other newsrooms too. But part of what frustrates many women I spoke with — in senior leadership positions and around the room — is what they feel is a backslide from earlier years. And even with recent successes, women still feel outnumbered.

“We’ve made a lot of progress, but there are still times when I’m the only woman in a meeting, particularly on national security topics,” said Elisabeth Bumiller, who runs the Washington bureau and thus oversees one of the biggest stories in journalism.

Being the only woman in a meeting can produce a feeling of having walked into the men's room. But more significantly a gender, or racial, imbalance changes what's considered news. When you combine the two variables — race and gender — you're no longer representing the audience you're trying to reach.

Baquet is not defensive in discussing the need for more women, in leadership and elsewhere. He says that the addition of three women to the masthead is progress, but that it hardly resolves matters. "There's no question that with women in positions of authority you will see stories covered in a different way," he says. "I'm forcefully working to get women into positions of authority."

Baquet says he gives his predecessor credit for really caring about women and developing their careers. And he recalls her driving her message home. "If Jill was the only woman in a meeting, she'd make sure we all knew it," he said. "And that was good."

If more seats are to be taken up by women, in critical coverage meetings and in top leadership, it will be up to men to make that happen. They are, after all, the ones with the power to do so.

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