ABOUT MEDIA

Newsrooms With A Female View

By Joan Konner

IT HAS BEEN a long, slow struggle for women to get into decision-making positions in the newsroom, and many wondered whether they would make a difference when they did. Now that some have arrived, the anecdotal evidence is building that indicates they do.

A couple of months ago, coverage of a rape story in The Des Moines Register stirred debate in journalistic circles about rape and journalistic propriety.

The Register published a five-part series reporting a rape in graphic detail, including the name of the victim. The victim decided to tell her story publicly after reading an article written by the editor of the newspaper, Geneva Overholser, urging victims to identify themselves. The editor wrote, "As long as rape is deemed unspeakable — and is therefore not fully and honestly spoken of — the public outrage will be muted as well."

Other news organizations followed with reports, debate, discussion. USA Today devoted a full editorial page to the subject, including another graphic rape account, this time in the first person by the victim, a senior editor of that newspaper, Karen Jurgensen.

The most often quoted definition of news comes from the editor who said: "News is what I say it is." Change the editor and you change the news. In this case, the editorial sensibilities and judgments of two women editors are challenging convention on a very sensitive and widespread act of violence. Remember when rape, as well as ethnic and sexist jokes and slurs, were just a laughing matter? In

newsrooms everywhere, including this paper's, this week, none of this is funny anymore.

Recent shifts in editorial approach traceable to women began with the remarkable Ms. magazine, which legitimized women's issues by producing a serious magazine about them. It, no doubt, can take the credit for helping to change the definition of front-page news to include domestic, workplace and children's issues; values and quality-of-life stories; and more reports about health, education, social trends and the environment. Today those stories can be found not only on the women's page but on every page, and on news broadcasts as well.

At a Columbia Graduate School of Journalism Alumni Forum on the subject "Is News Getting Too Soft?," Soma Golden, national editor of The New York Times, presented an analysis of changes in the position of "hard" and "soft" news on the front page of her newspaper. On a given day in

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1969, the front page was all "hard" news, that is, dateline breaking news.

By 1979, at least two of the stories on the front page on any given day were what was referred to as "new" stories. A "new" story was a series on care of the elderly or an analysis of a social trend. The trend continued into 1989, with as many as three "new" stories mingled with dateline news.

The distinction between hard and soft news is blurring. With the change in the number of women in newsrooms, we're seeing a change in the public agenda and priorities of society as well.

About 20 years ago on WNBC-TV, Barbara Walters interviewed Clare Booth Luce on the program "Not For Women Only." Luce said that serving in Congress was the worst experience of her professional life, and further, she did not think that women would ever become a strong force in Congress.

"Why?" Barbara Walters asked.

Mrs. Luce replied, "Because women do not have the instinct for the jugular, and men do."

Barbara Walters identified. "We'll learn," she said.

I remember thinking that the response was off the mark. We shouldn't be trying to learn killer instincts from men. What's the point of achieving power if, in the process, we become what we're trying to change? We should be trying to get into decision-making positions so that we can influence the way business is done, to the advantage of both sexes.

The female sensibility is growing everywhere in our culture today . . . in literature, in art, in history, politics, the media. There seems to be a great hunger in America for values that we associate with the private sphere of home, family and spiritual life — values of collaboration, community, care. We see it in the concern for the environment, in the search for a collective spirit and relationships based on the awareness of the interconnectedness of all life.

Some believe that women, as they succeed in the marketplace, are retaining what is valuable in what used to be considered the domestic sphere and bringing that broader, more life-supporting perspective into view. On a threatened Mother Earth, some — women and men — are calling into question the efficacy of the instinct for the jugular. Given the impact of the media in shaping our social, political and economic life, clearly it is the influence of those who never had the instinct.