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“That Was What I Had to Use”: Social and Cultural Capital in the Careers of Women Broadcasters

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Abstract

This study uses in-depth, biographical interviews to understand a range of historical experiences in the careers of individual women broadcasters in the Midwest, a region of the United States that has received relatively little attention from media scholars. The findings demonstrate the barriers these women faced as well as the social and cultural capital available to them as they pursued diverse roles in an industry that did not welcome their full participation. The study contributes to scholars’ understanding of women’s participation in the public sphere during the 1950s to 1970s.

Keywords

feminist media theory, media history, women and the media, radio and television, women and journalism

Disciplines

Broadcast and Video Studies | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Journalism Studies | Mass Communication

Comments

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‘That Was What I Had to Use’:
Social and Cultural Capital in the Careers of Women Broadcasters

In 1972, Jill Geisler was sitting at a job interview at WISC, the television station in Madison where she had been working part time while attending journalism school at the University of Wisconsin. Geisler would soon be graduating and was interviewing for the midday program. “I proposed that we change the focus of the farm hour to newsmaker interviews . . . for a little bit deeper conversation. And so I had this plan, and I had this meeting with the general manager, and one of the questions he asked me was, ‘Do you cook and do you sew?’ she recalled. Geisler, the first female president of her local Society of Professional Journalists chapter, told the manager she thought she could offer more than that. The manager stopped the interview and said, “I think you want to be one of the boys.” Geisler remembered searching for the appropriate response. “No, sir,” she told him earnestly. “I just want to be one of the reporters” (interview with the authors, February 6, 2015).

This study uses in-depth, biographical interviews to understand the relationship between gender and professional strategies in the work of individual women broadcasters in the Midwest, a region of the United States that has received little attention from media scholars. The findings demonstrate the barriers these women faced as well as the social and cultural capital available to them as they pursued work in an industry that did not welcome their full participation. The interviews reveal several narrative themes in these women’s experiences, which align with key concepts in field theory. The women: 1) endured violence and hostility in the field; 2) fought a “breadwinner” ideology that privileged men; 3) counted on community support; and 4) cultivated a professional identity. The study contributes to scholars’ understanding of women’s participation

and progress in the public sphere during the 1950s–1970s, a period that spans the conservative gender ideology of the post-World War II era and the surge of feminist activism that followed.

Historical Context

Historians and other media scholars have documented pervasive gender stereotyping in print and broadcast newsrooms throughout the twentieth century based on assumptions about men's and women's abilities, interests, voices, and behavior (Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 2004; Beasley and Gibbons, 2003; Rakow & Kranich, 1991; Mills, 1988; Sanders & Rock, 1988; Marzolf, 1977). Recent headlines and the dramatic #metoo movement have demonstrated the extent to which women journalists continue to face rampant sexism and sexual harassment in the workplace (e.g., Crocker, 2017; Rutenberg, Steel, & Koblin, 2016; Westcott, 2016). Yet history also shows that despite barriers to their participation, individual women have found ways to build productive careers within media industries. This illustrates a key issue for women's historians, who must explain both the success of exceptional women and the systemic patterns of discrimination that made success elusive for the vast majority of women (Lerner, 1975).

The history of broadcasting in the Midwestern U.S. offers a compelling context for a study of individual women's experiences. The early days of commercial radio and television were characterized by experimentation and offered opportunities to those who showed an innovative spirit and were willing to work for little pay (Marzolf, 1977). Women found work as variety performers, continuity writers, program directors, radio homemakers, and even as news anchors and station managers (Halper, 2014; Lont, 1995; Hosley & Yamada, 1987). The proliferation of radio stations connecting isolated homesteads across the nation's countryside coincided with membership gains in rural women's clubs and organizations after the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1920 (Egge & Devine, 2015). Marie

Zimmerman of Clinton, Iowa, became the first woman to own a licensed radio station in 1922 (Halper, 2014), the same year Judith Waller helped launch WMAQ in Chicago as the nation's first female station manager (Beasley and Gibbons, 2003). Rural stations such as KMA in Shenandoah, Iowa, relied on women to fill roles on and off the air (Birkby, 1991).

As radio matured into its "golden age" of the 1930s-40s, however, network and station executives became convinced women did not make suitable reporters or on-air personalities and women's roles were circumscribed (Greenwald, 2014; Beasley & Gibbons, 2003; Beadle, Murray, & Godfrey, 2001; Marlane, 1999; Sanders & Rock, 1988). Women involved in television during the late 1940s-1950s found themselves on a similar trajectory: Experimentation was encouraged in the early years—in 1947, for example, Dorothy Fuldheim of Cleveland, Ohio, became the first woman in the nation to anchor a news program (Hosley & Yamada, 1987)—but women's roles were constrained as the industry found its footing.

It is important to note that historical narratives about women in broadcasting have largely emphasized the experiences of white women. While there has been little historical scholarship examining the intersection of race and gender in broadcasting, it is clear that for women of color, the struggle for a presence in broadcasting was longer and more arduous than it was for white women. Few non-white women were given any opportunities on licensed radio and television stations until the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began examining stations' employment practices in the 1960s (Beasley and Gibbons, 2003). Racial and ethnic minorities' access to radio, in particular, relied on specialized programming and minority ownership (Lind, 2018). When women were able to secure roles on radio and television, the emphasis placed on physical attributes such as voice and appearance created anxieties and prejudices (Greenwald, 2014; Engstrom & Ferri, 1998; Burks & Stone, 1993). Additionally, women of color had to

contend with assumptions they were hired as a “double token” and not because they were qualified (Beasley and Gibbons, 2003, p. 236).

Liberal feminist activists in the 1960s and 1970s challenged discriminatory practices in the media within a legal framework of women’s employment rights, bringing lawsuits and working with agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to advocate for parity in hiring, promotions, and salaries (e.g., Povich, 2015; Robertson, 1992). Liberal feminism was distinguished by its emphasis on individual rights, arguing for Enlightenment ideals to be extended equally to women and men (van Zoonen, 2012; Steeves, 1987). Liberal feminists argued men and women should be given the same professional opportunities but stopped short of calling for broad structural changes or separate women-only cultural spaces, as socialist feminists and radical feminists did. A notable victory for liberal feminists was a ruling by the FCC in 1971 that the status of women be included with that of racial minorities in the affirmative action requirements for broadcasting license renewals. The 1960s–70s also witnessed a movement toward non-commercial broadcasting and alternative formats, which some women found to be more supportive and accommodating of diverse perspectives (Carter, 2004; Ganzert, 2003; Sanders & Rock, 1988) but which (according to Lind, 2018) were used more sustainably by minorities than by white women.

The historical literature describes pervasive discrimination against women in broadcasting. However, more work is needed to explain the strategies of individual women who persisted in spite of it. Examining women in the Midwest—who “developed strategies and created activist identities based on their own needs, rather than the rhetoric of women’s rights used by the leaders of national movements” (Egge & Devine, 2015, p. 18)—contributes to

scholars' understanding of individual-level resistance and professional activities that occurred outside the narratives of women on the national stage.

Feminist Media Theory

Feminist media theory examines the intersections of gender, power, and culture to explain how these factors shape the production of media content, the experiences of people working in media industries, the stories that are told in the media, and the effects that result from these representations (van Zoonen, 1994). This study focuses on women's historical experiences on an individual level, engaging with feminist media theory to make sense of the relationship between women's chosen activities as broadcasters and the local environment they faced.

Previous scholars have written about workplace conditions--such as discrimination and harassment, norms related to work-life balance, and an exclusionary culture--that have kept women in the U.S. from achieving parity in media positions (Elmore, 2009; Elmore, 2007; Everbach & Flournoy, 2007; Hardin & Shain, 2006; deBruin & Ross, 2004; Engstrom & Ferri, 1998). Less examined are the practices and strategies individual women have exercised to negotiate the barriers they face in their work, a gap noted by Byerly & Ross (2006).

Describing "a long history of women's efforts to change the picture both for themselves and for other women," Byerly & Ross (2006, p. 82) examined the careers of women media activists around the world who explicitly sought to diversify and shape the public discourse in their respective countries. The researchers identified four common career paths for these women: 1) politics to media; 2) media to politics; 3) outside change agent; and 4) women-controlled enterprises. In a similar project, Carter (2004) compared three models of women's access to broadcasting in the U.S. during the 1970s, which aligned with that decade's surge of feminist activism. She concluded a liberal feminist approach, emphasizing individual rights rather than

cultural change, was the most palatable to the broadcasting industry and thus outlasted more radical models, such as alternative programming and all-women stations.

The above scholars identified strategies that could be defined as explicitly feminist. Yet more work is needed to theorize the role of gender in how individual women historically have negotiated media workplaces, whether or not they are seeking to advance the status of women in general. In her review of feminist theorizing about journalism workplaces, Steiner (2012) noted a tendency to dichotomize women journalists into two groups: those who assimilated into a masculinized newsroom culture and those who left the field altogether. Yet history also shows that women journalists pioneered new genres, such as stunt reporting (Fahs, 2011) and personal finance journalism (Lucht, 2013), by tapping into resources related to their gender to build successful careers without fully embracing the dominant culture of the newsroom. The irony, Steiner noted, is that such innovations often became redefined as a traditional part of journalism culture, thus obscuring the logic behind their creation. Identifying a need for more integrated theorizing of gender and the workplace, Steiner advocated feminist analysis that considers the standpoints of individuals, shaped by multiple, intersecting aspects of their identities.

Representative of this approach is a study by Thiel (2004), which used Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to understand women's gendered identities within a technologically innovative environment. The women she interviewed invoked traditionally masculine characteristics (such as ambition or risk-taking) to describe themselves as individuals but cited traditionally feminine characteristics (such as collaboration) to describe what they valued about their workplace organizations. Thiel interpreted this reframing as a mechanism for self-empowerment; by constructing their environments in positive ways, the women journalists were able to imagine better opportunities available to them.

Djerf-Pierre (2007) also used Bourdieu's theories to examine gender and journalism in Sweden, finding that as the field changed during the twentieth century, women adapted their strategies and used different forms of cultural capital to secure positions in a male-dominated field. Three strategies emerged from Djerf-Pierre's historical analysis: competition, specialization, and expansion. When women engaged in competition, they sought to be "one of the boys," aiming to produce journalism that met the approval of the masculine power structure. When women engaged in specialization, they drew from their experiences and perspectives as women to secure positions in outlets, such as women's magazines, that valued this knowledge. Finally, when women journalists used a strategy of expansion, they developed new genres or story forms to open a space in journalism that had not existed before.

Field and Capital

As the above studies suggest, Bourdieu's notions of field and capital are useful lenses for examining the practices of individual media workers as well as what Djerf-Pierre called the "gender logic" of journalism. In Bourdieu's definition, a field is any social space in which actors are competing for agreed-upon stakes using shared, though often unwritten, rules of play or participation (Bourdieu, 1998). Applying this notion to journalism, Djerf-Pierre wrote: "What is at stake is success, prestige, status and, ultimately, the power to decide who shall be recognized as a member of the profession and what constitutes 'good' and valuable journalism" (2007, p. 82). Thus, those who have chosen to work in traditional media join an established field informally governed by conventions, values, and expected outcomes that constrain participants' behavior. However, the participants' individual responses to conditions in the field can vary and always depend on the material and symbolic resources available to them. This makes room for the kind of agency and creativity, feminist theorist Lois McNay (2000) wrote, that is "crucial to

explaining how women have acted autonomously in the past despite constricting social sanctions and also how they may act now in the context of processes of gender restructuring” (p. 5). As Djerf-Pierre wrote, “The power perspective also makes it possible to study counterstrategies to power” (2007, p. 98).

Feminist theorists have critiqued Bourdieu for his secondary treatment of gender (McCall, 1992) but also have shown that combining his “microtheory of social power” (Moi, 1991) with feminist understandings of gender as a social construction can yield productive insights into the history and everyday experiences of women. In particular, Bourdieu’s notion of different forms of capital--economic, social, and cultural--can be useful for explaining the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class while illuminating the forms of resistance available to particular women at a particular time and place. In Bourdieu’s analysis, individuals acquire status not only by accumulating economic capital but also by cultivating the right knowledge, social networks, values, and practices--as well as a “feel for the game” (described by Maton, 2008, p. 54)--which increase their legitimacy within the field (Bourdieu, 1984). In addition, McCall (1992) showed how Bourdieu’s concept of embodied cultural capital can be elaborated to include gender, suggesting women can choose to adopt traditionally “masculine” or “feminine” attributes depending on what best serves their interests.

Research Questions

In her essay, McCall (1992) outlined three general approaches to studying gender: gender symbolism, gender organization, and gender identity. Her concept of gender organization, which refers to the role of gender in the construction and function of social institutions, such as schools, churches, and workplaces, most closely aligns with the objectives here. This study treats gender

not as a biological category but as a “mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them” (van Zoonen, 1994, p. 3). This study examines the environment individual women broadcasters faced in the 1950s–1970s and what professional strategies were available to them in their work at radio and television stations.

The study was primarily guided by two research questions:

1) How did gender shape the field that individual women broadcasters encountered in the 1950s–1970s?

2) What types of professional strategies did these women use to work in an industry that did not welcome their full participation?

Method

The study used semi-structured, biographical interviews to learn about the historical experiences of individual women broadcasters in the Midwest. A regional focus was appropriate because of the importance Bourdieu (1984) and some feminist scholars (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1991) have placed on geographical particularity in understanding the relationship between environment and practice. The Midwestern U.S. was chosen because of several themes that punctuate women’s and media history in this region, including women’s leadership within their communities (Murphy & Venet, 1997) and an experimental, community-minded ethos that permeated early broadcasting in this region.¹ In-depth interviews were used because they allow an exploration of multiple perspectives (Elmore, 2009) and emphasize participants’ understanding of their own experiences (Brennen, 2013).

¹ For example, the University of Wisconsin is known for creating the model for public broadcasting with what is now WHA radio (McCollum, 2017).

The authors used state broadcasting websites and snowball sampling to identify women who had worked in a variety of roles in radio or television in the Midwest at any point during the 1950s–1970s. Interviewees were selected for maximum variation in the type of work they did and are significant for including women who were among the first of their gender in job title, station management, or organizational leadership. Their roles included television news anchor, radio host, television and radio reporter, news director, sports director, station manager, and station promotions director. The group was limited in its representation of race and ethnicity; ten of the eleven women interviewed were white, partly a reflection of historical demographics in the region and partly due to the period under study, which included years predating the FCC's push for greater diversity. The median age of the interviewees was 64, and the median number of years they spent in broadcasting was 39. Their experience reflects work in a total of six Midwestern states: Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska and Wisconsin.

All participants consented to speak on the record, with their names published, in order to help the authors build a historical record (table 1). Similar to oral histories, the interviews followed a chronological format and prioritized participants' narration of their own experiences. Unlike oral histories, the authors were guided by their research questions and approached the in-depth interviews as "conversations with a purpose" (Bingham & Moore, 1959, as quoted in Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 172). Due to the small sample and lack of racial representation, the findings are not generalizable. However, the interviews give voice to individual women's experiences in a male-dominated industry.

The authors conducted eleven interviews over three months. The interviews lasted an average of sixty-two minutes and were conducted in person, via Skype, or over the phone. The interviews began with questions such as, "How and when did you get your start in broadcasting?"

and went on to discuss each phase of a participant's career. Most participants independently introduced gender into their narratives. If they did not, the authors prompted their thoughts by asking questions such as, "Can you tell us about being a woman in broadcasting at that time? Were there any challenges or advantages related to your gender?" All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and both researchers checked the transcriptions against the recordings. The authors decided to stop conducting interviews when they began to observe recurring themes. Additional experiences, especially among women of color, would enrich the historical record, and the authors hope this study makes it easier to identify future research subjects.

The authors used a two-step process of categorical and connective coding (Maxwell, 2013) to analyze the interview transcripts. Working independently, the researchers first used open coding to identify narrative themes that emerged. After discussing and agreeing upon a single list of themes, the authors collaborated to synthesize them into broader topics and revise them into a meaningful narrative framework. To the extent possible, the authors verified factual information given by the participants. With one prominent exception, the names of people other than those interviewed have not been included here to protect their privacy.

Findings

The themes that emerged from the interviews characterize the field of broadcasting as a site of struggle in which the participants used multiple forms of capital to gain leverage, though not always successfully. The narrative themes below detail the field as it was perceived by the participants and specific strategies these women mentioned as they described how they had pursued their work. The interviews depicted an overall narrative in which participants: 1) endured violence and hostility in the field; 2) fought a "breadwinner" ideology that privileged

men; 3) counted on community support; and 4) cultivated a professional identity. All direct quotations come from the transcribed interviews.

Enduring violence and hostility in the field

The participants described a discriminatory environment in which they were denied opportunities, verbally abused, and harassed because of their gender. The most harrowing narrative came from Merri Dee, one of the country's first black women news anchors. After beginning her career as a disc jockey at the black-owned radio station WBEE-AM in Harvey, Illinois, in 1966, Dee pitched the idea for a talk show to television station WCIU (Channel 26) in Chicago in 1968 and later took the show to WSNS (Channel 44) in Chicago. On July 17, 1971, Dee was leaving the WSNS studio with a guest of her show when they were kidnapped, forced at gunpoint to drive to a wooded area, and shot by a man who had recently been released from prison. Dee survived two gunshot wounds to the head, but her guest died (see Devall, 1985). The gunman, who was found with Dee's car and purse, was sentenced to 120 years in prison but only served twelve. In 1972, a year after Dee had been attacked, she was hired as a news anchor at WGN, where she was subjected to harassment.

Dee described co-workers' efforts to sabotage her efforts, such as failing to tell her the correct time of meetings or trying to get her in trouble for things she did not do. Dee attributed the poor treatment she received to her race, gender, and interpersonal relationships: "[Being] female in a male world. Black. Word had gotten out that I had dated a Jewish man for a long time. That wasn't very popular." Another of Dee's early experiences at WGN reflects the different expectations placed on men and women regarding their dress and behavior:

Merri Dee: I remember my very first day at WGN, and one of the executives took me around to the different offices to introduce me. And I said, "You know, I notice," toward the end of my day, "that none of the women wear slacks." And he looked at me, in a very dignified manner, and said, "Our women don't wear pants." . . . I was floored by it.

At the same time, dressing too glamorously brought a different response, illustrating the double bind Dee faced as she negotiated expectations for women's dress and behavior.

Merri Dee: I remember coming to work one day with a fur coat on, and I drove a Cadillac. It was an old Cadillac, but it was a Cadillac. And I came out that evening, and there was a note on my window that said, "What are you doing outside of work that lets you dress like you dress and drive this car?"

Dee's perspective illustrates the intersectional experience of being in a field shaped by race, class, and gender, and she articulated a consciousness, according to McCall (1992), that is "acquired from venturing into male-dominated fields, from taking a gendered disposition into a position that does not fit it" (p. 849). Dee remained a news anchor at WGN until 1983, when she took on a new role as director of community relations.

Several other participants encountered hostility before they even held a job in the field. When Lynne Grasz was a journalism student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the 1960s, she wanted to be a news anchorwoman. "The problem," she said, "was that job did not exist." She recalled a phone interview with CBS News President Richard Salant, which she had conducted for a class project in 1964:

Lynne Grasz: And so I called—being a gutsy kid, I guess . . . I told him who I was and what I wanted to do, and I asked him if he would hire a woman to do television on-air news. And he said, "No, because one, women do not have an air of authority. Who would believe a woman?" Then he said, "Women have really high-pitched, whiny voices. It's not easy to listen to a woman." And then he said, "And y'all get really irritable once a month."

Grasz said the exchange with Salant "helped me and it hindered me at the same time because it made me realize that if I was going to do it, I was going to have to probably create my own niche, and I was going to probably have to do it on merit." As one of the first five students in UNL's broadcasting sequence, she even found the college not entirely supportive: "The dean

of the college was very adamant that women, if they were going to take up the space and time in the School of Journalism . . . they should not get married . . . so I didn't get engaged until the moment I had my diploma." After graduating in 1966, Grasz worked at United Press International in Detroit before returning to a job at KOLN-KHN-TV in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Lynne Grasz: When I went in to have my actual formal interview . . . [the interviewer] said to me, and you can quote this, he said, "Well, I hope you're going to be on birth control because we don't want you to get married and go off and start having kids, because there are a lot of guys who really need this job."

Grasz rose to become promotions and public relations director at KOLN-KHN and, after ten years, accepted a job as creative director at KLOX-TV in St. Louis. In 1977, Grasz became the first female president of what was then the Broadcast Promotional Association and later was hired by CBS to be director of communications and spokeswoman for the network's broadcasting group in New York City. Grasz emphasized "the only opportunities [for women] were those that we created ourselves."

Similarly, Carole Custer, the first female television news anchor in the state of Iowa, was initially denied a job at KGLO in Mason City, Iowa, in 1971, on the basis that she might become pregnant or that viewers would not accept her. She pressed for a second interview, and the station manager and news director reluctantly agreed to hire her. However, the men told her she would be fired if she became pregnant or if ratings fell.

Finally, Pat Blank, now the host of "All Things Considered" on Iowa Public Radio, was asked to serve as a sidekick to a male program host at KLSS-KLMN in Mason City, Iowa, in 1979, and had to fight for opportunities to report news:

Pat Blank: They needed to use me out of necessity, not necessarily because I was talented and the right person for the job in their mind. For example . . . they needed somebody to read the farm markets, and they were not going to let a woman do that because that just was not going to be done. So they let a much less experienced and not-from-the-Midwest

man read the markets for about three days and he, excuse the pun, butchered them. . . . It was terrible. It was awful.

Blank was finally allowed to read the daily market reports and even sports scores—but only on weekends: “Since I was a low person on the totem pole, the ‘woman’ could do that.” Even when more opportunities became available, Blank described a hostile environment that demonstrated the extent to which she was viewed as an interloper: “I got yelled at, literally yelled at and called stupid. . . . And that didn’t stop when I came to work at public radio.”

Influential actors in the male-dominated broadcasting industry tried to keep women out or else drive them out. This is consistent with the power dynamic described by Moi (1991), who wrote: “The aim is to rule the field, to become the instance which has the power to confer or withdraw legitimacy from other participants in the game” (p. 1021). Thus, the women struggled to gain entry into a space that had been coded as masculine and in which they were initially viewed as sexual and reproductive beings rather than as professionals:

Lynne Grasz: It was a very sexist environment There were lots of overtures of sexuality and being hit on.

Carole Custer: When I was doing radio, there’s a big window that I could see across the walkway to the producer—well, sometimes they would drag that mannequin up in front of the window where I was doing my radio news and [gestures] kind of molest her, in front of me, trying to see if they could break me up.

Pat Blank: It was everything goes. I mean, it was smoking cigarettes and . . . occasionally somebody would moon me and try to get me to laugh or crack up. . . . I was reading a story about a fire once and they started the wastebasket on fire while I was on the air.

Fighting a “breadwinner” ideology that privileged men

In addition to overt hostility in the field, women encountered a dominant gender ideology that positioned men as the natural breadwinners for their families and women as the natural caretakers. The underlying assumption, regardless of the realities of individual women’s lives,

was that men needed jobs to provide for their families and women's rightful place was in the home, raising children. Claudia Daly began her career during the early days of television as a writer and producer at KDKL-TV in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1955. She found the opportunity through a connection she had made after winning a speech competition in high school. Later, Daly moved with her husband, a broadcast journalist, to accommodate his career as they raised three children. She wrote radio commercials from home and worked occasional shifts at a local station, but she could not land a full-time job.

Claudia Daly: I was really good. The people at [radio station WDSM in Duluth] knew me by reputation, but didn't know me personally, so when I went there, I lived up to my reputation, and they thought I was terrific, so they hired my husband [laughs]. . . . I've had a lot of that in my life. And I'm not ever going to be modest about it, because the fact that I didn't get hired is enough of a diminishment.

. . . I don't know how to frame it. I just think that they thought that one person in a family was quite sufficient, thank you. . . . In those days nobody was going to offer you [a job] if you were a mom.

Daly's break finally came in 1972, when she borrowed her husband's recorder and submitted a story to National Public Radio about new Democratic Party guidelines to seat a higher proportion of women and minorities at political conventions. From that story came opportunities with Minnesota Public Radio and NPR affiliates around the state. Eventually, Daly was hired as station manager at KLSE in Rochester—the first woman to hold that position.

Employers invoked the dominant gender ideology not only when hiring, but also in salary negotiations, rejecting women's legitimacy as contenders for capital while maintaining men's power as arbiters of status in the field. Emphasizing this point, nearly all participants noted a pay gap between men and women.

Carole Custer: I said, "I hear that this reporter" . . . who didn't have as much education as me—he'd been in the business longer than me, but our job responsibilities were the same;

mine were even a little more--and the response was: "He has a number of children he needs to support, and therefore he needs a higher salary than just the two of you."

Lynne Grasz: All of the women got together to organize. . . . And we all went in there and we were like airing our grievances about how terrible it was, and how we should have equal pay for equal opportunity, and who was going to go present it. Our friend Leta . . . went in and she basically got shot down. You know, "That's just the way it is." And, you know, "He's got a family and his wife and kids to feed," and Leta said, "Well, I'm a single mother. I've got no husband and I've got a child to raise." And that didn't cut anything. . . . So, we realized that it wasn't going to do us any good to go complain.

Mollie Cooney, who graduated from Iowa State University and got her first job in 1975, worked in the same newsroom as her husband for most of their careers.

Mollie Cooney: We were dating when I got hired to go to San Jose, and so he kept coming out to visit me, and struck up a friendship with our news director, and then they hired him as my co-anchor. That would have been 1980. For more money than me. Not much more, but you know. . . . I was there first. And they never raised me up. It was just like a couple thousand dollars. But the principle of the thing? And I went all the way to the general manager, and he said, "Well, Kevin does features."

Cooney and her husband eventually moved back to Des Moines, Iowa, where both accepted positions at KCCI-TV, she anchoring the noon news, he the evening news.

Not only did these women voice the ideals of liberal feminism in their recollections, but they described taking action at the time to rectify inequities, belying assumptions that they must have failed to negotiate or ask for more money. In response, they were given explanations rooted in gender norms that assigned greater value to men's work professionally and within the family.

Counting on community support

It is significant that several employers cited a potentially negative reaction from the community as a reason to deny women opportunities because, for these participants, the opposite turned out to be true. Community support and social networks served as a potent source of social capital these women were conscious of using in order to advance their work.

Mollie Cooney and Carole Custer described receiving kindness from the public, especially from other women, a phenomenon Geisler called “generational generosity.” When Geisler rode in local parades, her niece observed that older women who usually waved from their seats rose and clapped for Geisler. Ironically, given employers’ reluctance to hire women due to their reproductive capacity, all participants who experienced pregnancy on the air said they were showered with homemade gifts and well-wishes from supportive viewers and listeners. Indeed, rather than run from their gender, some women found it to be a source of community support and used their social networks to build a personal brand before that became a buzzword.

Merri Dee: The trailblazing probably came because I did everything I could free of charge. I went to churches, I went to schools, I exceeded everything that was available. Everywhere there was something written, you’d see my name.

Jill Geisler: It seems like every time you volunteer to do something, with no expectation of some kind of payoff, it can lead to something else better. So when I got to WITI, they needed a union steward. . . . So I volunteered to do that, and that put me across the table from general managers and things when we were negotiating contracts. . . . I think that each of these things leads to your reputation and your grounding.

In 1968, Ruth Batschelet started a weekly program on religious station KTSC in Sioux City, Iowa, with a female friend. Her experience serves as an example of the homemaker programs popular in rural areas during the twentieth century, which drew largely on social connections as both a means and an end to women’s broadcasting in these areas. Batschelet’s program was called “Food for the Body and Food for the Soul” and lasted seven years.

Ruth Batschelet: We would have Scripture or poems, religious writings that maybe I came across and maybe would read, and recipes. And then we talked about what was going on . . . Sometimes we’d have it planned and sometimes we would just meet and get together and look out the window and start visiting about different things--just whatever would come to mind.

Friends of Batschelet had built the station with help from local farmers and asked for volunteers to provide programming. Batschelet estimated the station had about fifteen radio homemakers in all, and their primary objective was to build community and provide ministry over the airwaves. "I don't know that I felt like I was a pioneer," said Batschelet, who was the first member of her family to go to college. "I just felt like that was a goal that I had in life, was to go beyond what people had been doing and maybe get out into the world more."

Most participants described having the support of their families as they went to college and embarked on their careers; several gave special credit to their mothers.

Claudia Daly: So I got all my drive and motivation, I have to say, from the women in my family. My mother and my grandmother, huge influences.

Mary Stucky: [My mother is] just a really, really creative person. Brilliant. And a tremendous role model for me.

Carole Custer: And my parents, there was never any question about me getting a college degree. There was never a question about me being a professional, being able to support myself if ever need be.

All participants articulated a sense of self-sufficiency and actively sought college degrees and training that would bring them opportunities. Some also began to see a change in the latter part of the 1970s as women began to express a growing professional identity within journalism. "It was a time of transition--a lot of women trying to figure out how to be excellent journalists within the confines," said Mary Stucky, who started freelancing for NPR in 1977 while she was working at McCall's in New York City. Stucky had graduated from Carleton College in Minnesota and noted the large number of women in New York with degrees from elite institutions who were writing beauty and fashion articles for women's magazines while their male counterparts were able to secure positions in news. She returned to the Twin Cities, where

she worked first at Minnesota Public Radio and then in public and commercial television. “I mean, I have never wanted to do anything except journalism. I love this work,” Stucky said.

Cultivating a professional identity

The drive for professional excellence articulated by Stucky emerged in other women’s narratives, demonstrating a conscious cultivation of the knowledge and dispositions that would serve as cultural capital to increase their value and credibility. When Nancy Fushan walked into public radio station WHA in 1971 as a journalism student at the University of Wisconsin, the news director did not think women could be anchors because their voices were not authoritative. She offered to be his assistant:

Nancy Fushan: I would go in at 5 o’clock every morning and get his newscasts ready, and all he was doing was editing me. And that was very valuable. But essentially, as I got more and more adept at writing for his style, he basically turned it over to me. He actually allowed me to be one of the first women news anchors at WHA.

Fushan also noted the influence of the liberal feminist movement during the two years she worked at WHA: “Women were really pushing in, and particularly in public broadcasting. . . . So I think I was able to ride that wave because I guess I was part of that wave.” After graduating in 1973, Fushan took a job at WOI radio in Ames, Iowa, where she provided gavel-to-gavel coverage of the state legislature and co-hosted a morning public affairs program. Four years later, Fushan moved north to Minnesota Public Radio, where she was a cultural reporter and producer before being plucked to join NPR’s news team in Washington.

All participants described a strong work ethic and persistence as integral to their success:

Claudia Daly: And the issue of how I developed my ability to be a serious broadcaster, I looked at the old files. . . . I paid attention. I read tons of magazines and got ideas from there, so ultimately I learned a lot in that first five years. When I left, I was the highest-paid woman in television in the market.

Merri Dee: I never turned anything down. I was very inquisitive and also very desperate. Remember me: I needed a job. I wasn't looking at a career; I was looking at a job. . . . There was no big, real win. The win for me was my attitude, the fact that I was working, and that I was resilient.

While individual qualities such as perseverance and curiosity were universally articulated as necessary to gain traction in the field, gender performativity was a source of conflict for these participants. McCall's notion of gender as a form of embodied cultural capital—a set of gendered behaviors or dispositions that can be deployed strategically to gain leverage in a particular environment—happens when women with the means to do so trade on their appearance or perform stereotypical femininity to gain a field advantage:

Claudia Daly: It was a funny time because women were more women and men were men, and I was an anomaly [laughs]. I was very aware of it. I was very aware of it. And, you know, when--I used it. I mean, because that was what I had to use. I was cute, and I was funny, and I was smart, and I was cheeky, and all those things worked.

Heidi Soliday, who covered sports for KCCI-TV in Des Moines for about thirty years, acknowledged receiving attention because of her gender when she was hired in 1976. She credits her work ethic, her large and prominent family—her father had been a journalist—and her experience as an athlete in helping her succeed. She became sports director in 1990 and is believed to be the first woman in the U.S. to hold that position (Schultz, 2005, p. 235). Aware of her novelty, she also expressed ambivalence about it.

Heidi Soliday: The man-woman thing is a dynamic that can be easily exploited. . . . So, not that I ever had to--again, I was well known--but if it was a situation outside of Des Moines or even outside of Iowa, I may have had a slight advantage because I was a young woman with long, blond hair that sometimes, that usually wore dresses or skirts, to get a story. Not necessarily always, but let's just say that I was aware that I had a difference about me that might be perceived as an advantage.

Yet Soliday described missing out on a job at a Chicago station because the hiring managers thought that market was not ready for a female sports anchor. She also found differences between male and female broadcasters due to age: “I do think that women in television, as they age, do go by the wayside unless they are established enough that it doesn't matter.” Thus, if stereotypical femininity—with its emphasis on youth and appearance—is accepted as embodied capital, it must be with the understanding that it depreciates over time.

Indeed, participants articulated the consequences of being closely associated with their bodies. For example, most participants were told at some point that women's voices were not authoritative enough to deliver the news. They endured critiques from supervisors and family members and worked to strike a balance in how they performed gender on the air and in the workplace. They articulated an inherent conflict between being a woman and being a professional.

Nancy Fushan: I had to find my voice. I didn't want to sound too feminine, but I didn't want to sound masculine and authoritative.

Carole Custer: In order for me to do my job, I needed to be one of the guys. And that meant not being aggressive or demanding certain things or assuming certain things.

Heidi Soliday: I was kind of a tomboy. I never got any kind of a feeling that I was unique, that, oh, I was this woman in sports. I mean, face it, you're a woman in a man's world.

In terms of a collective identity, participants were divided in their relationship with liberal feminism, ranging from Claudia Daly, who described participating in women's empowerment groups in the 1970s, to Heidi Soliday, who said she did not consider herself a “women's-libber” and felt more comfortable in the newsroom than she did in situations where she felt other women were defining her by gender: “I can't say that I felt that I was this token chick in

the newsroom, you know? . . . I often got asked to participate in things by women because they perceived me as this huge groundbreaker. So that's kind of a weird dynamic, I guess."

Jill Geisler was more comfortable with her status as a groundbreaker but less comfortable with her novelty as a weekend sports reporter. She was hired as a news reporter at WISC in 1972 on the condition she would cover sports on the weekends. She was not interested in sports but did such a good job that WITI in Milwaukee offered her full-time job in sports reporting.

Jill Geisler: The only woman on the sidelines of a lot of games and things did not go unnoticed by people. And so I said, "I want to be a news reporter." I would fight to the death for the right, qualified woman to get that sports job, but in my mind I was going to be a gimmick, you know? It was the world's worst thing to do to hire this recent college graduate with long blond hair down to here and miniskirts, which is what everybody wore then, to do your sports when she didn't have it in her DNA.

WITI hired Geisler as a news reporter in October 1973 and made her news director in 1978. She was one of the first women in the country to have that title. She recalled that upon offering her the position, her supervisor asked: "Do you think there will be people who have a problem with you being a woman?" She responded, "Yes. And as long as we think it's their problem and not my problem, we'll be OK."

These examples reveal the historical limitations of liberal feminism and its emphasis on individual opportunity as well as the difficulty of performing gender in the workplace. They serve as a reminder that while marginalized individuals within a field may cultivate strategies that serve their interests, they cannot unilaterally restructure the field. As feminist theorist Steph Lawler (2004) wrote: "Authority cannot simply be claimed by the speaker: it must also be granted by the listener. This is not a question of individual choice, but of doxic rules; there must be sufficient legitimation granted to the speaker" (p. 123).

Conclusion

Bourdieu (1977) wrote that “interpersonal relations are never, except in appearance, individual-to-individual relationships and that the truth of the interaction is never entirely contained in the interaction” (p. 81). The history presented here certainly helps to explain the power dynamic that continues to play a role in women’s modern-day experiences of sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. The narrative themes uncovered in this study depict a hostile and discriminatory environment faced by women in Midwestern broadcasting as well as different forms of social and cultural capital they used to establish themselves.

While economic capital at times was not forthcoming—in the form of salaries or other paid opportunities—these women relied on social and cultural capital to create roles for themselves in radio and television. In terms of the strategies identified by Djerf-Pierre (2007)—competition, specialization, and expansion—this group of women represented all three, though most indicated a desire to compete, to be “one of the journalists” if not “one of the boys.” Two participants articulated how the two were synonymous: Carole Custer said she needed to be “one of the guys,” and Heidi Soliday said she was a “woman in a man’s world.” In contrast, Ruth Batschelet, like other radio homemakers, engaged in specialization by producing a program specifically for other women, while Merri Dee engaged in expansion by bringing ideas and a gender-neutral dress code, which she had cultivated at a minority-owned radio station, to white-owned television stations. This study also shows the importance of looking beyond content-as-strategy to examine how women navigated their immediate environments.

These women tapped into community support and social networks that helped them deal with conflicts between their gendered identities and their professional ideals, suggesting they gained support from external communities of women even while pursuing individual-level

strategies. They also described wanting to empower women who came after them in the field, sustaining the ethos of “generational generosity” Jill Geisler described, and several participants explicitly identified as feminist. This complicates the false dichotomy Steiner (2012) noted in the literature about women who assimilate vs. women who leave journalism by indicating some level of resistance from within, even if these women’s experiences lay outside dominant narratives of national, organized activism.

Viewing women’s professional strategies through the lens of social and cultural capital contributes to the feminist project of unpacking how individual women work through and against gender as they make their way in a male-dominated field. For example, as a source of embodied cultural capital, stereotypical femininity was at odds with the normative professional identity women described trying to cultivate. While some were able to use gender performativity to their advantage, reliance on white, able-bodied standards of feminine beauty-- unattainable for the vast majority of women--is a strategy with clear risks and implications, especially for women of color. Future research should more deeply examine the relationship among gender, race, class, and different forms of social and cultural capital.

This study distinguishes privilege from power, for it shows how social and cultural capital in the form of family connections, normative beauty, and education can serve to lift individual women without empowering women as a group. These individual broadcasters, through their “feel for the game,” created opportunities for themselves but encountered a historically male culture that welcomed them only to the extent they could emulate the norms and practices already in place. This helps to explain why culture is slow to change and why sexual harassment and discrimination have continued decades after women began asserting their presence in broadcasting. Ultimately, this study contributes to feminist media research that seeks

to explain not only how gender has worked on women, but also how women have worked through and against gender to negotiate barriers to their participation in radio and television. Their experiences illuminate both the struggles and the strategies that characterized women's participation in the public sphere during the twentieth century.

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Table 1. Interview participants.

Name	Years in industry	Age at time of interview	Role in industry	Location of experience	Date of interview
Ruth Batschelet	1968–1975	85	Radio homemaker	Iowa	April 4, 2015
Pat Blank	1978–present	58	Reporter; host of “All Things Considered” on Iowa Public Radio	Iowa	Feb. 10, 2015
Mollie Cooney	1974–2017	61	TV reporter, noon news anchor	Iowa	Feb. 23, 2015
Carole Custer	1971–1977	65	TV reporter, news anchor	Iowa	Feb. 25, 2015
Claudia Daly	1955–present	78	TV promotions; radio writer, producer and station manager	Minnesota; Illinois	April 27, 2015
Merri Dee	1963–2010	78	Radio, TV personality; news anchor	Illinois	March 30, 2015
Nancy Fushan	1983–2000	63	Radio news reporter, producer	Iowa; Minnesota; Washington, DC	April 10, 2015
Jill Geisler	1972–1998	64	TV news anchor, director	Wisconsin	Feb. 6, 2015
Lynne Grasz	1963–Present	71	TV promotions, communications director	Nebraska; Missouri; New York	March 12, 2015
Heidi Soliday	1976–2008	61	TV sports reporter and director	Iowa	March 25, 2015
Mary Stucky	1977–present	59	Radio, TV writer, producer, host	New York; Minnesota	March 16, 2015