WOMEN SPEAKERS IN AMERICA: IS ANYONE LISTENING?

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ABSTRACT

Women comprise a majority of the population in the United States but remain a minority voice. The male voice dominates in the corridors of power, drowning out women in corporate boardrooms, the halls of Congress, and the news media. Thus, women lack an equal say in important decision making and agenda setting. Women who have attempted to exercise the right of free speech have often been ignored, silenced, and/or maligned. This raises a question: To what extent is the lack of an equal public voice a significant factor in preventing women from obtaining more equitable levels of leadership? This thesis will explore how women have fared in their struggle to be heard, the contributions made by women speakers, and the necessity of including a female perspective in the public dialogue.

This examination of women speakers begins with an overview of how the right to free speech was denied long before – and long after – our nation was founded. It will look at the cultural expectation of silence that prevented women from playing a role in public life in colonial America up until the mid 1800’s. With participation in the abolition and suffrage movements, women began to defy the cultural, political, legal, and religious sanctions that had kept them voiceless. During this period women speakers faced a dual struggle risking humiliation and physical harm as they claimed what should have been a fundamental right.
Women can no longer be barred from the public square but those who do speak out continue to face barriers. This paper will detail what the climate is like for contemporary women speakers and explore ways to deal with ongoing bias and discrimination. The advent and proliferation of new media technology provides new opportunities to marginalize women. The technology is also providing new channels women can utilize to reach audiences and impact the public discourse. The strategic use of the Internet and social media present a possible remedy to the ongoing problem of stifled speech. An overview will be provided on how established women’s organizations, emerging groups, and concerned individuals are finding innovative ways to be heard in a cluttered communications environment.

The potential impact of the successful utilization of new media is far reaching. Beyond the social justice implications, this paper will examine how having women seated at the table broadens the conversation. With the inclusion of the female perspective the vital interests of millions of Americans will not be overlooked or given short shrift. The involvement of more women ensures our democratic nation will live up to its promises of fairness and equality.
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INTRODUCTION

A woman giving a speech is no longer considered a public oddity. At the same time, if that woman is speaking in an effort to wield power the audience will perceive her differently than a male leader. What she says, how she says it, and what she is wearing while she says it will be closely examined. She stands out because the vast majority of opinion leaders and decision makers in the private and public sectors remain men. The woman seeking influence over an audience must be prepared to contend with barriers that are deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and political bias. These barriers, which have been in place since before our nation was founded, have silenced women’s voices and marginalized the female perspective.

In colonial America, the cultural expectation was that women would remain silent in public. The woman who didn’t hold her tongue faced being ostracized for lacking virtue and for engaging in behavior deemed promiscuous. Given the societal prohibitions, women had to fight to secure what should have been a constitutionally guaranteed right. Thus, the 19th century leaders of the women’s movement found themselves in a dual struggle. As they mobilized on behalf of the expansion of the franchise and against discrimination they simultaneously battled the cultural condemnation of their advocacy activities. Taking a public stage to assert their rights meant having to face audience members who came to the speaking events with the intention to disrupt the proceedings and to ridicule or even threaten them.

The bravery and steadfastness of the early speakers eventually enabled them to claim the right of speech and to bring about social and political reforms. However, contemporary women are still working to be heard in the corridors of power. Women
comprise a majority of the U.S. population but they do not have equal say in determining how the country is run. Despite significant advances in education and professional attainment in recent decades, women remain a minority voice in all sectors of society. Women comprise just 17 percent of Members of Congress\(^1\) and 3.5 percent of CEOs at Fortune 1,000 companies.\(^2\) The number of women running universities, directing large nonprofit organizations, and serving on corporate boards remains small. In the field of communications, the vast majority of gatekeepers who control the content and flow of news are men. Further, male voices dominate the discussions on influential news and public affairs programming where women rarely appear in the role of expert.\(^3\) In most decision making forums – legislative bodies, university chambers, corporate board rooms, town hall meetings – women’s voices are out numbered. On ceremonial occasions – declarations of military victory, inaugural addresses, religious observances, memorials to the fallen – women’s voices are all but excluded.

This paper will examine the role of women public speakers, the road blocks to obtaining an equal playing field in the public space, and how the lack of balance impacts the manner in which our nation is governed. Additionally, it will explore to what extent the lack of a public voice is a significant factor in preventing women from obtaining more equitable levels of leadership. How might it be possible for more women to more

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fully participate in the democratic process? Would a woman’s perspective improve decision making at the highest levels?

Chapter one contains a brief historical overview of the societal sanctions against women’s speech. The gender bias rooted in our culture is revealed with specific examples of how audiences responded to the early women who defied societal norms. As women advocated for reforms they had to claim the right of free speech while dealing with society’s condemnation of their activity. The second chapter looks at how gender bias affects contemporary women. To what extent is a woman’s voice valued in an environment where the male manner of speaking is associated with the qualities of a leader? What has been the impact of the rise of conservative women who speak against the gains made by previous generations of women? And, what are the continuing challenges presented by pervasive sexism in our mass media culture?

Chapter three offers a perspective on a possible means to level the speaking field. The last decade has seen a significant increase in the development and proliferation of new communications technologies. The technology provides more opportunities to marginalize and demean women. It may also provide effective methods to circumvent longstanding barriers. This chapter explores to what degree solutions to the chronic problem of stifled speech can be found in the strategic deployment of new media tools.

Finally, the paper will look at the social justice implications of including woman’s voices. How does having a woman’s perspective at the table when decisions are being made affect the decision? What are the possible benefits of broadening the conversation on public policy issues? To what extent do women’s voices ensure that the vital interests
of millions of Americans are not overlooked or given short shrift? How might the inclusion of women’s voices improve and strengthen democracy?

The central questions raised in this thesis speak to the ongoing need to ensure that the concept of human values relates to all humans regardless of gender. A truly democratic form of government will not be realized in the United States until all citizens are able to voice their opinions without being subjected to humiliating or oppressive tactics designed to suppress them. Government of the people, by the people, and for the people doesn’t exist when women lack an equal voice.

Furthermore, women who serve in high level positions in the public and private sectors serve as important role models at home and abroad. The citizens of this country have yet to elect a woman President. Currently, there are 32 countries with women heads of state and government including Liberia, Brazil, Germany, Kyrgyzstan, Australia, Bangladesh, and most recently Thailand. The willingness and desire of the American people to support women in high-profile leadership positions will ensure that our nation remains a beacon of democracy.
CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN IN THE PUBLIC SPEAKING ARENA

One of the hallmarks of a great leader is their ability to move people with their words. Ideas that are expressed powerfully and eloquently enable a leader to shape events and change the course of history. President Franklin D. Roosevelt rallied a nation with his exhortation: “All we have to fear is fear itself.” With the refrain “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall” President Ronald Reagan called upon all Berliners to end the Cold War. President John F. Kennedy challenged U.S. citizens with: “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” Stirring rhetoric lives on long past the speaker. The ultimate expression of victory was purportedly Julius Caesar’s declaration: “I came. I saw. I conquered.”

However, the words of women leaders are more difficult to recall. In *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, former presidential speech writer and *New York Times* columnist William Safire compiled what he deemed were the “outstanding instances of oratorical eloquence.”¹ The speakers chosen for inclusion in the collection were described as individuals who exhibited the finest examples of “the art of speechmaking in human experience.” Of the two hundred speakers in the compendium that dated back to Socrates only thirteen were women. When the first edition was revised and expanded the percentage of women decreased. How is it that so few women were deemed worthy of recognition? Why have women speakers contributed so little to the canon of oratory? The missing words of the last great queen of Egypt provide some clues.

For twenty-two years, Cleopatra ruled one of the ancient world’s most powerful and wealthy nations. The kingdom included nearly the entire eastern Mediterranean coast and she reigned with the loyalty of the army and the support of the Egyptian people. Like many successful leaders, Cleopatra was a strong communicator. In the biography Cleopatra, Stacy Schiff details the diligence the future queen paid to her ability to speak well in public. As the daughter of a king, she had access to something most women did not - a good education. She studied the art of rhetoric, practiced her speech aloud, and was tutored by learned minds. Her speaking ability was so commanding that her contemporaries took note of her style and praised her skill. She was said to have “learned to marshal her thoughts precisely, express them artistically, deliver them gracefully.”

While we know Cleopatra was a good speaker, we don’t know what she said. There is no surviving record of any speech, remark, or pronouncement. The monarch’s words have been lost to history. Thus, what we do know about the Egyptian queen and her reign is what others chose to document. We lack the insight that would come from knowing her thoughts about her political rivals, the threats to her reign, how she held onto power. She is renowned for affairs with married rulers Julius Caesar and Marc Anthony and bore children by both men. But, we have no first hand knowledge as to whether those relations were primarily affairs of the heart or state. She was beloved by her people but we do not know what she said to win them over.

What we are left with are second hand accounts from detractors, Roman propagandists, and Hollywood movie makers. This may be partial explanation for the

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3 Ibid., 7.
patchy record that focuses on Cleopatra’s ability to charm and beguile men rather than a more complete accounting of her accomplishments on the battle field and other political achievements. What other tales of women’s leadership have been marginalized or simply lost to history? What if the words of women were celebrated and immortalized? Would the chronicle of Egypt and other nations have been written differently? What about in the U.S., a nation founded on the principle of free speech? What would we have been able to gain from the words of our founding mothers?

The letters of a future first lady portend what would be the long road to equality that lay ahead for American women. Despite the constitutional guarantee of free speech, women were not able to exercise the right at the time of the nation’s birth in a practical sense. They were denied speech along with a host of other rights including the vote and the right to own property. Dismay about the limited freedoms of women led Abigail Adams to famously implore her husband John to “remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them then your ancestors.” Unfortunately, her husband and the members of the Continental Congress did not heed her plea. This chapter examines the historical roots of the barriers faced by the women who dared to enter the public speaking arena. Women who wanted to help build and later govern the nation first had to secure the right to speak for themselves.

Historical Roots of Stifled Speech

Women in America were denied the right to free speech long before – and long after – the nation was founded. In 1634, four years after sailing to the new world in search of broader freedoms, Anne Hutchinson was persecuted for speaking in public. Hutchinson, her husband, and eleven children had settled in the Massachusetts Bay

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4 Abigail Adams’ letter to John Adams, March 31, 1776.
Colony where she led prayer meetings to discuss Scripture and theology. Soon these
meeting became a cause for alarm amongst the colony leadership. Hutchinson dared to
speak critically of the Puritan Church and her teachings began to draw large audiences
that included men. Prayer meetings held in her home with other women were tolerated
but mixed audiences were expressively forbidden.

Hutchinson’s insistence on preaching her understanding of the testaments raised
the ire of the first governor of the colony John Winthrop who derided her as “the
instrument of Satan.”⁵ Winthrop and other colony leaders interpreted passages from the
Bible as injunctions against women speaking in public. One often cited was Apostle
Paul’s writing in First Corinthians: “Let your women keep silent in the churches, for it is
not permitted onto them to speak; but they are committed to be under obedience, as also
saith the law.” Governor Winthrop ordered Hutchinson to stand trial for heresy. Once
she was found guilty, he banished her from the colony.

Prior to her banishment, the colony’s ruling elite had tried to silence Hutchinson
by publicly humiliating her. An egregious incident occurred in the aftermath of a
complicated pregnancy. Hutchinson experienced a late term delivery that ended in a
stillbirth of what “was described as looking nothing like an infant. It resembled a handful
of transparent gooseberries or grapes.”⁶ Winthrop attempted to use the tragedy as a
means to turn public sentiment against Hutchinson by claiming that the deformed birth
was an obvious link between the intellectual woman and the devil. He wrote: “But see
how the wisdom of God fitted this judgment to her sin every way, for look as she had

⁵ Eve LaPlante, American Jezebel: The Uncommon Life of Anne Hutchinson the Woman Who
⁶ Ibid., 217.
vented misshapen opinions, so she must bring forth deformed monsters.”

The depraved manner in which Hutchinson’s personal loss was made into a public spectacle was not without precedence. A year earlier, a supporter of Hutchinson’s had experienced similar maltreatment after suffering a miscarriage. Mary Dyer was a wife and mother and a practicing Quaker whose religious beliefs were held to be blasphemous. While pregnant with her second child, Dyer suffered a miscarriage at six months. The stillborn female was reported to have extensive deformities of the head, spinal column, and extremities. The deformed fetus was buried by a midwife but Governor Winthrop had the body exhumed and then released a full description of the corpse, describing the birth as “unnatural,” that it was a “monster child” with “talons instead of toes.”

Religious leaders such as Reverend John Wilson used the stillbirth as an occasion to pass judgment on Dyer’s faith: “We have been visited of late by an admonition of the Lord. One Mary Dyer of our midst, who has lately become addicted to heresy, has produced not a woman child but a monster. God himself has intervened and pointed His finger at this woman at the height of her sinful opinions.” In the wake of the tragedy suffered by her friend, Hutchinson spoke out on Dyer’s behalf at a women’s meeting.

…the time is upon us when we must stand and be counted for the truth. Already we have witnessed evil men who wear the cloak of the church heap shame upon one of us for a sad occurrence in which she is blameless. They have hoped this would break our spirit. It has not done so. Instead it has made us, and most of all our dear Mary Dyer more resolute.

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7 Ibid., 218.
8 Ibid., 206.
10 Ibid., 20.
Despite the resolution and courage exhibited by Dyer and Hutchinson, they did not live to exercise their religion freely. Both women suffered grisly deaths. In June 1660, Dyer became the first woman to be executed in the colony. After a long imprisonment failed to prompt Dyer to renounce her Quaker faith she was paraded into Boston Common where she was hung from a rope in a tree. Hutchinson’s fate was no less brutal. Sixteen years after her expulsion from the colony that left her without the protection of local militia, Hutchinson and family members were murdered in an Indian raid on Long Island.

Hutchinson and Dyer were punished for daring to express views that differed from state approved orthodoxy. Despite their status as married women with families who were generally well-regarded members of the community they had little recourse. Their gender rendered them defenseless against the harsh judgment of the colony and religious leadership and there was no higher court to which they could appeal. Rendered voiceless they lacked the means to mobilize the support of others who shared their beliefs.

Violent and cruel religious persecution in pre-colonial America was not inflicted solely upon women. Men were whipped, locked in irons, and nearly starved to death. Three Quakers – John Copeland, Christopher Holder, and John Rouse – had their right ears cut off for publicly cursing the colony leadership. Another Quaker, Humphrey Norton had his hand permanently branded by a burning hot iron with the letter “H” to signify his status as a heretic. The treatment accorded men was inhumane and should not be discontented. However, the men were not punished for the act of speaking. They

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were punished for what they said while the women were condemned for their beliefs and for breaking the sanction that demanded silence on their part. So begins a sordid record of gender based attacks used to gag women. The nation which would be founded on the principles of freedom and democracy would deny the freedom of expression to half its citizens for nearly two centuries.

Dual Struggle

There is a gap of 170 years between Dyer’s execution and the emergence of women on public platforms. For decades, the act of speaking in public was frowned upon by the likes of Thomas Jefferson who stated that if women were allowed to engage in the public meetings of men, doing so would result in a “depravation of morals.”12 Society maintained its gag rule by religious edict, limited educational opportunities, and court ordered punishment. A woman deemed loquacious could be subjected to the dunking stool, a wooden device usually situated in a public space outside of a courthouse. “After being bound to the stool, the ‘scold,’ ‘nag,’ ‘brabling,’ or ‘unquiet’ woman was submerged in the nearest body of water, where she could choose between silence and drowning.”13

The opportunities for educational advancement were limited for girls especially for those lacking means. Women were not permitted to enroll into any college or university until Oberlin College opened its doors to white women in 1833 and African-

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Americans in 1875. Most girls were not allowed or could not afford to stay in school beyond primary grades. The daughters of the wealthy received instruction from private tutors including the fine arts of music and dance. But, if a privileged young woman were to perform outside the home the action would have been considered scandalous. Theatrical performances were viewed as a suspicious waste of time and the theatre was not a place for respectable women. One acceptable forum was the church where women could participate in male-led psalm singing and family prayer. Aside from restricted participation in church services there were no forums open to and accepting of women speakers. Those who did venture forth to defy society’s sanctions and condemnation were exceptional individuals. The small handful of women who did appear before audiences did so for brief periods with mostly disappointing results.

Deborah Sampson was a patriot who took to the stage with a daring story of heroism. In *Masquerade: The Life and Times of Deborah Sampson*, Alfred Young tells the story of the twenty-two year old, unmarried, part-time weaver who devised a scheme to enlist in George Washington’s army. In 1782, clad in a man’s suit and posing as her deceased brother, Sampson joined the Massachusetts Fourth Regiment without raising suspicion about her gender. For two years, she kept her true identity hidden and may have never been found out if not for a wound sustained during a skirmish. Sampson was able to remove the musket balls lodged in her thigh but subsequently fell ill and the doctor who treated her discovered the injured soldier was a woman.

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14 Jane Greer, ed., *Girls and Literacy in America: Historical Perspectives to the Present* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 73.

It was illegal for women to enlist much less serve in the army and Sampson could have been charged with defrauding the government and impersonating a man. The newspaper accounts of her predicament stated she had comported herself with “great activity, courage, and valor”\(^\text{16}\) and she escaped punishment with an honorable discharge. Upon returning home, Sampson married and gave birth to four children and most likely would have lived out her life more conventionally if her family hadn’t struggled financially. Denied a military pension, Sampson decided to embark on a professional speaking tour. The decision to become a public lecturer was as unprecedented as the one to enlist had been. Despite or perhaps because of the peculiar nature of her presentation, she received critical praise at the Federal Street Theatre in Boston on a March evening 1802. The audience was regaled with her stories of war time exploits.\(^\text{17}\) In full uniform, she executed the soldier’s manual exercise of arms twirling her musket with precision and confidence. Sampson’s speaking career was short lived as she suffered ongoing illnesses likely related to her injury.

There is no surviving text of Sampson’s dramatic speech. Nor, were any of Anne Hutchinson’s sermons preserved. The first woman to have her words recorded on U.S. soil was not American born. A Scot, Frances Wright delivered a patriot address in celebration of the nation’s birthday on July 4, 1828. Wright was an activist reformer who initiated a series of lectures on women’s rights and anti-slavery. Her appearances were not well-received and she was “viciously attacked for stepping outside the accepted


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 203.
sphere of women.”¹⁸ News accounts vilified her as a “voluptuous preacher of licentiousness” and the “Great Red Harlot of Infidelity.”¹⁹ Despite the backlash and slander Wright was dedicated to her cause and lectured widely for a decade.

A widow who was a former domestic servant spoke out in Boston from 1831-1833. Maria W. Stewart attempted to rally concern about the slave question and the need for the education of girls. Stewart was an African-American born to free parents in Hartford, Connecticut who faced strong rebuke for her race as much as her gender. Uneducated but impelled by her religious beliefs, Stewart heralded the achievements of strong biblical women.

What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah to be a mother and a judge in Israel? Did not Queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalen first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead?... If such women as are here described once existed, be no longer astonished then, my brethren and friends, that God at this eventful period should raise up your own females to strive by their example, both in public and in private, to assist those who are endeavoring to stop the strong current of prejudice that flows so profusely, against us at present.²⁰

After delivering only four speeches Stewart abandoned the stage. In a farewell address she expressed her dismay at her inability to rally support for her people: “I find it is no use for me, as an individual, to try to make myself useful among my color in this city… I have made myself contemptible in the eyes of many.”²¹


¹⁹ Ibid., 3.


It is not until the mid-1800s that women seize the fundamental right of speech that supposedly had been guaranteed to all citizens. Over the next several decades, women emerged to advocate on behalf of suffrage, abolition, education reform, married women’s property rights, temperance, and other causes. As they mobilized for social and political reforms they also had to do battle with society’s continued condemnation of their activity. They were ridiculed for the causes they triumphed and harassed for being outspoken. Their struggle was a dual struggle.

Groundswell of Reformers

In 1835, Angelina Grimke became the first woman to debate a man in public and was given high marks for presenting a well-reasoned argument in a composed manner. However, the editor of the local newspaper was so scandalized by the event he refused to publish an account of the proceedings.22 Angelina and her sister Sarah had been engaged in a public speaking tour as anti-slavery agents for the abolitionist movement. Initially, they spoke to small groups of women but their first hand accounts of slavery began to draw crowds of men and women. Daughters of a wealthy South Carolina judge and plantation owner, the sisters condemned what they called the “evil” of slavery. Angelina considered her public advocacy to be an example of a woman enacting her rights as a “moral and political being.”23

The Grimke sisters influenced many of the women who would follow including

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Lucy Stone. 24 Stone was the first and for many years the only woman in America to campaign full time for women’s rights. Nothing could stop the woman who became known by the nickname “Locomotive Lucy.” When doused with cold water mid-speech, Stone picked up her shawl and finished the talk. When spattered with egg, she challenged the listeners to rid their minds of her spoken truths as easily as she wiped away the sticky mess. She braved audience insults and became adept at dodging the frying pans and rotten vegetables hurled her way. Stone’s parents feared for her immortal soul. They believed her speaking activities violated biblical teachings and they brought disgrace upon the entire family.

For the audience members who came to listen, they said Stone: “…possessed a great personal magnetism and a remarkable speaking voice… the voice of an angel.” 25 With her intellect, calm demeanor, and sense of humor she had the ability to turn hostile mobs into receptive crowds. When confronted with counter arguments, she disarmed the skeptics with a sound reasoning and good humor. At the height of her career in the mid-1850’s Stone was earning as much as $1,000 per week. 26 This was an accomplishment given admission tickets were priced at just 12 ½ cents a piece. The money she earned was used to fund a women’s journal and to lead one of the first national organizations dedicated to advocating for suffrage.

Stone’s powerful oratory inspired two of the women who would become figure heads in the suffrage movement, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.


25 Ibid., 50.

26 Ibid., 74.
Anthony who had been an active abolitionist credited a transcript she read of a Stone speech with bringing her to the cause.\textsuperscript{27} Stone offered Anthony advice and encouragement when she first began speaking publicly. And, Cady Stanton praised Stone’s abilities as a campaigner, “She is the first person by whom the heart of the American public was deeply stirred on the woman question.”\textsuperscript{28}

The working relationship that developed between Anthony and Cady Stanton was somewhat unlikely but highly productive. The tall, slim bespectacled Anthony never married and the pint-sized but plump Stanton was married with seven children. However mismatched they appeared to be, the pair would inspire and guide the suffrage movement for decades to come. Anna Howard Shaw, a suffragist and physician, described the team: “She (Miss Anthony) often said that Mrs. Stanton was the brains of the association; while she was just its hands and feet; but in truth the two women worked marvelously together.”\textsuperscript{29} While both women were strategists, Stanton was primarily the writer who worked at home while raising her children and Anthony dedicated herself to the task of improving her speaking style and soon was a sought after speaker.

Stanton authored countless pamphlets, articles, and famously \textit{The Woman’s Bible}, a book that refuted the religious orthodoxy dictating women should be subservient to men. She was the chief author of the \textit{Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions} which was based upon the Declaration of Independence and presented at the first woman’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. The Declaration is a pivotal

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 61.


document in the progression of women into the public space. Cady Stanton elevated the
denial of free speech “alongside other injustices including denial of the franchise to
women and the legal subjection of women to husbands.”

Resolved: That the accusation of indelicacy and impropriety, which is so often
brought against woman when she addresses an audience, comes with a very ill-
grace from those who encourage, by their attendance, her appearance on the stage,
in the concert, or in feats of circus.

Resolved, therefore, That being invested by the Creator with the same
capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise, it is
demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every
righteous cause by every righteous means; and especially in regard to the great
subjects of morals and religion, it is self-evidently her right to participate with her
brother in teaching them, both in private and in public, by writing and by
speaking, by any instrumentalities proper to be used and in any assemblies proper
to be held….

Passed unanimously by the women and men who attended the convention, the
Declaration detailed a comprehensive listing of the rights denied to women. The
convention delegates vowed to finish the work of the founding fathers by extending the
promise of America to women. This marks the beginning of what has been called the
most significant bloodless revolution in our nation’s history.

Along with Stone, Anthony was one of the most traveled speakers for suffrage. A
former school teacher Anthony by her own calculation estimated: “… she had delivered
75 to 100 speeches a year for forty-five years, not counting thirty years of addresses to
Congress and the New York State Legislature.” In one remarkable year she gave a

30 Deborah Cameron, “Theorising the Female Voice in Public Contexts,” in Speaking Out: The

31 Lynn Sherr, Failure is Impossible: Susan B. Anthony In Her Own Words (New York: Times
speech that came to be known as the “Constitutional Argument” fifty times in two counties in New York.32

The location of the speeches was significant because she had earlier been arrested in Rochester, New York for casting the first ballot by a woman in a national election. Her attempt to vote for Ulysses S. Grant in the presidential contest resulted in her arrest for violation of the Fourteenth Amendment that specified only “male citizens” were eligible. The speech she delivered in the fifty Post Office Districts where her trial would be held laid out her defense. It was based on the preamble of the constitution.

It was we, the people, not we, the white male citizens, not yet we, the male citizens’ but we, the whole people, who formed this Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people – women as well as men. And it is downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government – the ballot.33

Anthony made her case as she traveled from post office to post office asking: “Is it a crime for a citizen of the U.S. to vote?” However, she was unable to persuade the judge who heard the case. In an unusual move, the judge ruled from the bench rather than allow a jury to hear the trial. He found her guilty and ordered her to pay a $100 fine which she refused to do. Denied an appeal, Anthony used the courtroom proceedings to make national headlines and was frequently called upon to describe the ordeal in subsequent speeches.

Neither Anthony nor Cady Stanton would live to vote without fear of prosecution. Yet, their dedication to the cause and their ceaseless campaigning laid the foundation for the effort that would eventually secure passage of the 19th Amendment. The long sought

32 Ibid., 132.
33 Scileppi Kennedy and Hartmann O'Shields, We Shall be Heard, 79.
victory was celebrated with the presentation of a marble statute honoring three of the founding suffragists in the U.S. Capitol.\textsuperscript{34} The Portrait Monument featured Anthony, Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott and was installed in the Capitol Rotunda for public display in February 1921. The sculpture was presented as a gift on behalf of the women of America by the National Women’s Party. At the time it was the only statute honoring the contributions of women but it wasn’t designated to remain on display for long. Within days of the unveiling, an all-male Congress took action to have the statute removed from its place of honor and relegated it to a basement storage closet.

Despite repeated attempts to have it displayed properly it languished in the basement for seventy-five years.\textsuperscript{35} It was dismissed for its supposed lack of historical value and derided for its aesthetic. The suffragists were described as homely and the statue was nicknamed “Three Ladies in a Bathtub.” In 1995, a coalition of women’s groups raised private funds to move the 26,000 pounds of marble but the work was no longer intact. The inscription that the monument’s sculptor Adelaide Johnson had originally carved had been removed. The statue that sits in the Rotunda today is “without the original 1920 inscription restored to the statute or displayed nearby. Its plaque fails to recognize Stanton, Anthony, and Mott’s accomplishments; it merely offers their names and dates.”\textsuperscript{36}

The sculptor’s original inscription read in part: “The mightiest of revolutions encircling the globe accomplishing without bloodshed the overthrow of entrenched

\textsuperscript{34} Courtney Workman, \textit{Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape}, ed. Paul A. Shackel (Gainsville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2001), 40.


\textsuperscript{36} Workman, \textit{Myth, Memory, and the Making of the American Landscape}, 58.
dogma and hoary bigotries… Historically these three stand unique and peerless.”37 The saga of the statute in many ways mirrors the story of a great many women orators. Too often the words women have spoken have been erased or never recorded. Just as the statute was relegated to a basement so too have women speakers disappeared from sight nearly forgotten.

America has a strong foundation of women reformers, activists, and leaders who changed the nation. These women risked humiliation, condemnation, and physical harm to express beliefs and champion causes. How is it that their achievements haven’t been more widely recognized and celebrated? Why haven’t more women risen to positions of power based on their ability to effectively use the public stage? Are there other factors that have held women back? Is it possible that a barrier to full equality emanates from other women?

37 Ibid., 61.
CHAPTER TWO
A HOSTILE ARENA

While serving as chair of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), in the late 1990’s Brooksley Born was a lone voice advocating for more regulation of the financial markets.¹ Born had been watching and analyzing a specialty product known as derivatives and from her research she determined this particular market was expanding too rapidly with little to no oversight. She made repeated attempts to bring her findings about irregularities to the attention of other regulators. But, her calls went unheeded by her counterparts – all male – at the agencies that control U.S. monetary policy.

Throughout her tenure, Born was the only senior woman in policy meetings with Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan, Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin and his deputy Larry Summers, and Securities and Exchange Commissioner Arthur Levitt. The Wall Street Journal summed up the situation Born faced with her colleagues: "The nation's top financial regulators wish Brooksley Born would just shut up."² On PBS’s Frontline, Born described being isolated and ignored: “I do think that some people, some men, may have problems in dealing with women as equals or listening to women's voices, particularly dealing with their disagreement with them.”³


Analysts believe that if Born’s warnings had been taken seriously the financial
debacle that occurred in the next decade could have been avoided or the impact lessened.\(^4\) However, at the highest levels of the nation’s oversight agencies, the issue of regulation
didn’t receive a hearing because the person calling for it wasn’t viewed as a valuable
member of the team. As was reported in \textit{Bloomberg Businessweek}, “Ms. Born’s
distinctness (training as a commodities and futures lawyer, her perch at the CFTC, and
likely her woman-ness) was her values proposition; it was also her demise.”\(^5\) Treasury
Secretary Rubin in particular viewed her as “too strident, too legalistic… not deferential
enough (to him).”\(^6\) Thus, a top level government officer who was distinguished as the
first female president of the Stanford Law Review and whose name had been mentioned
as a possible candidate for U.S. Attorney General was viewed as an outsider who could
be shunned.

Women can no longer be legally barred from the public square. Some of the
cultural attitudes that dictated women’s silence have gone by the way side. Further, some
women like Born have gained access to inner sanctums due to merit and credentials. Yet,
the Born incident is a startling reminder of the gender imbalance that exists in the way in
which our society is governed. Born occupied a position of authority that gave her a seat
at the table. But, when she attempted to voice a strong, dissenting opinion her sex
contributed to the dismissal of her concerns.

\(^4\) John DeGraaf and David Batker, \textit{What’s the Economy for Anyway?} (New York: Bloomsbury

2010, \url{http://www.businessweek.com/managing/content/jan2010/ca20100129_165898.htm} (accessed
November 27, 2011).

\(^6\) Bethany McLean and Joe Nocera, \textit{All the Devils are Here: The Hidden History of the Financial
Crisis} (New York: Penguin Group, 2010), 167.
Why is it that women are often unable to garner the same hearing as men? What factors continue to stifle their ability to command an audience? Is there some aspect of the way in which women speak that causes others to question their authority and credibility? What has been the impact of the rise of conservative women who use the public space to speak against the gains made by previous generations of women? To what extent is the sexism in our culture a hindrance? This chapter examines the discriminatory attitudes, practices, and structures that continue to hold women back in the 21st century.

Male Voice Dominates

Delivering an effective speech requires more than the transmission of information from the speaker to the audience. The most accomplished presenters are individuals who prepare a narrative that is developed with the needs and interests of the audience in mind and deliver it in a compelling manner. An effective style is one in which the speaker projects confidence with an assured voice and proactive body language. The combination of the presenter’s engaging delivery style and substantive content ensure that the audience views them as a credible source of information and even inspiration. The most accomplished orators learn the art of rhetoric through study, practice, and repeated exposure to audiences. For some the process of honing and improving their speaking style takes years.

Dating back to ancient times, the models of speaking success have been based on the techniques and habits of men. Demosthenes of Greece was an official state orator.

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who was hailed for his rousing political addresses.\textsuperscript{8} A speechwriter and lawyer, in 330 B.C. he warned of Philip of Macedonia’s plans to conquer Greece in a quest for world domination. In Rome, Cicero was a compelling orator who wrote a history of public speaking in which he explains the details of effective performance.\textsuperscript{9} The Roman senate was said to have good acoustics but it lacked amplification. Even the strongest speakers needed to know how to project the voice to be heard and to use the body to be more visible. A great deal of knowledge is available about Cicero’s speeches and speaking style because what he said and how he said it was recorded by a former slave.\textsuperscript{10} His personal secretary named Tiro devoted himself to the task of collecting and preserving all of Cicero’s words and may have developed an early form of shorthand that enabled him to keep full and accurate records.

The paucity of early women speakers means that women learned the art and science of oratory from men. “There is no record of any celebrated female orators in classical Greece or Rome, and the early texts on rhetoric and oratory were written on the assumption that the practitioners would be male.”\textsuperscript{11} Throughout all of Athenian history, the practice of public speech was denied to slaves, foreigners, and women. For Romans, free speech was considered to be the province of statesmen and warriors. There is one record of an extraordinary exception. In the year 552, Empress Theodora gave an


\textsuperscript{11} Max Atkinson, \textit{Our Master’s Voices} (London: Methuen, 1984), 111.
impassioned speech reproaching Emperor Justine who was about to abandon the throne for fear of invaders.\textsuperscript{12} Theodora castigated the Emperor for his cowardice and rallied the army which delivered a victory against the rebels.

My Lords, the present occasion is too serious to allow me to follow the convention that a woman should not speak in a man’s council. Those whose interests are threatened by extreme danger should think only of the wisest course of action, not of conventions. In my opinion, flight is not the right course, even if it should bring us to safety. It is impossible for a person, having been born into this world, not to die; but for one who has reigned it is intolerable to be a fugitive. May I never be deprived of this purple robe, and may I never see the day when those who meet me do not call me empress. If you wish to save yourself, my lord, there is no difficulty. We are rich; over there is the sea, and yonder are the ships. Yet reflect for a moment whether, when you have once escaped to a place of security, you would not gladly exchange such safety for death. As for me, I agree with the adage that the royal purple is the noblest shroud.\textsuperscript{13}

Empress Theodora exhibited candor and courage in a time of high distress. She did not shrink from her position of privilege but sought to retain power and was willing to breach the sanction of silence. What if other records of the words of public figures like Cleopatra had survived? What impact might those words have had on succeeding generations of women? Would others have been ready to step forward as leaders? Would there have been more like Cleopatra?

The fact that the standards of public speaking excellence were developed and honed by men for men presents a conundrum for present day women speakers. Historically, no consideration was paid to what the female perspective and manner might have contributed to the oratory cannon. Women who have risen in the ranks have had to forge their own way relying on a male standard. This raises questions for women

\textsuperscript{12} Steve Israel, \textit{Charge! History’s Greatest Military Speeches} (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 47.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
presenters today. Must a woman adopt a more masculine style to be listened to and to be
taken seriously? To what extent is it necessary or expected that she mask her more
feminine qualities? Would women feel more confident expressing their ideas if they had
more female role models?

A study conducted by the *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* shows that law
schools cultivate and reward patterns of behavior that are more likely to be typical of
men. At Yale Law School, the women students said they are much less likely to speak up
in class than their male counterparts. Nearly 90% of the female survey respondents
agreed with the following: “Male students tend to have more confidence in themselves as
public speakers and feel more comfortable speaking in large classes, even when the point
they are making is minor.”¹⁴ Additionally, the study found that male faculty members are
less likely to integrate women students into classroom discussions.

When asked why they hesitate to speak up in front of their classmates and
professors several of the women students said anxiety keeps them quiet. They are less
likely to respond to questions because when they do what they say is being
simultaneously judged by classmates who send text messages to one another. One
student described spending an entire semester changing her classroom seat so the
professor would never find her and be able to call upon her.¹⁵ This excessive worry is
causing the students to disengage. As a result they are missing valuable opportunities to
practice formulating arguments and defending positions. The self-imposed gag order is
negatively impacting how they are graded on classroom participation and may later put

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¹⁴ Sari Bashi and Maryana Iskander, “Why Legal Education is Failing Women,” *Yale Journal of

them at a competitive disadvantage in the job market and the court room.

The lack of confidence seems to go hand in hand with success for some high achieving women. A study of 150 women including PhD’s, respected professionals, and students with top academic scores revealed that they had not internalized their accomplishments. Rather, they believed that they were not intelligent and would soon be found out to be frauds. Both women and men experience what is called the “imposter phenomenon”\(^\text{16}\) but with a gender twist. Women tend to blame themselves more for perceived shortcomings. Men are more likely to place the blame on external factors such as bad luck. Men are also less likely to feel like frauds because they convince themselves they would have done better if they had spent time preparing.

The divergent attitudes that the genders hold about speaking in public are formed at a young age. There is considerable research that details how boys and girls learn different styles of communication that affect their level of comfort when speaking in public later in life. In *You Just Don’t Understand*, linguistics professor Deborah Tannen writes that the “world of words” boys and girls grow up in is worlds apart even though they may be raised in the same community, neighborhood, or family. Boys tend to play in larger groups with leaders who take center stage, give orders, argue, and compete for status. Girls are more likely to play in small groups or pairs where the focus is on cooperation and friendship. Girls give suggestions rather than orders, they avoid boasting, and they don’t directly challenge on another.

From an early age, boys learn and are rewarded for the skills associated with

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powerful public speakers. If there are more people in a room and the speaker needs to take control to showcase her/his ability, these are the circumstances in which many women tend to hold back. “In a situation that is more private, because the audience is small, familiar, and perceived to be members of a community (for example, other women), they are more likely to talk.”17 In the public sphere, the male style of asserting oneself, holding the floor, and interrupting tends to dominate and be accepted as long as a man is doing the talking. If a woman is talking, the audience perceives her differently. The woman who achieves a position of authority or status can find herself in what has been termed a double-bind, “a feeling of being trapped…that nagging sense that whatever you do, you can do no right.”18

Women in the workplace must learn to navigate a labyrinth of communications double standards. Engaging in verbally dominant behaviors such as self-promotion, public disagreements, or defending turf is tricky and risky business. “…female leaders often struggle to cultivate an appropriate and effective leadership style – one that reconciles the communal (helpful and sympathetic) qualities people prefer in women with the agentic (aggressive and self-confident) qualities people think leaders need to succeed.”19 In corporate suites, the woman who exhibits a speaking style more closely associated with men is judged negatively. Leaders take charge but a woman with a dominant speaking style is viewed as too abrasive or pushy.

The Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of

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Pennsylvania, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, has examined how the double-bind extends to every aspect of a woman’s leadership style including the sound of her voice. The deeper male voice has long been associated with the characteristics of leadership such as authority, control, knowledge. “Over time, such conventions as use of a male announcer (the voice-over) on television reinforces the connection between lower pitch and authority.”20 The higher pitched female voice by comparison can be deemed deficient for sounding nervous, excited, strident, or shrill. The Prime Minister of England Margaret Thatcher worked with a tutor to lower her pitch and to slow her pace.21 Her advisors concluded she would be more acceptable to audiences who might otherwise be skeptical of her ability to lead if her voice sounded more like a man’s.

The harsh judgment extends beyond a woman’s speaking style and the sound of her voice. Women seeking high level positions in government and business tend to be judged much more harshly on their physical appearance and attire. Political reporters covering campaigns are more likely to report on a woman candidate’s clothing, hairstyle, makeup and accessories: “By including more physical descriptions of women candidates, the press may reinforce the stereotype that women are objects of beauty as opposed to political actors; it may trivialize women’s campaigns by including irrelevant information such as comments about appearance and attire, and it reveals the unconscious ideology that women are valued for their appearance.”22 This double-standard forces a woman speaker to walk a fine line between projecting in a manner that is either too masculine or

20 Jamieson, Beyond the Double-Bind, 121.
21 Atkinson, Our Master’s Voices, 113.
too feminine. Women in public life benefit from a thick skin to withstand the judgment that comes with being on stage.

Hypocritical Opposition

Throughout the long suffrage campaign the leaders of the movement generally spoke with a unified voice even though there were disagreements about strategy and tactics. One area of disagreement was whether the vote should be extended to minority women and newly arrived immigrants. However, there were no national women leaders who argued against the extension of rights for women. In the 1970’s, a woman rose to national prominence primarily for her opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment.

The suffrage leaders were primarily white, middle to upper class women with time and resources to devote to the cause. The movement lacked ethnic diversity due in part to ongoing debates about whether enfranchisement could be achieved if African-Americans and immigrants were included in the struggle. Some white suffragists attempted to convince white men that the vote should be given exclusively to educated, white women. Literary tests were considered as a mean to control access to the ballot box because of ongoing fears particularly in southern states that a black electorate might challenge white supremacy.

The resistance to fully embracing African-Americans and others in national organizing campaigns was publicly challenged by both white and black leaders. When Ida Wells-Barnett, a journalist and the daughter of slaves, attempted to march in a suffrage parade she was told that the southern women would not agree to such interracial

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23 Eleanor Flexnor and Ellen Fitzpatrick, Century of Struggle, 287.

24 Ibid., 297.
participation. Not to be undone, Wells-Barnett waited until the parade was underway and joined in flanked by white supporters and finished the march.

Despite attempts to exclude them, national figures like Wells-Barnett ensured minorities remained visible and active in the movement. Having first come into national prominence as an anti-lynching crusader, Wells-Barnett was a newspaper publisher in Memphis. The office of the paper she established was burned to the ground by an angry white mob. Undeterred by the violence, she spoke out passionately for the rights of African-Americans and women. Her best known address was a speech she gave in Chicago in 1900 about the inadequacy of lynch laws in America.

In 1884, Mary Church Terrell was the first African-American woman in the U.S. to earn a college degree. She then went on to become a high school teacher and principal. As the first woman president of the National Association of Colored Women, the social justice activist gave one of the most influential speeches on race in the 20th Century entitled “What it Means to Be colored in the Capitol of the U.S.”

As a colored woman I cannot visit the tomb of the father of this country, which owes its very existence to the love of freedom in the human heart and which stands for equal opportunity to all, without being forced to sit in the Jim Crow section of the electric car which starts in the very heart of the city – midway between the Capitol and the White House. If I refuse thus to be humiliated, I am cast into jail and forced to pay a fine for violating the Virginia laws…

Notwithstanding differing positions on the racial issue, the leaders of the first wave of the women’s movement were united in their desire to achieve the vote. The

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movement encompassed different philosophies, approaches, and tactics regarding the nature of equality and the best means to achieve it. Initially, there were two factions which shared similar goals but operated independently with different strategies. The National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton was based on the philosophy that the movement should be a broad cause that included the fight for suffrage as well as the reform of divorce laws, property rights, and other issues. The American Woman Suffrage Associate which was headed up by Lucy Stone focused solely on securing the vote.

In 1890, the two organizations merged under the banner of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. With Carrie Chapman Catt at the helm the united movement achieved passage of the 19th Amendment. Throughout the decades-long campaign for the vote there had been women who opposed suffrage but no one person emerged as a leading anti-voice. As Eleanor Flexner details in *Century of Struggle*, anti-suffrage women were primarily wives of wealth with high social standing.

The main burden of their argument was that woman suffrage placed an additional and unbearable burden on women, whose place was in the home; the fact that this argument came largely from women whose housework was done by an adequate force of servants and that they presumed to speak for women less fortunately placed, never seemed to disturb the “antis,” who also argued that they did not need political suffrage since their menfolk represented them and cared for their interests.  

Flexner adds that the suffragists never credited the women in the anti-movement with a significant level of effectiveness or organizing power. The women who did speak out were considered to be fronts for other well-funded interests who opposed suffrage for political reasons such as the liquor lobby. The suffrage movement was essentially a

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movement by, for, and of women. This may be a partial explanation for the anger and shock expressed by the second wave movement leaders when they realized the most vocal opposition they faced was being voiced by a woman.

In the 1970’s, a woman emerged as the leading voice to speak against new efforts to achieve equality. Phyllis Schlafly used the hard won freedoms gained by the early leaders in the women’s movement to argue against additional public policy reforms. “‘I would like to burn you at the stake!’ an exasperated Betty Friedan, the coryphaeus of feminism, blurted out in a debate with Phyllis Schlafly at Illinois State University in the spring of 1973.”29 Friedan, author of the seminal feminist work The Feminine Mystique was expressing the frustration felt by many who were lobbying for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. A writer who had been fired from her newspaper job for being pregnant, Freidan’s book is credited with revitalizing interest in the issue of women’s equality which had gone essentially dormant after suffrage.

The nemesis of the women’s movement, Schlafly was the wife of a prominent St. Louis lawyer who supported his wife’s ambitions.30 Schlafly’s interest in politics took root after earning a graduate degree in government from Harvard University and working as a researcher at the conservative think tank the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. In 1952 she launched her first unsuccessful bid for Congress running as the “average housewife.” She never won elected office but later earned a law degree and came to prominence with the release of a book supportive of Barry Goldwater’s presidential bid.


30 Ibid., 31.
Schlaflly fell into her role as the leading anti-feminist late and by accident. The organizers of a conservative forum in Connecticut needed a spokesperson to argue against ratification of the E.R. A. in a debate. Schlaflly initially declined to participate because she had never previously written or spoken about women’s issues. In her Congressional campaigns, she focused her platform on security and national defense concerns. After a review of pro-ERA materials, Schlaflly decided to join the debate in the opposition and thus a crusade was launched that led eventually to the amendment’s defeat.31

Originally drafted by suffragist Alice Paul and later revised, the ERA was first introduced into Congress in 1923. The language of the amendment simply states that: “Equal rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.” Supporters contend it was needed to “to provide a fundamental legal remedy against sex discrimination for women and men. It would guarantee that the rights affirmed by the U.S. Constitution are held equally by all citizens without regard to sex.”32 After being introduced into Congress every year, it finally passed both houses in 1972 and was sent to the states for ratification.

The amendment enjoyed strong bipartisan support from leaders across the political spectrum. At the White House, First Lady Betty Ford successfully lobbied Republican members of Congress and state legislators. The National Organization for Women (NOW) which had been founded by a group of women and men including


Friedan organized the support of thirty state legislatures across the country. Only eight more states needed to ratify the amendment and it would become the law of the land.

Schlafly’s opposition strategy was initially outlined in the article, “What’s Wrong With Equal Rights for Women?” The principle objection was based on the view that the ERA wouldn’t give women any new protections but rather would take away some of the most important rights, benefits, and exemptions they already enjoyed. Schlafly wrote, “The family gives a woman the physical, financial and emotional security of the home – for all her life.” She argued that the ERA would degrade a woman’s role as wife and mother because the women’s movement was seeking to destroy the family.

Schlafly’s arguments extended beyond criticism of the ramifications of the amendment should it pass. She personalized the battle using rhetoric that belittled the accomplishments of previous generations of women. In public speeches and television interviews she demonized the leaders of the women’s movement describing them as “man-haters,” “women’s libbers,” and “straggly-haired women” who “yap” on talk shows and picket lines. Schlafly wrote that “Women’s libbers are promoting free sex instead of the ‘slavery’ of marriage. They are promoting Federal ‘day-care centers’ for babies instead of homes. They are promoting abortions instead of families…” Reflecting back on what she experienced during the ratification process, Friedan wrote that she never understood why the proponents were so rabid in their words and actions. “Under sweet

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34 Ibid.
smiles, one could feel their hatred, especially on the question of the liberalization of abortion laws. On one occasion, some women tried to stick a fetus in my face.”

Another successful line of argument utilized by opponents was the ERA’s impact on the draft. Women were exempt from the selective service but Schlafly maintained that with the ERA women would be drafted to serve in combat on warships and submarines. This caught the pro-ERA spokespeople flatfooted and defensive in debates: “No sane parent would want to see either child, either a son or a daughter subjected to the draft. But if women are to be citizens and citizens are subjected to the draft then women should take the responsibility of the rights of citizenship.” The anti-ERA’ers successfully used the issue of expansion of the draft as a distraction from the main purpose of the amendment.

In addition to the fears of being sent into combat, Schlafly claimed feminists were threatening to do away with Mother’s Day because the holiday would be discriminatory. Schlafly’s penchant for outrageous rhetoric against women echoes sentiments that have been expressed for hundreds of years but usually by men. What is one to make of a woman who is a public figure articulating an argument for keeping women at home while speaking in public? Schlafly had publicly thanked her husband for permitting her to speak against ERA but she never believed there was any hypocrisy in the rhetoric she used. Rather, she felt her life demonstrated how women could already do whatever they wanted and didn’t need special legislation. Wives and mothers could lead


lives outside the home but they needed to do so in a way that was compatible with their family situation and with their husband’s permission.\textsuperscript{38}

However, the leading anti-feminist conveniently overlooked and marginalized the sacrifices other women made so that she could freely speak her mind. Part of Schlafly’s legacy is the rise of other conservative women who use religious dogma to plead for a time when men did all the talking. U.S. Representative and 2010 presidential candidate Michelle Bachmann has echoed Schlafly’s sentiments. While campaigning for Congress, Bachmann told an audience that she speaks out with the permission of her husband and her God: “The Lord says be submissive. Wives you are to be submissive to your husband.”\textsuperscript{39}

The defeat of the ERA left the women’s movement divided along ideological lines. The chasm is most visible in current public debate on issues related to women’s reproductive health care. The “abortion war” is a politically divisive issue that has prevented women from working together for a broader woman’s agenda as women have done in the past. On both sides of the issue, groups have formed to argue for and against abortion rights. The national organizations which represent the pro-choice position have been and are currently led by women. NOW is run by Terry O’Neill, Planned Parenthood Federal of America is headed by Cecile Richards, and Nancy Keenan is the president of NARAL Pro-Choice America. The hierarchy of the Catholic Church which has a strong anti-choice position is exclusively male. Tony Perkins runs the faith based


Family Research Council and Troy Newman is the president of the activist organization Operation Rescue. These conservative groups and others have some women spokespeople but it is primarily men who frame the dialogue on women’s reproductive health by setting legislative and organizing priorities.

Evidence of the lack of women spokespeople was on display during a hearing held in the U.S. House of Representatives on religious liberty and birth control in February 2012. Not a single progressive woman was invited to join the panel to speak about the need for access to contraception. Rather, the hearing panel consisted exclusively of men representing conservative religious organizations. They spoke against a policy proposed by the Obama administration that would require health insurers to pay for birth control for religious institution employees. Women were excluded from testifying about how the ability to get coverage would affect basic health care concerns.

Pervasive Sexism

 Regardless of ideology it is clear that no woman seeking power in the 21st century can avoid becoming a target of gender bias. This includes conservatives like Representative Bachmann who in her bid for the White House championed her role as a wife and a mother to five natural children and 23 foster daughters as much as she touted her legal and legislative experience. When Newsweek ran an unflattering front cover photo of her with the headline “Queen of Rage,” Bachmann declined to personally comment. Her campaign’s response was that the cover was an example of the bias of the liberal mainstream media. But when a flagrantly offensive song was played for her introduction on the television program “Late Night with Jimmy Fallon” Bachmann responded that “Lyin’ Ass Bitch” was a discriminatory choice. On FOX-TV News,
Bachmann said: “This wouldn’t be tolerated if it was Michelle Obama. It shouldn’t be tolerated if it is a conservative woman either.”\textsuperscript{40}

The treatment of presidential candidate Bachmann was a repeat of the sexism that reared its ugly head in the 2008 campaign. At that time it was directed against two dissimilar women with divergent backgrounds and philosophies who came too close to securing real power – the presidency and vice-presidency. The vitriol unleashed upon Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin shattered any illusion that sexism is a thing of the past. When these women stepped up to the microphone they were condemned for their gender. Hillary was a “ballbuster” who would render men powerless. Palin was the “mother of five” who was too inexperienced to be taken seriously.

The sources of sexist commentary and demeaning imagery came from both the political left and the right. On the progressive network Radio Air America, Clinton was described as "a fucking whore." \textit{The Washington Post} journalist Carl Bernstein publicly declared his disgust about her "thick ankles." There was a website called Citizens United Not Timid. The acronym stands for a obscene reference to female sex organs. Liberal talk show host Ed Schultz said Palin set off a “bimbo alert”\textsuperscript{41} No where was the sexism more outrageous and widespread than it was on the Internet. One particularly egregious example was an image of Palin’s head that had been photo shopped onto a bosom figure in a red, white, and blue bikini holding an assault weapon.

The manner in which Clinton and Palin were portrayed is significant because it


\textsuperscript{41} Rebecca Traister, \textit{Big Girls Don’t Cry: The Election That Changed Everything for American Women} (New York: Free Press, 2010), 233.
demonstrates that while women have made progress advancing in the public and private sectors, sexist attitudes are persistent and used to bring down women. A poll taken in 2008 showed that 51% of Americans were not “ready to elect a woman to high office.” The survey conducted by the Pew Research Center also revealed a paradox in the public’s thinking about women as leaders. The public feels that women do have the right traits to be leaders such as “honesty, intelligence, decisive, ambitious and hard working.” But, women don’t make it to the very top because of “gender discrimination, resistance to change, and a self-serving old boys club.”

In the last several decades anti-discrimination laws have been effective in decreasing inequality in the workplace, classroom, and athletic arena. Regrettably, our media culture remains rife with stereotypical images that marginalize women. Susan J. Douglas writes in *Enlightened Sexism* that the sexism in today’s culture is “… a response, deliberate or not, to the perceived threat of a new gender regime. It insists that women have made plenty of progress because of feminism – indeed, full equality has allegedly been achieved – so now it’s okay, even amusing, to resurrect sexist stereotypes of girls and women.” Enlightened sexism is embodied in the mass media and advertising that objectifies women to sell products and drive viewer ratings. In 2011, NBC-TV released a program called *The Playboy Club*. The show presented a glamorized view of the 1960’s *Playboy* bunny clubs focusing on cocktail waitresses dressed in provocative costumes.

In *Sexism in America*, Barbara Berg details the rampant discrimination that exists

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in what she describes as “unpopular culture” and how the images women see of themselves are distorted, “Instead of realistic portrayals we’re barraged with minimizing deviations – the sultry schoolgirls, the consumerist chick, the militant manhunter, the cold-hearted careerist. Shaped and dominated by a mass media overwhelmingly in the hands of men, popular culture has engaged in years of misogynist maligning.”

This type of stereotyping led Douglas to write, “Enlightened sexism is especially targeted to girls and young women and emphasizes that now that they ‘have it all’ they should focus the bulk of their time and energy on their appearance, pleasing men, being hot, competing with other women, and shopping.” The media and advertisers are targeting younger and younger girls with messages about the need to focus on appearance and other superficial concerns. The retailer Wall Mart recently introduced a line of cosmetics for girls aged eight and up.

The predominant purveyors of this new brand of sexism are the same entities that Betty Friedan exposed in The Feminine Mystique fifty years ago. Friedan challenged a media driven culture that perpetrated an image of women who “were defined only in sexual relation to men – man’s wife, sex object, mother, housewife – and never as persons defining themselves by their own actions in society.” The image of the happy homemaker was reinforced in the popular culture. It was embodied in TV programs such

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45 Douglas, Enlightened Sexism, 10.


as *Father Knows Best* which depicted a traditional family where mom stayed at home to care for the family’s needs. The image was also displayed in the editorial and advertising content of the leading women’s magazines which promoted products such as vacuum cleaners and self-cleaning ovens as the means for women to achieve fulfillment and happiness.

The lack of positive and more diverse role models is not limited to entertainment programming and advertisements. In the traditional news media, women reporters, editors, writers, and producers are far outnumbered by men. Only 3% of all decision-making positions in the news media are held by women.48 News rooms are populated by gatekeepers who make decisions about what news we hear and what falls on the editing room floor. Men decide which people, places, and events are important and which are not. As a result, news coverage about and for women has largely been relegated to the lifestyle or feature sections of newspapers.

All across the media and public landscape, significant barriers remain that limit the presentation of women’s voices and a woman’s perspective. News media organizations lack balance at the highest levels. Political and social commentators use derogatory language when speaking of women leaders. Sexist stereotypes are embedded in advertising, television programming, movies, and websites. Further, the masculine manner of speaking is more closely associated with the attributes of authority and credibility. Highly vocal conservative women ignore the contributions and sacrifices

made by previous generations of women. Given the intensity of challenges that remain for women who enter the public arena it is important to ask what can be done if anything to improve the situation. While these obstacles are serious they may indeed be surmountable with the strategic use of new media tools that have been developed in the last decade. The deployment of technology such as social media platforms may present the best chance for a more balanced public square.
CHAPTER THREE
LEVELING THE SPEAKING FIELD

In his classic work *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan foretold of a media universe that would act as a global village. The communications theorist predicted that electronic technology would expand into an “electronic nervous system” that would simultaneously connect people around the world. More than any other platform, the World Wide Web brings McLuhan’s vision to life. With the Internet, it is now possible for geographically dispersed individuals to share information instantaneously. It is possible to observe and comment on events that are unfolding in other parts of the world in real time. It is possible to reach out to anyone, anywhere, anytime in a matter of seconds.

McLuhan’s global village presents new ways for women speakers to reach broader audiences. When Susan B. Anthony campaigned for suffrage, if someone wanted to hear her speak they would have had to travel to a venue to watch in person. If Anthony were alive to give a talk today, there are many more options for hearing her. The speech might be covered by the news media. If not, it might be simulcast online or later viewed on a website. Anthony might also post a transcript online and write a blog that summarized her remarks. It is now possible to reach audiences from venues other than a public stage or news media coverage. This change is significant because it means women are no longer reliant on others for an invitation to speak or for inclusion in news coverage. Women speakers can be proactive in reaching audiences, responding to public policy debates, and commenting on current affairs.
This chapter explores the ways in which women speakers can be heard in a new communications universe. What are the new forums and venues and what advantages might they have over traditional formats? What does it take for a woman’s voice to have impact in an environment that is saturated with information? To what extent do new media technologies provide a means to deal with the chronic barriers of marginalization and sexism? Are there downsides for women engaging in the digital world of instant communication?

The New Speaking Universe

In colonial America, news of the trials of Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer was disseminated through personal communication, primarily word of mouth or hand delivered letters. Any effort to organize support on their behalf would have taken days and weeks. The speed and reach of printed materials from mechanical presses came years later. Printing presses were expensive and uncommon in colonial America. The British government was concerned they could be used to generate civic unrest that would threaten the stability of their control over the colonies.¹ By 1775, the postal service had been expanded to thirty offices from Maine to New Hampshire and newspapers had become more widely available in the mid-eighteenth century.²

At the same time, Samuel Morse’s telegraph greatly enhanced communications and made it possible to reach across the vast expanse of the continental U.S. By then, newspapers and newsletters had grown in popularity and one of the first publications to focus exclusively on the interests of women readers was the Woman’s Journal


² Ibid., 55.
established and published by suffragist Lucy Stone in 1870. Large circulation women’s magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* were also founded in the latter half of the 19th century.

In the ensuing decades, printed news was steadily supplemented with the emergence of radio and television broadcasts and then cable. The last decade has brought an explosion in technological advances and a corresponding decline in the circulation of older formats such as magazines and newspapers. Information now reaches people directly through digital screens, often hand cellular telephones and portable computers. While the cost of computers prevents their reach from being universal, cell phones are nearly ubiquitous. It is estimated that “the total number of mobile phones in the world went from about 500 million at the beginning of the century to approaching 5 billion today.”

From downtown Beijing to a rural African village, cell phones permit the transmission of voice, text, and video images.

These omnipresent screens transmit content from traditional radio, cable, and television broadcasters and with ever increasing influence, the Internet. According to the United Nations, the number of Internet users worldwide is more than two billion people with most new users logging on in developing countries.

Individuals use the Internet to research information about unlimited topics. Blogs serve as personal diaries that individuals use as forums to share commentary and debate timely issues. Social media

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sites enable people to connect and reconnect with networks of friends. “If Facebook were a nation it would be the third most populous country after China and India…with over 500 million users.”

Social media sites are supplemented by forums such as Twitter which allow for the dissemination of brief messages to anyone who chooses to follow the “tweets.” Twitter account holders are able to receive endless updates instantaneously from the people who interest them and about issues they care about. For people who prefer video content, YouTube offers thousands of videos that are uploaded onto the website hourly.

The power of the Internet has expanded to the degree that a UN report declared that access is a human right: “…the Internet is one of the most powerful instruments of the 21st Century for increasing transparency in the conduct of the power, access to information, and for facilitating active citizen participation in building democratic societies.” Some analysts point to the 2008 U. S. presidential campaign as a dividing line between pre-Internet advocacy efforts and post-Internet advocacy.

Every piece of news and information is instantly processed by the combined brain power of millions, events are interpreted in new and unpredictable ways, observations transformed into beliefs, thoughts into reality. Ideas and opinions flow from the ground up, insights and inferences, speculation and extrapolation are put forth, then looped and re-looped on a previously unimaginable scale, conventional wisdom created in hours and minutes.

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Social media networking technologies have revolutionized the way individuals and organizations communicate. Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are being used to bring about unprecedented social change in unexpected places and in surprisingly uncomplicated ways. In 2010, The New York Times reported that the Red Cross had raised more than 40 million dollars through text message donations for Haitian earthquake relief in a few days. The technology that is used to send email to colleagues and family members can bring significant change to devastated communities. Individuals are using the technology to support the causes and to exercise their voices by standing up to powerful institutions. A college student sparked a consumer boycott with an online petition that resulted in Bank of America dropping a proposed increase in banking fees. The disempowered can now reach large audiences with little expense to speak out and talk back.

Social Media for Social Change

A dramatic example of the impact of social media was witnessed in the Middle East as protestors used technology to organize large scale demonstrations for democracy. The Arab Spring protestors mobilized thousands of citizens to take part in public demonstrations through Facebook and cell phone messages. In Cairo, Egypt, massive public demonstrations held in the town square were instrumental in bringing about the ouster of a president who had reined for decades.

The catalyst for the utilization of social media for social protest was far from hi-

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tech. The Arab uprising was launched on the streets of Tunisia when a fruit and vegetable vendor set himself on fire outside of a government building. The vendor who was trying to support his family on a meager income felt voiceless after suffering years of bullying by local police officers. He was harassed on a nearly daily basis and his produce was often confiscated without cause. The image of this lone man’s attempt to be heard through self-immolation spread rapidly online. What at first may have appeared to be a desperate act of defiance led to the fall of Tunisia’s president and served as the impetus for other acts of civil disobedience that spread to other countries.

A few months after the Tunisian protest in a country half way around the world, a comment made by a Toronto police officer set off the first global feminist protest movement. The officer was speaking to students at York University when he suggested that their clothing choices could help them avoid rape: “women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized.” The ill-advised remark set off a demonstration that the organizers dubbed a SlutWalk. Thousands of marchers, some dressed in skin revealing outfits with the word “slut” painted on their bodies, descended upon police headquarters. They carried placards with statements such as: “Those who experience sexual assault are not the ones at fault.”

The SlutWalk event generated headlines and within months similar demonstrations occurred in cities across the U.S., Europe and even spread to conservative

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11 Ibid., 59.


places such as Indonesia, and India. The initial walk sparked one of the most successful feminist actions in decades. An initial team of five people in Toronto breathed new life into a form of protest that the women’s movement has historically used to advocate for women’s rights.

The suffragists had taken to the streets in major cities turning out tens of thousands of marchers and hundreds of thousands of onlookers. In 1913, the National Women’s Party organized a massive parade in Washington, D.C. to coincide with Woodrow Wilson’s arrival at the White House. The event “mimicked the long-held ritual of president’s inauguration celebration to help promote a vision of women suffrage as a united, national movement, and to constitute the identities of women as national citizens.”

More recently, women’s organizations have used marches to bring attention to the issue of women’s reproductive health care. Washington, D.C. has been the site for advocates on both sides of the abortion debate to rally support for their position and to lobby legislators for policy initiatives. In 1992, one of the largest marches ever held in the nation’s capitol was organized by NOW when 750,000 people turned out to express concern about the future of reproductive freedom. These marches may not bring immediate change in legislative policy but they are powerful collective displays of citizen advocacy that generate widespread attention.

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Similarly, the SlutWalks brought attention to an issue on a global scale. The Internet allowed the organizers to strike a universal chord with people of different ethnic backgrounds from diverse nations. Together, they were able to speak out about the manner in which victims of sexual violence are treated by the criminal justice system. The events served as a way to educate people about the stereotypes that affix to the victims of sex crimes who are primarily but not exclusively women.

The SlutWalks are not without controversy particularly in places that lack a women’s movement and where women’s rights are paid scant attention. Concern was expressed about the event’s name and the outrageous attire of some of the participants. Some people feared the use of the word “slut” would reinforce a negative stereotype rather than educate about the problem. The suggestive clothing of some marchers could have delegitimized the events. In more conservative locales, the marchers toned down their dress for fear of arrest.16 Despite concerns raised about the provocative nature of the event, the theatrics ensured the protestors would be noticed. These are the types of tactics that are necessary for an idea to be heard in a crowded digital world.

Social scientist researchers have found that growing numbers of people are becoming hyperconnected “using at least seven different digital devices and nine different applications, in order to stay as screen connected as possible at all time…”17 Individuals are using those devices to send and receive billions of messages daily. “In 2002, people sent more than thirty-one billion email messages every day; by 2006, that


17 Powers, Hamlet’s Blackberry, 32.
number had more than doubled."18 A significant challenge faced by any entity hoping to create change is breaking through in an information-saturated environment. Ideas and causes are competing for limited attention spans. The louder the voice, the more graphic the image, the more emotional the rhetoric, the more likely it is that the event or idea will break through the clutter and grab an audience member’s attention. Slutwalks do not appeal to everyone who wants to speak on the topic of violence against women. But the publicity generated ensured widespread coverage by mainstream news organizations beyond sympathetic audiences such as feminist publications.

The mainstream media has a weak track record of reporting on the issue of violence against women and related topics. Analysis of news stories has also found a lack of neutrality and balance in how stories are reported. Researcher Marian Meyers found that traditional print and broadcast news organizations perpetuate the problem of violence against women by the way stories are written and produced. Stories often contain a bias that blames the victim and reinforces harmful cultural stereotypes. For example, a woman who is shot by her husband is referred to only in relationship to him “his wife” but never by her first name. And, a woman who was murdered by her husband is first described as being stricken by AIDS.19 This unbalanced coverage very frequently goes largely unnoticed. With widespread dissemination of newspapers and articles online it is now possible for individuals to serve as media watch dogs and point out inaccuracies and bias.


In March 2011, readers of The New York Times expressed outrage with how one of the country’s largest and most respected news organizations covered a gang rape of an 11-year old girl. The child was attacked by eighteen boys and men in an abandoned trailer in a small Texas town. The article pilloried the victim for dressing “older than her age” and hanging out with “older boys at the playground.” The reporter detailed the concern that was expressed by community residents for the ruined lives of the men involved without dually acknowledging concern for the victim.

The Times article quickly became one of the newspaper’s “most emailed.” The viral distribution by concerned readers extended the reach of the article beyond the newspaper’s general circulation numbers, which have been dropping for the last decade. While circulation has hovered around one million subscribers, the newspaper’s website is one of the most popular online news sites with as many as 30 million visitors monthly. The public editor of the paper credited the intense interest in the story to the people who identified the bias in the initial story. The subsequent online commentary spelled out the reporter’s errors and the lack of balanced editorial oversight.

The reaction to the Times’ coverage of the rape case is an example of how social media tools serve as a means for news consumers to reduce their dependence on traditional gatekeepers. These gatekeepers at major news gathering operations are primarily men. Readers can quickly bring attention to any deficiencies to large audiences beyond a news organization’s staff and paid subscribers. Now it is possible to hold

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individual writers and editors responsible for errors in judgment and personal bias. It is no longer necessary to wait for a correction from the news organization that may not come. News consumers wield power with the ability to comment directly on a story and then circulate critiques widely.

Public figures have begun using social media to exercise control over their public image. After enduring biased press coverage in the 2008 election, Sarah Palin became one of the first individuals to communicate directly with her supporters through a Facebook page and Twitter messages. Bypassing the mainstream media allowed Palin to have more control over how her actions and words were interpreted. She urged other conservative elected officials and candidates to ignore interview requests from major newspapers and television networks to bypass what she termed the “liberal bias” of the elite press. Across the political spectrum, newsmakers are now speaking directly to audiences without having to depend on unknown editors.

Additionally, given questions raised about the ideological bias of mainstream news operations, there are growing numbers of organizations that serve as monitors of the media. They focus on analyzing media coverage to detect bias and inaccurate reporting. Factcheck.org is a nonpartisan program of the Annenberg Public Policy Center that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics. Other monitors have an ideological bent such as the nearly three decades old MediaMatters.org, a progressive research group that monitors, analyzes, and corrects conservative misinformation. In the last few years, efforts have been organized to create more widespread awareness of sexist bias in the media. Name It. Change It. is a website that focuses specifically on how
women electoral candidates are covered by the media. It disseminates alerts to its members about coverage of candidates and their campaigns.

New Channels for a Female Perspective

When Katie Couric sat down at the news desk on the *CBS Evening News* in 2006 she became the first woman to anchor the news on her own. Four years later when Diane Sawyer took over at *ABC World News Tonight*, another milestone had been reached. Two of three broadcast networks had entrusted the reins of their primary news shows to women. However, was anyone still watching network news? The networks have seen their ratings decline due to competition with all-news cable channels and the Internet. It seemed women had finally reached the pinnacle of TV news just as the job was viewed as less influential.

In the U.S. and around the world, women play a secondary role in all aspects of news gathering and reporting. The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), a program funded by the United Nations Development Fund for Women, has found that women are underrepresented in all aspects of media coverage. GMMP research has found that while more women around the globe have moved into news anchoring jobs – women make up 57% of news readers – only 29% of news stories are written by women reporters.\(^{22}\) The stories that women reporters produce are more likely to be feature and lifestyle pieces. Men are still more likely to cover hard news issues such as crime, the economy, and foreign affairs. Additionally, women are much less likely to be the subject of news. Three-quarters of all news stories feature men as the primary subjects leaving

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women largely absent. Women are seen, heard, and read about in broadcast and print less than one quarter of the rate of men. Most decisions about what will be covered and how it will be covered by print, broadcast, cable and radio news organizations content are made by men who run and control news operations.

This underrepresentation exists in the U.S., despite the fact that the number of women enrolling in journalism and mass communications bachelor’s degree programs has remained higher then men. Research shows that women students are a clear majority at nearly 65 percent while at the same time, only one-third of all news room jobs are held by women.23 In the major national news magazines, there exists what is called a “byline gender gap.” In 2006, the male to female ratio of names on the masthead of some major publications was 27:6 at The Atlantic, 30:2 at Harper’s Magazine, 44:18 at The New Yorker, and 14:7 at the online publication Salon.24 The employment rates for women have been and remain much better at women’s magazines. However, the editorial content at those publications tends to focus on fashion, diets, and lifestyle issues. Ms. Magazine is the lone woman’s voice focused on political issues and social policy available on news stands.

This black hole of reporting by women and for women is starting to be filled on the Internet with hundreds of websites and blogs developed and maintained by women. Established by three women in 2005, BlogHer was one of the first and has an extensive


Similar websites bring together individuals with common interests, whether social, professional, or political. There are hundreds of websites devoted to commentary on the issues of the day that feature a woman’s perspective. There are hundreds of thousands of women bloggers who comment on gender and sexuality, race relations, contemporary news events, and world affairs and they are very active. “More than one-third of all women in the United States aged between 18 and 75 participate in the blogosphere at least once a week.” These women are reading blogs and posting and updating their own commentary.

A new generation of activists with blogs and Tweets has replaced the banners and newspapers of the suffragists and they are mobilizing women of all ages across the political spectrum. Author Jessica Valenti founded the website Feministing.com in 2004 “to better connect feminists online and off.” Valenti is a prolific writer and Feministing.com is considered one of the most influential progressive blogs. Across the partisan divide, Karin Agness’ Network of Enlightened Women is a forum started for young conservatives. Women of color like activist Morgane Richardson established a presence online with the website Refuse the Silence: Women of Color in Academia Speak Out. Richardson is one of many voices advocating on behalf of minority women

25 Antoinette Pole, Blogging the Political: Politics and Participation in a Networked Society (New York: Routledge, 2010), 64.


28 O’Connor, Gender and Women’s Leadership, 242.

who navigate the issues of race, class, and gender.

Online commentary provided by these speakers is free of the constraints found in traditional news rooms. The feminist websites and blog posts are allowing women to establish their credentials as experts in a given field. They no longer have to compete for limited chairs on TV news sets or column inches in major publications. Women can post on any subject thereby demonstrating their knowledge and expertise. Most women who are blogging on politics and public policy do not limit themselves to women’s issues but rather cover a range of general issues. Blogs and social networks allow women to maintain and expand their professional networks.

On Facebook, women comprise the majority of the hundreds of millions of users and women are the most engaged users of the site. The predominance of women on the site means they are also the prime target for the site’s advertising and marketing. As the site continues to evolve it may become more of a commercial space than a networking site. What this means for women is unclear. It remains to be seen whether the site will stay friendly to its women users. Or, will it be used to reinforce negative stereotypes like other commercial media enterprises?

In addition to the social media sites, there are organizations that have been established to help women gain the skills and know-how to successfully utilize social media and traditional media. The Women’s Media Center is raising the visibility of women in the media by providing content from women writers, journalists, film makers, and digital media producers directly to news organizations. By offering original content the organization is able to supplement the offerings of news gatherers many of which are

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30 Pole, Blogging the Political, 56.
operating under tight budgets in news rooms with fewer personnel. Additionally, women are being trained to serve as expert commentators on television and cable news programming.

Calling Out Sexism

In her essay “Life Between the Lines,” Gloria Steinem related some of what she has experienced as a well-known public woman over the last several decades. One of the more depressing scenarios from the 1970’s was seeing displayed on newsstands all across New York City a centerfold spread in the pornographic tabloid, Screw. It depicted her face with signature glasses and hair attached to a nude body. The altered photograph was bordered with penises and a headline instructed the viewer to: “Pin the cock on the feminist.”

Steinem wrote that she felt helpless and humiliated by the magazine spread. As she considered how to respond, it was clear that there were few avenues of redress available. A letter could be sent to the editor to complain but it was highly unlikely that the publication’s readers would sympathize with her predicament. When it was learned that the publisher planned to produce a full color poster of the offensive photograph, Steinem’s lawyer contacted the publisher. A poster would have been considered a for-profit product and would not be protected as editorial comment. The response to the legal letter was a box of chocolates from the publisher with the note that said: “Eat Me.” At that point, Steinem dropped the matter. A legal battle would likely have been a costly affair that could drag on for years.

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32 Ibid.
Since the Internet acts as an extension of the real world, it is not surprising that women face sexual harassment online. Forty years after Steinem was pilloried by a news magazine, an equally offensive image of vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin went viral. However, the reaction to a photoshopped image of Palin that circulated on the Internet was very different. There was an immediate outcry and the image of Palin’s head on another woman’s body in a bikini was quickly revealed to be a hoax. The website Urban Legends tracked down the genesis of the original photo of Palin and of the second woman identifying her as a model named Elizabeth\textsuperscript{33} and explained how the photo was altered. A phalanx of pundits and bloggers rallied in support and decried the actions of the individual responsible. Anyone attempting to download the photo was then automatically linked to a website that championed Palin’s record as the governor of Alaska.

Women cannot expect to avoid sexual harassment online particularly since it is possible to post anonymously. The anonymity provides cover to individuals willing to ignore social conventions and behave in ways that are unacceptable and even criminal in the case of cyberstalking. However, the Internet ensured that Palin didn’t have to respond personally and risk being marginalized as someone who couldn’t take a prank. The technology made it possible for others to speak to the serious nature of the problem, step in to stop the behavior, and defend her.

As detailed in the previous chapter, Palin and Hillary Clinton were pummeled by a relentless barrage of sexist commentary. For the most part the candidates withstood the onslaught, except when family members were subjects of attack. Late night television

host David Letterman made a lewd comment about Palin’s 14-year old daughter, Willow, when he joked that she had been knocked up by a New York Yankees baseball player. Palin responded personally to the attack on her Facebook page and by sending Twitter messages to her followers.\(^{34}\) When an MSNBC anchor said during a live program that Clinton had “pimped out” her daughter, supporters and members of the general public were able to channel their outrage online. The initial response from cable executives was to issue a statement saying the comment was “irresponsible and inappropriate” and that the network “takes these matters seriously and offers our sincere regrets to Clinton for the remark.”\(^{35}\) The anchor then made an on air apology and was suspended for a short time.

This action didn’t satisfy many who had witnessed the ordeal that both Clinton and Palin had experienced throughout the campaign. In a letter from Emily’s List, a political group that supports women candidates, more was demanded from the cable executives. Concern was cited not only about Shuster’s comment but also about a misogynistic pattern to the channel’s reporting. Emily’s List President Ellen Malcolm wrote: “I know I speak for millions across this country when I demand that you take immediate steps and publicly tell us what you will do to eliminate this sexist and demeaning culture that has become so pervasive in your network.”\(^{36}\) Almost immediately, a network of bloggers circulated the video of Shuster making his offensive

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comment and his next day apology. Viewers could listen and make a determination for themselves about what they thought happened. Did Shuster commit an unfortunate and inadvertent slip of the tongue? Was his subsequent apology heartfelt or half-hearted?

Many women had a visceral reaction to the way in which the candidates were marginalized and humiliated. Women of all ages, races, and nationalities face discrimination that varies along a continuum. The acts extend from blatant actions which are intended to cause harm to ones that are more hidden and more difficult to do anything about.\textsuperscript{37} Blatant discrimination includes sexual harassment, physical violence, wage discrimination and other forms of unequal treatment that can be documented and remedied through the courts and the political system. Discrimination that is more subtle is less visible and obvious because some people have internalized it as normal or acceptable, even though it leaves women feeling demeaned and humiliated with little to no recourse.

A common form of subtle discrimination that knows no city, state, or country border is street harassment. Women walking in public often are subjected to unsolicited comments about their looks, bodies, and clothing. Some comments are seemingly innocent: “Hey baby, you look good in those jeans.” Some are lewd, graphic descriptions of body parts or sex acts and may extend to unwanted touching or groping. The problem is pervasive and insidious with as many as 80\% of women reporting they have been subjected to street harassment.\textsuperscript{38} It is also one of the forms of harassment that


\textsuperscript{38} Holly Kearl, \textit{Stop Street Harassment: Making Public Places Safe and Welcoming for Women} (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 3.
is least legislated against. On the street the protections that exist in the home, school or workplace don’t apply.

Where the police and the courts are unable to intervene or prevent harassment, mobile technology is providing a means of redress and prevention. A group of enterprising citizens has started a movement to end street harassment by putting the focus on the harasser. Hollaback is an international movement that began as a response to a harrowing story.\textsuperscript{39} A young woman sitting on a subway in New York City was subjected to a man seated across from her who started to masturbate. Terrified, she didn’t know what to do so she used a cell phone to take a picture of him and took it to the police. Officers ignored her complaint, saying there was nothing they could do. So she posted the photo on a site called Flicker and it eventually appeared on the front page of \textit{New York Daily News}. The newspaper’s article generated a conversation that is spreading to cities globally.

Hollaback is looking to change the global culture of acceptance and toleration of abuse that prevents women from feeling safe in public. There is a similar organization in Cairo called HarrassMap and in England there is London Against Street Harrassment. Anyone who has been subjected to street harassment can post a story or photograph on the organization’s blog. A cell phone application makes it possible to share geographically coded photos. The app is empowering to victims of abuse and helps document the incidents of abuse. Data is being collected on where abuse occurs so it can be tracked and offenders caught. The information is also being used to raise awareness of the problem. In October 2010, the New York City Council held the first, ever hearing on street harassment and may consider the possibility of creating “harassment free zones” in.

\textsuperscript{39}Hollaback, History, \url{http://www.ihollaback.org/about/history/} (accessed February 20, 2012).
Hollaback is one creative example of how social media tools are helping women reclaim public space. Women have reported that there are public areas they never enter because they fear being harassed. Street harassment teaches a woman to be silent and walk on. If women are to claim their voice they must be able to claim all public space as their own. Women who feel intimidated or threatened are not free to speak their mind. The elimination of street harassment is a crucial step to leveling the public speaking field.

In the last decade there has been an explosion of media outlets that shape debates, inform and activate millions of people, and create change in society. Gone are the days when CBS newsman Walter Cronkite delivered the evening news once a day. The dependence news consumers once had on the mainstream media no longer exists. There is no need to rely on a small cadre of individuals who lack ethnic and gender diversity. Through the Internet and social media individuals can serve as gatekeepers that more accurately reflect the diversity of our nation. Concerned citizens can share their views with networks of friends and strangers who are digitally linked by shared interests. They can talk back to power institutions and have impact.

Women speakers have new channels that enable them to express themselves and provide commentary on contemporary events. The power of thousands of individuals willing to devote time to creating websites, posting blogs, monitoring the media, and producing videos is just beginning to be realized. With more women engaged in the dialogue the speaking environment can be made to be less hostile and intimidating.
CHAPTER FOUR
WHY WOMEN’S VOICES MATTER

U.S. Senator Debbie Stabenow: “… and I don’t think you can go forward and allow 60% of the insurance companies not to provide basic maternity care in a new system we are setting up that hopefully is going to be better than the old one.”

U.S. Senator Jon Kyle: “First of all, I don’t need maternity care. And so, requiring that to be in my insurance policy is something that I don’t need and will make the policy more expensive.”

Stabenow interjects: “If I could just object with my colleague. Yes, but I bet your mom did.”

The back and forth between Senators Stabenow and Kyle took place during a Congressional finance hearing on reforming national health care policy. The Senators were discussing whether all insurance companies should be required to provide certain types of health care coverage. Imagine that debate without Stabenow in the room. Would any of her male colleagues have spoken up on behalf of millions of American citizens and their health care needs? The simple exchange captures the different sensibilities that men and women bring to the discussion of a topic like health care reform. It demonstrates that women legislators raise issues that their male colleagues may never think to raise.

With her prescient interruption, Stabenow articulated the need for a full hearing of the health care concerns of all citizens. What she said served as a reminder that policy discussions are not abstract rhetorical exercises. Rather, those discussions result in

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consequences that impact millions of lives. Stabenow’s comment helped to ensure that women’s health care needs would not be left out of the decision making process.

It has not been the objective of this paper to assert that a women’s voice is better, or that a woman’s perspective is more important. Rather, a main objective of this examination of women in the public speaking arena is to provide an understanding of how a woman’s voice is different and why it matters that those differences are articulated. This final chapter examines how the female perspective enriches the dialogue. What are the benefits that accrue to audiences as well as the speaker? How might our democratic form of government function differently if a greater diversity of voices were heard and respected?

Attributes of Woman Talk

Historically, the speaker’s podium has been the province of men and male speakers have received more acclaim for their speaking ability. Often times, the leaders of nations, businesses, and movements are the individuals who emerge as the most persuasive representative for their cause. Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, Joseph Stalin, Patrick Henry, Cicero, Adolf Hitler, and John F. Kennedy used speech to stir the emotions of people. Whether for good or evil, these men shared the astonishing ability to command attention, compel movements, and inspire loyalty.

With the rise of the suffrage movement in the United States, women showed that they too could make effective use of the bully pulpit. When women raised their voices they were successful in their campaigns to bring about social and political change. When women refused to be silenced they were able to improve their own lives and strengthen
our nation. Women speakers have demonstrated leadership by successfully utilizing their speaking skills to captivate and motivate audiences.

The best speakers are the ones who have honed technique and skills over time.\(^2\) Audience members sometimes mistakenly believe that the most accomplished had the good fortune of being born with the talent. Charisma may be part of the package but upon closer inspection it is clear that the best presenters share similarities in technique. In his research on the masters of political speech Max Atkinson demystified the aura surrounding great speakers: “…by looking closely at spellbinding oratory in action, it emerges that there is nothing particularly mysterious about it, and that it involves the master of a relatively small number of technical skills that can be identified and described.”\(^3\) Those skills include the ability to project with a clear voice, the use of interactive body language, and the preparation of content that is relevant to the listeners because it has meaning and applicability to their lives.

There is nothing gender specific about the core techniques and practices of talented presenters. Rather, the individuals who are effective – female and male – demonstrate a combination of attributes that include both feminine and masculine qualities. It is no longer possible to control audiences using attributes more closely associated with a masculine approach – talking over people, lecturing, interrupting, or suppressing ideas. Those dictatorial styles do not impress audiences who are accustomed to the dynamics of a diverse, interconnected social media world. Creative expression and engagement are more likely to capture and hold an audience’s attention. The feminine


\(^3\) Atkinson, Our Master's Voices, 121.
attributes of dialogue, listening, disclosure, animation, and empathy – traditionally considered signs of weakness – are now valued and expected.\(^4\) When those characteristics are combined with steady confidence and a polished style the sum is a compelling persona.

Women have shown that they have the ability to embrace fundamental techniques and add feminine touches that resonate with audiences. In 1996, Elizabeth Dole gave a speech that left many convinced she would be a stronger presidential candidate than her husband Bob Dole. Renowned for acute attention to detail and exhaustive practice schedule, Dole brought that discipline to bear at the Republican National Convention when she delivered an untraditional presentation at a most conventional forum.

Speaking on behalf of her husband’s campaign, Dole broke with long held tradition by leaving the enormous stage with elaborate podium to walk on the floor of the convention auditorium.\(^5\) In a canary yellow suit and high-heeled shoes, she skillfully descended twelve steps and navigated a crowded room to walk amongst thousands of seated “friends.” The talk show delivery style had such impact that it led to immediate speculation that Elizabeth should be on the ticket. Dole did go on to use the publicity from the performance to make her own run for the presidency three years later. Dubbed the “Oprah” speech by the press, Dole’s carefully choreographed routine was modeled after the style of daytime television talk show host, Oprah Winfrey. Winfrey was a pioneer in her own right, becoming the first woman to change the predictable format of


questions and answers with the guests. The dialogue was broadened to become a conversation with the people seated in the studio and the viewers at home.

The format of the Oprah Winfrey Show allowed for a more intimate dialogue although the audience was vast. In recent years, women beyond the entertainment industry are using this more intimate style of dialogue. In business and government, women are beginning to see the advantages of sharing their full selves with audiences. PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi has spoken about the necessity for women to bring every aspect of their lives to the office. The executive of a company that would be the 37th largest republic in the world if it were a country speaks freely about the exhilaration of being in charge. In the next breath, she will openly discuss the resulting guilt that she isn’t doing enough for her children. Nooyi says she has succeeded in the corporate world by embracing her immigrant roots and discussing the challenges of being a wife and mother. Nooyi says financial performance alone isn’t enough when measuring the success of a company.

All employees of PepsiCo are first mothers, fathers, children, husbands, wives, aunts, uncles before they are employees of PepsiCo. The only way we thought we would be able to bring the best and brightest to work at PepsiCo is if we allowed them to bring their whole selves to work. Not park themselves at the door, walk in, and be somebody else. We had to think about how do we articulate the direction of the company in a way that everybody feels very good about the company not because of financial performance alone.⁶

As a woman of color, Nooyi is the rarest of rare birds in the c-suite. Minority women hold less than 2% of all corporate officer positions in Fortune 500 companies.

Nooyi says she learned early on to embrace rather than hide her differences and believes

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that she has succeeded in corporate America because she is a woman, foreign born, and willing to speak her mind.

Former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina and the company’s current CEO Meg Whitman are two high-profile business women who went on to run for statewide office in California. The COO of Facebook, Sheryl Sandberg uses her platform as one of the highest ranking women in the male dominated technology industry to advocate for women to own their ambition.⁷ Renowned for her on-stage presence at industry conferences, Sandberg doesn’t speak in techno-garble but draws on her experience as the lone woman in board meetings to connect with her target audience of women.

With more and more women in the public speaking arena, the image of a woman behind a podium becomes more ordinary. It allows individual women to be accepted for their own style of speaking. Hillary Clinton has travelled a rocky road to acceptance throughout her career in public life. As first lady she was often viewed with suspicion and dislike. Pronouncements that the election of her husband Bill would result in a “co-presidency” did not endear her to audiences.⁸ In 1995, Clinton delivered a speech at the United Nations Fourth Conference World Conference on Women in Beijing China. The strong rhetoric moved audiences: “If there is one message that echoes forth from this conference, it is that human rights are women’s rights – and women’s rights are human rights.” But, the American public wasn’t ready to commend her abilities on a stage. The

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skepticism was revealed in the amount of attention placed on her hair style and the sound of her voice “strident” and her laugh “cackle” then was focused on her accomplishments.

Over the course of the presidential campaign Clinton was lauded for the strength she displayed by not quitting the race. The concession speech she gave at the 2008 Democratic National Convention was praised for the generosity she articulated towards her opponent and the acknowledgment of her supporters. “Although we weren’t able to shatter the highest, hardest glass ceiling this time, thanks to you it’s got about 18 million cracks in it. And the light is shining through like never before filling us all with the hope and the sure knowledge that the path will be a little easier next time.”

In 2011, presidential candidate Michelle Bachmann broke new ground with her willingness to talk about her family while on the stump. Bachmann went so far to say that the skills it takes to manage a family – creating a budget, providing discipline, working under pressure, educational assessments – prepare her for the highest office in the land. In a *Washington Post* interview, Bachmann explained that her parental experience offers what the country needs. “…the ability to know when to say no is tremendously applicable in a country that has been overindulging.”9 In the past, discussions about family and children have been difficult terrain for women seeking high political office.

Research on how voters view women candidates shows that they feel women with small children could be hindered by torn loyalties, particularly in the case of a family emergency. People assume a male candidate has someone else to care for his family, and

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that a female candidate is the primary caregiver in her family.\textsuperscript{10} Former Attorney General of North Dakota Heidi Heitkamp used to be asked about the age of her children. She concluded the questioners were implying she was a bad mother for neglecting her family to campaign.\textsuperscript{11} Heitkamp response was that her children were the same age as her opponent’s.

With more high profile women taking on more visible speaking roles, these double standards may continue to fall away. In a 2011 GOP presidential primary debate, Bachman stressed how being a mom allows her to relate to the worries of families, “When you are talking about housing, when you are talking about foreclosures, you are talking about women who are at the end of their rope because they are losing their nest for their children and their family…I just want to say one thing to the moms all across America tonight… Hold on, moms out there.” When more women are willing to share their full life experience, perhaps audiences will be more accepting of the reality that it is possible for a woman to be a good mother and a good executive.

Speakers Tell Us What We Stand For

The speeches delivered by elected officials, business leaders, and activists are a lens through which history can be viewed. They provide context and analysis of events as they unfold. They are closely linked to the emotion of the time and the place in which they were spoken and are a rich repository of the ideas that shape the national discourse. The inclusion of a woman’s perspective ensures that the vital interests of millions of Americans are not overlooked or given short shrift. A truly democratic form of

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\item \textsuperscript{10} The Barbara Lee Family Foundation, \textit{Keys to the Governor’s Office} (Brookline, MA: The Barbara Lee Family Foundation, 2001), 35.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Interview by thesis author, Washington, DC, July 31, 2011.
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government will only be realized when all citizens are able to voice their opinions without being subjected to humiliating or oppressive tactics designed to suppress them.

The words of men tell us something about who we are. So, do the words of women. It is imperative that women’s words be heard and documented as part of a collective narrative. The missing texts have left an incomplete history. We don’t know what Anne Hutchinson said to the people who gathered to hear her preach. What was it that caused such alarm? What might we have learned from the wife and mother of eleven? How might her words have contributed to a dialogue about the need for religious tolerance?

Through Abigail Adam’s prodigious correspondence with her husband we know she advocated for her gender and considered men to be “naturally tyrannical.” While tending the family farm in Massachusetts and with John busy forming the nation’s new government she sent him a code of laws designed to ensure gender equality. The response she received seems to indicate that she struck a nerve as he mocked her sincere effort. “As to your extraordinary Code of Laws I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our struggle loosened the bands of government everywhere… But your letter was the first intimidation that another tribe more numerous and powerful than all the rest had grown discontented.”

How would Abigail have formulated her rationale for women’s rights had she been allowed to address the Continental Congress? She had written that if the ladies were not remembered they would “foment a rebellion and not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.” If the intelligent and purposeful

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Adams had been permitted to speak would women have had to wait nearly one hundred and fifty years to get the vote?

The words of leaders impact the course of events and can sometimes hurry up history. At the March on Washington, the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. called for racial equality and the end of discrimination. The words he spoke from the steps on the Lincoln Memorial marked a defining moment in the civil rights movement. School children can recite King’s inspirational dream of a color-blind America: “I have a dream that one day my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” Delivered to over 200,000, King called upon a great nation to deliver on its promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all Americans. Four years later landmark civil rights legislation passed Congress and was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson.

One hundred years before King’s speech, a former slave made a call for a nation that was color-blind and sex-blind. With her limited education, Sojourner Truth could not match the eloquence of King’s speech but Truth was also a person of faith. In plain words and with common sense reasoning, she delivered an equally powerful call for freedom in the “Ain’t I a Woman” address given at a women’s rights convention in Ohio in 1851.

Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, ‘cause Christ wasn’t a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with him. If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.13

13 Scileppi Kennedy and Hartmann O’Shields, We Shall Be Heard, 92.
Presiding over that meeting was Frances P. Gage who detailed the audience’s response to Truth’s bold statement: “Amid roars of applause, she returned to her corner, leaving more than one of us with streaming eyes, and hearts beating with gratitude…I have never in my life seen anything like the magical influence that subdued the mobbish spirit of the day, and turned the sneers and jeers of an excited crowd into notes of respect and admiration.”14 Sojourner was the first African-American woman to speak against slavery and she channeled her passion for the abolition movement into her feminist message.

The pronouncements of women have been an essential element of our national conversation about what we stand for and what we stand against. A junior Member of Congress used her ability to translate complex events to console the conscience of a nation during a troubled time. At the Watergate impeachment hearings, a first term member of the House Judiciary Committee, Representative Barbara Jordan, rose to the challenge of explaining the charges leveled against the president and whether those charges constituted impeachable offenses. In her sure and steady cadence, Jordan impressed upon the nation the importance of the proceedings that would determine the fate of President Nixon.

We the People. It is a very eloquent beginning to the Constitution. But when that document was completed on the seventeenth of September 1787, I was not included in that ‘We the People.’ I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But through the process of amendment, interpretation, and court decision I have finally been included in ‘We the People.’…And, I am not going to sit here and be an idle spectator to the diminution, the subversion, the destruction of the Constitution.15

14 Ibid., 93.

Jordan spoke about what was at stake and explained how the president had put himself above the rule of law and why his misdeeds were crimes against the Constitution. The rhetorical discipline she had developed as a law student was on full display as she logically laid out a convincing argument for impeachment and demonstrated her patriotism and love for country. When she finished, committee members had tears in their eyes and within days many Americans were calling for Barbara Jordan to serve in the White House.\textsuperscript{16}

Women have stood up for the truth even when doing so meant risking personal condemnation to say what needed to be said. A former telephone operator was the first person in the U.S. Senate to speak out against Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communist crusade in the 1950’s. McCarthy’s witch hunt for communists in the federal government targeted and damaged innocent people. Six of Senator Margaret Chase Smith’s colleagues had signed onto a declaration condemning McCarthy but she was the only member with the courage to publicly stand by her principles.\textsuperscript{17}

While ninety-nine of her male colleagues remained silent, the only woman in the chamber delivered a “declaration of conscience” against a member of her own party. Smith put aside concerns that she would be labeled a communist sympathizer to address the vacuum in leadership that she felt could result in “national suicide” if McCarthy pursued his witch hunt for communists unfettered. Speaking as a “woman” and “Senator” she stood alone as she spoke.

I don’t like the way the Senate has been made a rendezvous for vilification, for selfish political gain at the sacrifice of individual reputations and national unity. I


\textsuperscript{17} Janann Sherman, \textit{No Place for a Woman: A Life of Senator Margaret Chase Smith} (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 111.
am not proud of the way we smear outsiders from the floor of the Senate and hide behind the cloak of congressional immunity and still place ourselves beyond criticism on the floor of the Senate.18

Fundamental to the strength and vitality of democracy is the right to free expression about how well our government serves the people. Americans constantly review the fundamental conception of government and question its role in people’s lives. One of this country’s best known speakers was a politician who could take a pedantic subject like government and bring it to life. Governor Ann Richards was an experienced speaker who understood how to draw upon small things to make a big point.

Government is the most pervasive influence in our lives. It is the institution that determines the price you pay at the grocery, what happens when you flip the light switch and the electricity comes on or doesn’t, whether your environment is clean, whether or not the garbage is picked up in the morning, all the way to the questions of life and death, and whether or not we will give our children in war. That’s how pervasive government is.19

A speech at the 1988 Democratic National Convention first brought Ann Richards into the public conscious. At the time she was a political unknown serving as the state treasurer in Texas. A line from the speech about George H.W. Bush being born “with a silver foot in his mouth” was a heads up to the audience that this was a speaker with a silver tongue who wasn’t afraid to use it for political gain. Never before had a woman of a certain age addressed the country on live television with such bravado and conviction. The speech is widely remembered for its sharp humor but Richards offered more than funny lines. She contributed to the cannon of story telling in the tradition of Mark Twain and Garrison Keillor by sharing her perspective on what matters in life. In the

18 Sherman, No Place for a Woman, 110.

convention address, her storytelling ability transported the audience to another place and time.

I was born during the Depression in a little community just outside Waco, and I grew up listening to Franklin Roosevelt on the radio. Well, it was back then that I came to understand the small truths and the hardships that bind neighbors together. Those were real people with real problems and they had real dreams about getting out of the Depression.

I can remember summer nights when we’d put down what we called a Baptist pallet, and we listened to the grown-ups talk. I can still hear the sound of the dominoes clickin’ on the marble slab my daddy had found for a tabletop. I can still hear the laughter of the men telling jokes you weren’t supposed to hear, talkin’ about how big that ol’ buck deer was, laughin’ about mama puttin’ Clorox in the well the day the frog fell in. They talked about war and Washington and what this country needed. They talked straight talk and it came from people who were living their lives as best they could.20

Women speakers have wrought change that has improved the lives of people who lack the ability to speak for themselves. The co-founder of the United Farm Workers of America and mother of eleven children, Dolores Huetra risked her life for the cause. If Cesar Chavez was the hero of the farm workers’ movement, then Dolores Huerta is its unheralded heroine.21 Together, Huerta and Chavez founded the National Farmworkers Association to fight on behalf of migrant workers. Known as the “la Pasionaria,” the passionate one, for her toughness and outspoken personality, she has won major victories on behalf of thousands of poor working families. Over six decades, this woman warrior has brought hope with the enduring social justice refrain “Si, se puede!” or “Yes, it can be done!”


In 1988, Huerta suffered a vicious beating at the hands of San Francisco police officers while leading a peaceful protest. Huerta was hospitalized after sustaining life threatening injuries and doctors operated to remove her spleen. Speaking about the dangerous nature of her organizing efforts, Huerta said: “When you choose the path of the warrior, you can get beaten or shot at or even killed – that comes with the work.”

Women have made their mark addressing the issue of human rights in the farm fields of California and on international platforms. After leaving the White House, Eleanor Roosevelt became a global ambassador for good will and peace. She dedicated herself to elevating the rights of all humans by accepting President Truman’s invitation to serve as the lone woman member of a delegation to the United Nations. As the chair of the human rights commission, Roosevelt helped draft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to ensure the fair and humane treatment of people by their governments.

We stand today at the threshold of a great event both in the life of the United Nations and in the life of Mankind, that is the approval by the General Assembly of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recommended by the Third Committee. This declaration may well become the international Magna Carta of all men everywhere. We hope its proclamation by the General Assembly will be an event comparable to the proclamation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man by the French people in 1789, the adoption of the Bill of Rights by the people of the United States… This must be taken as testimony of our common aspiration first voiced in the Charter of the United Nations to lift men everywhere to a higher standard of life and to a greater enjoyment of freedom. Man’s desire for peace lies behind this declaration. The realization that the flagrant violation of human rights by Nazi and Fascist countries sowed the seeds of the last world war has supplied the impetus for the work which brings us to the moment of achievement here today.  

It wasn’t until she was nearly forty years of age that Roosevelt found the courage to take to the stage. Although born to a life of wealth and privilege and the wife of a President, the advantages did little to help Eleanor gain a sense of self-confidence. In 22 Scileppi Kennedy and Hartmann O'Shields, We Shall be Heard, 279.
fact, she struggled for decades to find her voice. Orphaned at the age of ten by the
class of her alcoholic father and society mother who had expressed disappointment in
Eleanor’s looks, she was raised by a strict Victorian grandmother.\footnote{Blanche Weisen Cook, \textit{Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume One 1884-1933} (New York: Viking, 1992), 71.} Roosevelt described herself as an extraordinarily timid child crippled by the fear of everything, including

Gradually propelled into public life as her husband Franklin’s profile rose, she
wrote that she ultimately overcame her fear by doing what she didn’t think was possible. “In doing it you not only free yourself from some shackling fear but you stretch your
mental muscles and gain the freedom that comes with achievement. Every time you meet
a crisis and live through it, you make it simple for the next time.”\footnote{Ibid., 38.} The ordeal and
anguish of public speaking was tackled step-by-step and with the help of vocal coaches,
she learned to control her anxiety and gain confidence. Roosevelt wrote that it took great
effort but she gradually learned that: “Courage is more exhilarating than fear and in the
long run it is easier. We do not have to become heroes overnight. Just one step at a time,
meeting each thing that comes up, seeing it is not as dreadful as it appeared, discovering
we have the strength to stare it down.”\footnote{Ibid., 41.}

During the Great Depression, Roosevelt travelled across America to witness
firsthand the impact and devastation wrought on families. This type of trip was unheard
of for a First Lady and some considered it an unladylike betrayal of her class. But,
Roosevelt wanted to talk with unemployed coal miners, factory workers, and destitute farmers, so she could report back to the President on what she learned. Of the thousands and thousands of letters that poured in until the end of her life, some of the most rewarding must have been the ones written by women seeking her guidance on public speaking.

Eleanor Roosevelt is a role model for any woman who contemplates a public life. She conquered self-doubt to become a force in the advancement of ideas and the evolution of change. The critics called her behavior “unwomanly” but they couldn’t deter her from addressing world audiences at international forums and small groups in tiny hamlets. In that regard, she demonstrated the courage and resolve of the first wave of women speakers who ascended public stages to restore the first and most inherent human right – the freedom of speech.

The advent of women into the arena of public dialogue has brought with it unprecedented change in the evolution of American culture and society. This was readily apparent when Representative Nancy Pelosi became one of the most powerful women in the world with her election as the first woman Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. The speaker is second in the line of presidential succession after the vice president. The accomplishment was a first for a woman who is a mother of five and grandmother of six. When she picked up the gavel in the House chamber, Speaker Pelosi spoke on behalf of two centuries of American women:

Never losing faith, we waited through the many years of struggle to achieve our rights. But women weren’t just waiting; women were working. Never losing faith, we worked to redeem the promise of America, that all men and women are created equal. For our daughters and granddaughters, today we have broken the
marble ceiling. For our daughters and our granddaughters, the sky is the limit, anything is possible for them.27

The words of women have power and they make history. Yet, the women who’ve used words to defend, heal, champion, and inspire have not always been given the recognition they deserve. With more awareness of the significant contributions women have made to the public dialogue it is more likely that there will be a corresponding rise in the value placed on their speech. If a women’s perspective is given appropriate weight then more women may be encouraged to join the dialogue. When all citizens are able to voice their opinions, arguments, and dissents the nation will be strengthened by an enriched national conversation.

CONCLUSION

Women speakers have historically faced barriers to the fundamental right to free speech. In colonial America, the women who sailed here seeking the opportunity to express their religious beliefs were subjected to harsh punishment and death. They were condemned for behavior that was deemed unwomanly and society dictated their silence for generations. The religious, cultural, legal, and political sanctions remained in place until women claimed the right of free speech for themselves in the 19th Century. The political and social reformers of that era were courageous trailblazers who weathered ridicule and abuse to advocate for suffrage, abolition, and other causes.

The vestiges of disdain regarding women’s speech are still present in society today and impact a women’s ability to be viewed as competent leaders. The media culture is laden with sexist imagery and negative stereotypes. The dominance of the masculine style of speaking ensures that it is more closely associated with the traits and habits of a leader. Politically conservative women belittle the accomplishments of previous generations of progressive women. The negative environment impacts women at all levels and is most readily apparent when women seek high profile positions of authority and power.

Given the pervasiveness of the barriers, it is time again for women to claim their right to the public space as the suffragists did nearly 200 years ago. The obstacles that stifle speech are entrenched but they are not insurmountable. More women need to be willing to speak out to create a critical mass of voices. When greater numbers of women choose to actively engage in the public dialogue the female voice will become
increasingly familiar and with greater familiarity, acceptance and value are more likely to follow.

Technological advancements in communications can aid in bringing the female perspective to the forefront. Audiences have greater access to the words of leaders through the Internet and social media platforms. As digital platforms continue to expand so do the opportunities for women presenters. The Internet is the Roman Forum of the day. The Internet knows no limits in size and scale of audience and it ensures that the speeches of public figures remain an essential element of our national conversation. It is the most visible platform women can use to voice opinions, express dissent, and debate matters of consequence.

If women step up to virtual microphones they can play a greater role in determining the shape and quality of what lies ahead. New platforms can be used to impact the business, cultural, and political landscape of our nation and the world. These platforms provide a venue women can use to speak out against bias and discrimination and enrich the dialogue with different insights and ideas. When more women seize new speaking opportunities they can address the interests and needs of millions of people. As women contribute they can do so knowing they have been well-served by the pioneering women who came before them.
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