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The Changing Role of Women in Journalism

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“The Changing Role of Women in Journalism”

written by

Caroline Derby

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion of the Carl Goodson Honors Program meets the criteria for acceptance and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Throughout the course of time, the role of women in journalism has changed tremendously. Women in journalism were considered inferior to men and had to fight their way up the ladder to be given the same roles and responsibilities as a man. However, when given breaking stories or interviews with heads of states, women still weren't paid as greatly as a man was, despite the level of work they were doing. We see the remnants of this in today's society. However, thanks to groundbreaking women in journalism, women are now able to be in positions, the same positions within a newsroom as men, and hold their own. Yet, despite women doing the exact same job as a man, even today, it has been shown that there are men who make higher salaries than women. Women are still facing unnecessary scrutiny by viewers. I would argue that we see more women than we ever have in news before, yet they're facing the same challenges faced decades ago.

Comparing the stories of three women in broadcast journalism, Barbara Walters, a ground-breaking female journalist; Tiffany Lee a new-to-the-industry reporter and anchor; and veteran anchor Alyse Eady will share how the role of women in journalism has changed, yet still has similarities to the past, as well as show how society has changed, yet there still is work to do in creating a fair workplace in television.

Barbara Walters' Audition

Barbara Walters, paved the way for the future success of women as discussed in her memoir, "Audition." Walters' life was not an easy road. It was filled with moving around the country as a child, being in and out of true schooling because of her dad's job and having to learn to assist a sister with disabilities. The daughter of a showman, Walters learned at an early age the meaning of auditioning. The common word over the course of time indicates that she was even constantly auditioning for the approval of others. Whether that was husbands', news producers',

audiences' worldwide, and even her family, Walters found that most of her life, if not all of it, was one big audition,

Growing up, Walters would play with showgirls, and she would see her father speak in front of large audiences at the nightclubs he ran. It was this form of interaction that paved Walter's strong and straightforward technique in interviewing, as well as fighting against the odds of the time. She saw women being who they wanted to be, and although that was not the career path she wanted to take, I would argue that it inspired her to pursue her dreams. Walters as a child was never drawn toward one career. She was interested in multiple things but never knew exactly what she wanted to do. She went to Sarah Lawrence University, and from there found a job in a news studio, and that one foot in the door propelled her toward her legendary career.

Walters started as a production assistant, and eventually was given a show that was titled, "Not For Women Only." Walters wasn't truly reporting the news yet. She was hosting a show that was geared toward women. Because she was a woman, it fit her well, however, she didn't want to be limited to just that show. After proving herself not only as an assistant, but also as a host, NBC promoted her. With this promotion she was able to start her career officially, and she was finally named a co-host at NBC. Walters is now known for interviewing heads of states, and for traveling the world in order to get the story.

Walters, a woman in a field where men dominated, was faced with discrimination throughout her career, and scrutiny from media outlets aside from her own. The difference between men and women in journalism, and a large difference that exists still to this day, is how the audience feels about both genders, specifically, regarding their performance on air, with special interest in their appearance. Women were scrutinized in the media for having one hair out of place, not wearing the best colors on them, and even down to whether they were wearing a

pantsuit or a dress. In Walters' case, it wasn't so much about her appearance, but rather audiences laughing at her for the way she said her name, "Baba Wawa," rather than using the full extent of the "r" in her name. She didn't speak it quite properly. Walters tried to shut down the usage of that, but it became who she was. She had to take it in stride, which is now a testament to her strength. This is one of many examples in which women were poked fun at, whereas men still could receive audience feedback, but it didn't become who they were.

Barbara was given several opportunities to travel abroad, and have groundbreaking, international, and exclusive stories with hundreds of people. Specifically, there was an instance where she followed President Nixon on his visit to China. She visited numerous historic sites and gained insight and reported on the First Lady as well. Since Walters had a catching and electric personality, she caught the eye of the president and other world leaders as well. Because of this, she was invited to dinners and treated slightly differently than other reporters.

On the trip to China, she faced discrimination from other male reporters because she was a woman, getting great stories, and being in the good graces of President Nixon. They excluded her from having dinner with them, treated her differently than other colleagues in the field, and viewed her in a different light as well. Although Walters was having this positive attention from important people, because she was a woman, and the male reporters were essentially jealous, she was discriminated against. When you compare this situation to the concept that if Walters was a male, there might be jealousy, but there is a less likely chance that they would discriminate against him.

Everything was going well for Walters in the late 1970s. She was a top anchor at NBC, she was getting paid great money, still not as much as her male counterpart, but she was enjoying her life and job. Then, she received an offer from ABC to be the co-anchor of ABC Evening

News with Harry Reasoner, as well as do a series of Specials. This offer was enticing, but she initially turned it down. She had something good going on "Today" and didn't want to rock the boat. She was beginning to negotiate a new contract with NBC, but her agent started having a difficult time getting the simple requests from Walters agreed upon by NBC. Walters wanted a 5-year contract, but NBC wasn't going to give her that. They only wanted her for a 3-year contract.

This negative negotiating from NBC's side started drawing Walters away from NBC and she started to consider the offer at ABC. An advantage of making the switch from NBC to ABC was that Walters would no longer have to get up before the sun. She would be able to take her daughter to school and spend more time with her. However, Walters was still scared to rock the boat. She told ABC "no" again. Once again, they didn't take no for an answer. ABC needed a well-known figure to draw in a larger audience and generate more money for the company. They needed a television news star, and that was Walters. Walters, with much consideration and thought, felt wanted by ABC. A feeling that NBC only started to create within her when they got wind she was thinking about going to ABC. What truly rocked the boat more so than eventually leaving NBC, was that there was a leak of information from a secret meeting Walters had with ABC. ABC was offering her one million dollars to come and work for them. The headlines called her the "Million-Dollar Baby." They disregarded her as a journalist and were calling her more of a celebrity than a journalist. This information was detrimental to her career and had long-term effects on her.

Walters mentions several times that the people who saw her through this tough time were her family and other women in journalism. Female journalists were calling into question how Walter's gender affected the rage seen in headlines and media outlets across the world, and how if she had been "Mr. Walters," things might have been different and even easier making the

switch between NBC to ABC. One woman wrote about how we should be proud and recognize that a woman has reached a million-dollar yearly figure, yet news outlets still punctured her work and reputation. She had to persevere through this time while still anchoring until her contract was up with NBC. That meant she went behind the anchor desk for several more months for NBC but could not get started at ABC until she finished her contract. Walters writes about how she was thankful she had people standing up for her, and people publishing items in her defense, but she was uncomfortable being the centerpiece of a gender war. She felt as if journalists were supposed to report the news, not be the news.

When Walters began her work at ABC, she anchored alongside Harry Reasoner. The first broadcast was live, and Walters made it through the first broadcast after the disaster that had come months before it. At the end, she was explaining to the viewers what they could expect from her. Reasoner signed off by telling the audience that he had counted the minutes of each story they reported on, and he told Walters on air that she owed him four minutes. At the time Walters assumed he was kidding around, but to her dismay, he was not. Reasoner shut her out within the station and when live on television. He began to take shots at her and indicated at one point due to a situation that occurred that she was a sex symbol in Washington. The relationship was so bad that Reasoner had people using a stopwatch to ensure Walters didn't get any more time on air than he did. He would do stories that for Walters weren't considered real journalism, but when he did those stories, no one called him a non-journalist. This behavior is an example of how the woman's role in journalism was not considered as important as a man's role. He got away with terrible behavior at the station and women might not have been so lucky.

Once again, women started rallying behind Walters when viewers took note of how awful things were between them. They called out Reasoner for insulting Walters on air and said he was

rude and sarcastic. They leveled their sights at Reasoner and supported a fellow woman in journalism. The viewers were noticing the issues, yet very little was ever done about it.

If Walters had not faced the scrutiny, dealt with sexism, and fought for herself, the role of women in journalism would have been extremely different now. She broke through the glass ceiling after persevering through numerous tough times. She is one of the most well-known and well-accomplished female journalists in history. Walters truly beat the odds against her, and paved the way so that women pursuing a career in journalism can thrive. She has left a legacy and women in journalism are walking in her footsteps every day.

Tiffany Lee's Journey

Tiffany Lee, a 2019 Ouachita Baptist University graduate, grew up watching the news with her grandmother. She would come home from school, and it would be on the TV in the living room.

“When I was little, I just wanted to be on TV, like the people I watched with my grandma,” Lee said.

Lee enjoyed and loved how in news, while she said there is a lot of bad, you could also show the good within communities. She said she became obsessed with news and watched it in every city they went to. That was the push that led her to pursue a career in journalism. Despite being briefly scared in college and hearing “it’s so hard, and you won’t make money,” she went after it. She felt like it was what she was supposed to do with her life. So, she took off to Fayetteville, Arkansas, to start her news career.

When she started, everyone was known as being young and beautiful, and that was a previously developed standard for the station that potentially all women could be was young and have beautiful faces. Lee started her job just weeks after competing in the Miss Arkansas pageant and placing third runner up. The pageant was broadcast around the state, and on day one she walked in with the label of “the pageant girl” strapped to her chest. Lee felt as if she had to overcome the label placed on her not only by the pageant, but also the standard set by the audience when referring to the station she worked for.

“I think I had to work harder to prove myself as a woman there,” Lee said.

Starting straight out of college, Lee was a multi-media journalist, meaning she did it all on her own. She wrote packages, edited videos, and did the interviews herself. Learning how to be a journalist while also leveling the playing field given to her was a task. This wasn’t the only challenge she faced. When she arrived at the station, a pay gap between males and females existed.

“Men made significantly more than women did at our station. The male morning anchor made \$20,000 more than the female morning anchor did, and they had the same amount of experience,” Lee said.

The pay gap issue is not just within newsrooms but is universal. According to a Pew Research Center analysis of median hourly earnings of both full- and part-time jobs, the gender pay gap in the United States has not closed in recent years, but it is more narrow among young workers. However, in 2022, women earned an average of 82% of what men earned. The study outlined potential reasons for this, after surveying men and women across the nation. Half of U.S. adults said that women are treated differently by employers as a major reason, according to

a Pew Research Center survey conducted in October 2022. The majority of women surveyed pointed to different treatment as the reason for this gap as well.

The gender pay gap is narrow among younger workers as the study shows. This is interesting and can add to the point Lee makes about how pay changed when younger management came into the picture. Also, an interesting fact to consider when looking at if society's role has changed in how they view women in journalism, but also women in general since the start of Walters' career.

Lee now has worked her way up and is the weekday morning news anchor. A few years ago, if the male anchor left, they would've only hired a male. When the morning anchor job came open, because of the mindset previously created by her old management, she didn't think she had a chance of getting the job because she was a female. With her new management however, the mindset was different. Her News Director now believes in equal opportunity within the workplace.

Walters battled audience negativity and comments, and so does Lee, something she says she has to battle so much more than others, particularly males, within the workplace. Walters lived in a time when women were breaking into journalism. A female co-anchor of nighttime news, Walters arguably faced more scrutiny than some women now, yet the same words and opinions are still being shared with current women in broadcast journalism today.

"I used to get blown up with messages, from men especially, telling me I was pretty or saying I had good legs. Somebody made a YouTube video about my legs. Some wouldn't leave me alone unless I responded," Lee said.

However, while men are making these comments to females, some are also coming from women feeling the need to comment on women. Being in the public eye, there is a level of judgment that comes with the territory. What culture have we Americans cultivated for it to be OK to openly comment on appearance, and especially why do some people think it is OK to sexualize women on television when they should be listening to the story, they are telling? While we might not ever know this answer exactly, what we do know is that this trend of behavior aligns with both Lee, a journalist in her mid-20s, and Walters, a journalist who started her career over 50 years ago.

The number of women in journalism has increased, according to the *Elon Journal of Graduate Research in Communications* (Vol, 4 NO. 1) study on *Women in Broadcast News: Reporters and Sources in Hard News Stories*. In the 1960s and 1970s, 13% of reporters were women. In 2013, half of the reporters were women. That number has only since grown in the current year. Women are welcomed in news now and their role has become more seriously taken, yet still experience sexism every day from society.

“When you watch the news, and it is not as bad anymore, but used to you would see a goofy-looking man and a beautiful woman,” Lee said. “Yes, women have to be talented, and they have to be good, but viewers expect them to have a certain look. Because of that, they feel like they have every right to comment,” Lee said.

A universal problem is also the root of why some feel conditioned to comment. Also, personality plays a factor in it all, according to Lee. She says you would expect a man to push back, and clap back to hateful comments. Whereas a woman is less likely to, she says. Until women clap back, they’ll continue to get those hateful messages. A former co-worker of Lee’s would post the person who said something hateful to her and call them out for it. Therefore,

people stopped sending her messages as frequently as they once did. However, it shouldn't take public shaming for people to stop committing these acts. Lee said she won't do that, but if she did call them out, she probably wouldn't have as much of a problem with those comments.

There are more women in broadcast journalism than there ever have been before, and Lee says women are needed in journalism. They provide different perspectives and ideas. Women give a different viewpoint than others that can only help within the industry.

"There is something so nurturing about being at a tragedy with a woman figure there. You're with people who just lost a family member, or they find out that their family is in the hospital because of a fire. Being women, it shows the world that we are too are capable, we can be just as strong, just as intelligent, and we can handle ourselves just as well by being able to do it all," Lee said. "We can do this hard news story; we can be trusted with those things. I feel like it is harder for women to build a trust repour than a man. I think a man is just more demanding."

Going back to her reason why she wanted to be a journalist, Lee said, "When you have people who care, and who are out in the community showing who care, it sets the future up so well for future journalists."

Barbara started and was the only woman doing it, yet management is still underpaying women. They are still having to jump through hoops. Lee believes that until there is a change, the old ways will still trickle into our current age.

"We have old-school general managers, and until younger people become management news, women will have the same problems they did decades ago," Lee says.

Alyse Eady's Career

Alyse Eady, a news anchor in Atlanta, Georgia, graduated from Ouachita Baptist University in 2010. Eady started her career as an anchor in Little Rock, Arkansas, which is rare in the journalism field. Her abilities spoke for themselves, and she was hired as an anchor out of college. Since she wasn't in the field to begin, she has a different perspective on the hardships in broadcasting that women have faced. Through listening to friends and co-workers in the field, and her own experiences behind the desk, similar to Lee's thoughts, some of the sexism experienced in broadcasting comes from older generations.

"Some of the hardships that they faced right now is dealing with older people who remember a time when journalists were men—they ran newsrooms, they ran the whole thing. It's changed a lot," Eady said.

When Barbara Walters began her journey, it was all men. Now, that has drastically changed as women are more prevalent than ever before within the industry. Yet, Eady feels as if she, and women in general, have to work harder to be taken as seriously as their male counterparts.

"Women work twice as hard to be credible, and you can't slip up. Because it puts your credibility at risk, you just have to be sharper and on top of it, in my opinion, more so than if you weren't a woman," Eady said.

As known from Walters' and Lee's experiences, the pay gap is still prevalent in this industry. Perhaps due to older generations running newsrooms, as Eady mentioned, that is what an audience is used to. Lee's older management underpaid female broadcasters too. Generational issues could be a leading cause as in why they are paid less.

“In an industry that is overwhelmingly women, I felt safe in saying that from what I know, we are still paid less,” Eady said.

Regarding appearance comments, Eady says it’s ten to one in the number of comments that are for women instead of a man. She has also dealt with her fair share of appearance and body opinions from viewers, but never from a male co-worker as Walters did.

“I don’t feel like it took me long to realize this either. It’s so much easier to wear a suit, shirt, and tie, to ‘get it right’ to people. People are so very comfortable sharing their thoughts on what you’re wearing, how you look in it, and how your hair looks, I have been absolutely just ripped apart,” Eady said.

According to USA Today, a male Australian TV host, Karl Stefanovic, took a stand against sexism by wearing the same suit every day for 365 days. Frustrated by the sexism targeted at his female co-host, he did an experiment. No one noticed the outfit worn every day. Stefanovic told The Age, an Australian newspaper that women are judged more harshly for what they do, what they say, and what they wear.

“But women, they wear the wrong color, and they get pulled up. They say the wrong thing and there’s thousands of tweets written about them,” Stefanovic told The Age.

This experiment started after his co-host gave a speech about sexism detailing her experience with criticism of her wardrobe. After a month of wearing the same suit, Stefanovic told his co-host what he was doing, and they waited for people to notice, and they never did.

Different from Lee, Eady experienced two pregnancies while on air. Maternity leave is a crucial part of being a woman in any workplace, and management knows the possibility of a

child upon hiring. While these questions were not raised to Eady, she has heard of management asking about family planning to women during contract negotiations, saying they asked questions trying to gauge a contract based on the possibility of maternity leave. These types of questions, in Eady's opinion, would never have been asked of a man, as well as creating a contract around the thought of paternity leave.

When Walters was going through her contract negotiations, it wasn't detailed in her memoir whether or not family planning was considered in her contract. What was a focus was that management was not taking simple contract requests from Walters' agent. An interesting point that Lee brought up was that she believes sometimes women don't feel as if they can negotiate. A man is more likely to bargain for what he wants. Walters discusses in the memoir some about how her agent did the true negotiating because it was a good middle person for both sides to work with.

To Lee's point about women not wanting to negotiate, and just taking what they were offered, the nature of the two genders is different. Eady also discussed the nature of women is different from men. Walters, however, when she didn't get what she was negotiating for, left for another network. That act is a glass ceiling-breaking moment as she demonstrated for women in future roles of journalism to continue working for what they want.

As Eady grew into her role as a wife, the role of mother did come along too. She detailed how hard being pregnant on air was. So many people were already commenting on her appearance, however, with her pregnancy the child was also discussed. The clothes she wore were criticized more than usual, and how she looked overall was ridiculed more.

“I have two children and I have spent those pregnancies on air, but we all do it and it’s not for the weak. How comfortable people are on commenting on your body, it’s very interesting,” Eady said.

Comments about dresses like “let the baby breathe” were left to her through email and other sources by viewers. At those points in pregnancy, Eady said she was just trying to find something to wear.

While hardships are faced that others might not experience, Eady says women bring a unique perspective to journalism. A perspective that is needed. Women are different from men, and that is something to be celebrated.

“We are different in the way that we gather news, I mean we all have the same goal, but the way we work with sources, write, and interview. I think it just adds such a unique perspective. We may make it to the end goal the same, but in the way that it is presented, in my opinion, women are able to do that in a way that is different. I feel like we read the emotions of the person being interviewed. You’re talking to someone who potentially just lost their home in a fire, and the nuances that we are able to pick up on, are not things that men pick up on easily. That’s important when speaking to people who have gone through tragedy,” Eady said.

Lee also touched on this point, that women have the ability to be a comforting presence. Relationships building is important within news due to having to maintain relationships with sources, and with co-workers, as news is a business that depends on one another. Walters showed that women could be journalists by building connections around the world. She brought together world leaders who are on opposing sides politically for an interview. Her interview helped countries create peace. Walters, Eady, and Lee all have in common the shared view that women

are needed in journalism, this singular ability to connect with others is one of many reasons women belong in this field.

Harassment in the Workplace

Sexual harassment of women in news has occurred, and one of many headlining stories about this topic is when the former head of Fox News, Roger Ailes, was accused of harassment. Gretchen Carlson, a former *Fox & Friends* cohost accused Ailes of docking her pay, moving her show times to lower-profile time slots, after she refused his advances. She was eventually fired, and Ailes claimed it was because of the show's poor ratings. Carlson couldn't speak out about this because of a non-disclosure agreement and a mandatory arbitration agreement. Carlson hoped for her claims, while being handled privately, would allow other women to come forward to share their stories. Ultimately 20 women came forward with sexual harassment claims against Ailes. He was forced to resign from the network. Others at the network were accused of covering this up and were either let go or resigned themselves. This started a new era at Fox News, and arguably sent a message to news networks around the country, that this behavior is unacceptable.

Walters didn't detail any form of harassment within her memoir, but that doesn't mean it didn't exist. Eady and Lee didn't discuss this type of harassment in the workplace but did detail hateful messages received from viewers because they were women. Women in journalism in the current era now have more ability to come forward if harassment has happened. Carlson showed that coming forward is the right thing to do. This concept not only applies to news, but to every career field. In this day in age, and with the MeToo movement starting after claims against Harvey Weinstein were made, women are encouraged now more than ever to come forward to receive help and to hold those in the wrong accountable.

An example of misconduct, with someone younger than Ailes and Weinstein, is Matt Lauer, a former “Today Show” host. A woman brought claims against Lauer, detailing inappropriate experiences and conduct. After her claims were brought to light, other women came forward with accusations. Lauer, in a statement, said that there was enough truth to the claims for him to be embarrassed and ashamed, but some of what was being said was untrue or mischaracterized. Lauer was fired when the claims were determined credible. The NBC Human Resources department handled these allegations appropriately and swiftly, contrary to some of the employees at Fox News, who were accused of covering up the misconduct by Ailes.

Society's role in combatting harassment has changed from previous years, due to the MeToo movement and the impact it has made on workplaces around the country and the world. Women in journalism now live in a time where coming forward is more encouraged. Holding people responsible is encouraged by all, and the foundation of this movement was started by women supporting one another, and women in a variety of media paving the way for women around the world to share their stories.

The Future of Women Journalists

As the future of women in journalism looks up, noticing the changing role of how women in journalism came to be is important to recognize where society should be. On my journey to broadcast journalism, I have yet to experience anything like Walters, Eady, and Lee. However, hearing their stories prepares me for the ridicule and public opinion that will inevitably be thrown my way.

Regarding the number of women in management, a concept Lee touched on, I interviewed with eight stations. I was contacted by 22 stations. Of the interviews, I visited with

either the News Director or the Assistant News Director. Five of the eight interviews conducted were with men. I was expecting all eight to be men in management positions. Of the amount that contacted me, 14 of 22 were men in management positions. Looking at the statistics of those stations is interesting. The future of women in journalism is important, and we are at the height of women being in journalism, but what is exciting to consider is women being in management positions within newsrooms too.

As discussed in Walters's era of news, she was one of the first women to be on-air in news. Her contract negotiations were done with men. Her bosses were men, and her coworkers, and co-anchors, were men. The role of women in journalism has changed to allow for women to lead newsrooms, a concept that would've been considered foreign in Walters' era of news. Lee is part of an all-female morning news team, a concept that also would have been foreign in Walters' time. Considering the backlash given to her when she took the on-air anchor position, imagining two women at the desk in that time would've been unheard of.

All three women, Walters, Lee, and Eady, have experienced scrutiny for their appearance on air. While one can hope that this would've changed from the time of Walters to the current time, society is still placing a lot of value in the appearance of women rather than in the talents they possess. Through social media direct messages, calling into the newsroom as Eady said, and other mechanisms, criticism is given every day to women in journalism. This is not a pull for women to not look presentable on air, or in any way a statement insinuating that women shouldn't dress and look professional in the workplace. This is merely a cry for the public to listen to these women, not just look at these women. For in the example of the Australian News Anchor testing the difference in clothes, it can be assumed the public was listening to him more

than they were looking at him. We can hope the same can be achieved for women at the desk too.

Women in journalism bring qualities to the newsroom that are needed within a workplace. These interviews, along with the insight from Walters, and studies done across America and the world, show that the role of women in journalism has changed. It has gone from there barely being a role for women in the newsroom, to women dominating the newsroom.

However, the treatment of women in this new role does not measure up in some cases to what should be given to them in the position they are in. Gone are the times in which women in journalism have to fight for a seat at the table. Now they have a role at the table but are still striving for a fair voice at it. They are striving for fair pay and fair treatment.

To conclude, while the role of women has changed, I argue that society's roles in the treatment of women in journalism, as well as women in the workplace, have not changed enough. There is still work to be done in respecting women to the same degree as their male counterparts, another example of society needing to change more. It can be argued that generationally, change has occurred when viewing the role of women in journalism, but older generations as Lee said are still living in the times when men were the only ones on camera. Society's view on women in journalism must adapt and change as much as the role of women in journalism has changed since Walters' time at the desk.

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