Caitlin Trude

Dr. Jim Willis

JOUR 410 Global Media Systems

16 April 2015

Report: *The News Sorority* by Sheila Weller

Three of the world’s most groundbreaking women journalists Diane Sawyer, Christiane Amanpour and Katie Couric are household names, but what else they share in common goes beyond than their journalistic roles in a 24-hour news world and the fact that they had to break down traditional gender roles in the newsroom.

While each woman differs greatly personality-wise and in terms of the values each held growing up, the women of what Sheila Weller calls the “news sorority” all overcame personal and professional challenges while pushing the boundaries of the newsroom in their desire to cover the most newsworthy issues and events.

Although “austere” may be too strong a word to describe Diane Sawyer, the Southern values brought on by her upbringing in Louisville, Kentucky instilled a poise and maturity in Sawyer beyond her years. Sawyer may have been characterized by her peers and as a genteel, elegant Southern lady, as she was shaped by the expectations of all the extracurricular activities she became involved in throughout her young adulthood – beauty pageants, student newspaper, choir, poetry, and of course, her first few steps into the world of journalism.

Much like CNN’s Anderson Cooper, Sawyer channeled the tragedies she experienced in her young adult life into her work. The early death of Sawyer’s father forced her mother to raise her and her older sister on her own, perhaps provoking Sawyer to rely on herself as her own caretaker in such a precarious world. “Precarious” is certainly an accurate word to describe the beginnings of one’s journalism career, especially Sawyer’s. Long before her reign as ABC World News anchor and co-anchor position on Good Morning America, Sawyer had to prove herself as a credible, reliable journalist, having to essentially “purify” her name due to her association with Richard Nixon as his former staff assistant. Not to mention there were also considerable hurdles to mount during her time in the 1970s newsroom where few women were able to break ground, although Barbara Walters helped pave the way for ambitious young female journalists like Sawyer.

Though perhaps a cliché saying, it is true that Sawyer’s career, in a sense, became her child. A serial perfectionist through and through, Sawyer was known for keeping her staffers working late hours to make news packages pristine and covering news stories back-to-back-to-*back*, as well as covering stories that may have perhaps garnered less media attention in American news than other stories, such as the Chilean mine rescue. But more than “parenting” her news crews, Sawyer was in many ways like an honorary aunt to some of the subjects of her stories. Weller writes, “Diane was not only attracted to stories with heart, but she made deep and meaningful friendships having nothing to do with their television utility...The viewers didn’t know the many acts of philanthropy Diane performed – the hospitalizations she paid for, the flowers and food she sent to producers’ mothers who were having operations in far-off states. Or that she tutored a high school girl several mornings a week” (Weller 267-268).

Like Sawyer, though under completely different circumstances, Amanpour too experienced loss early on in her life. Having grown up in a relatively privileged lifestyle pre-war ridden Iran, the Amanpours did not suffer large losses until leaving their home in Tehran for England during the height of the Islamic Revolution. Venturing from England to the U.S., Amanpour began her college education. Though a student at the University of Rhode Island, Amanpour seemed determined to assert herself as an Ivy League Brown student, which was near to Amanpour’s own school. She certainly fit the part, excelling in her university’s curriculum, becoming involved in both student and professional news outlets, and striking friendships with popular household names, like the Kennedys.

1980 marked the start of CNN’s 24-hour news network, where Amanpour began her career as an entry-level desk assistant. Considered unique for her “foreign accent” and appearance, as well as her fluency in both English and Persian *and* her willingness to cover conflicts in the heart of war zones, Amanpour’s humble beginnings at the “Chicken Noodle Network” would eventually lead her to become one of the world’s leading foreign correspondents. But first, Amanpour had to grapple with newsroom politics, particularly the resistance poised by foreign editor Jeanee von Essen and other veteran journalists who were often less informed than she about Middle Eastern issues.

Amanpour learned to develop what all journalists need to develop, especially in the field of international reporting – thick skin: “For her part, Christiane has downplayed her ambition in favor of a narrative that has her combating prejudicial obstacles,” Weller writes. Amanpour has said of her start with CNN, “I had to lose the ability to hear the word ‘no,’..*. ‘No,’* as in, ‘Your name is too unpronounceable to be on television.’ ‘*No,*’ you’ve got a foreign accent.’ ‘*No,*’ your hair is black, for heaven’s sake, and very unruly. Don’t you know you have to be a blond to be on television here?’ ”

Reporting at the forefront of numerous international conflicts, Amanpour understands the demands and risks few people will ever encounter in their lifetimes. Like other foreign correspondents who have put their lives on the line to cover the worst of human atrocities, Amanpour developed a journalistic resume of countless conflict zone reportage, such as the genocide in Bosnia and the Arab Spring, to name just a few. However, marriage and motherhood would prompt her to reconsider covering quite so many conflicts – this dilemma of work versus family becomes a problem in any job setting, and is a harsh reality for a woman seeking to maintain her status as a serious foreign correspondent at the prime of her career.

While Amanpour’s childhood and career beginnings were turbulent at best, Katie Couric’s youth seemed to be reflective of a sort of red-blooded, American girl stereotype. Eventually dubbed “America’s Sweetheart” for her long career with The Today Show, Couric’s cheerful attitude, pluckiness and snarky demeanor helped her and her respective networks to a) garner a faithful fan base and b) get an “in” for some of the most newsworthy events and noteworthy individuals.

As Weller’s chapter “America’s Sweetheart to Premature Widow” highlights, the early death of Couric’s husband helped to further endear Couric to audiences worldwide. One of Couric’s largest contributions made due to her media influence was raising awareness about colon cancer. In this instance, Couric’s image as a perky morning show host broadened with this philanthropic move.

As first female solo anchor working for CBS, Couric struggled to portray herself as serious nighttime news journalist, given her background in the more cheerful morning show environment. Says Weller, “Katie’s show was a risky, ambitious, and expensive experiment...And she – the highly paid star in a budget-strained TV news era – met with a relentlessly conservative national CBS audience and a stubborn difficulty in shedding her female morning star image” (352). Fortunately, Couric scored an array of interviews which cemented her status as a serious journalist, namely her interview with Sarah Palin, which has raised questions as to whether or not Palin’s less-than-stellar responses to Couric’s line of questioning compromised her and John McCain’s 2008 presidential bid.

*The News Sorority* was a compelling read, highlighting the triumphs and hurdles overcome by these three journalists.

However, the end of the text seemed to take a more pessimistic turn – and understandably so. Although women reporters have still a ways yet to go, Warner encourages readers to take heart: “The punctiliousness, focused ambition, and high quality of work these women had to master and refine in order to earn places that were long more easily, and with lower bar, given to men made them superior strategists and more dogged professionals. They’ve prevailed for so long because they *had* to be better” (434).

Despite the heaviness and depth of content of the book, I found Weller’s commentary poignant and engaging. I am inspired by Sawyer, Amanpour and Couric for different reasons for each, and am encouraged to continue to ponder the ethics of journalism and the equality deserved by both male and female journalists.

If had to choose one wisdom from *The News Sorority* that struck a chord with me, I would choose the following statement made by Amanpour: “There are some situations one simply cannot be neutral about, because when you are neutral you are an accomplice. Objectivity doesn't mean treating all sides equally. It means giving each side a hearing.” Although Amanpour made this statement in the context of giving equal voice to both sides of controversial subject matter, I would venture to say that this mentality may be applicable to newsrooms still evolving to give men and women journalists equal footing. Traditionally a male-dominated field, I daresay it is not too optimistic to think that television journalism has come a long way in giving both anchormen and anchorwomen fair hearings.