

Onward and UPWARD

BY DEBORAH TAYLOR TATE

Women are more involved and more influential than ever in today's electronic media. But according to one FCC commissioner, it's not enough.

Women have been shaping mass media in pivotal ways since the advent of the industry. Indeed, the first president of American Women in Radio & Television, Edythe Meserand, is one of our early matriarchs. Over the course of her half-century career, she participated in the birth of NBC, the creation of the first radio broadcast newsroom, and the first investigative radio documentary.

Today's "media mavens" stand on the shoulders of giants like Meserand and continue her legacy of revolutionary innovation. I am particularly proud of two fellow Nashvillians, Robin Roberts and Oprah Winfrey, who have helped erase gender and racial barriers and inspired millions of American women. Roberts catapulted from local sports to co-anchor of ABC's *Good Morning America*. More importantly, she used her public role to bring national attention to breast cancer and early detection, even allowing cameras to follow her through the treatment process. Winfrey is

quite simply an institution unto herself no matter what the medium—radio, television, print, and now web-based—providing help across the spectrum of human concerns.

Others, such as Deborah Wilson, president of The Weather Channel, are on the cutting edge of technology, investing tens of millions of dollars in a state-of-the-art, high-definition production studio. Or consider Melody Spann-Cooper, who runs WVON, Chicago's only African-American-owned and -operated radio station, and who has been hailed by the *Chicago Sun-Times* as one of the 10 most powerful women in media.

And no list would be complete without Katie Couric, who, in addition to making history as the first woman to solo-anchor the *CBS Evening News*, has done so much to educate us on preventive health care. She shared her husband's ultimately fatal fight against colon cancer and now champions routine health screenings, from

colonoscopies to mammograms. All of these women have advanced more than just the bottom line and their own careers; they have educated us, affected our communities, and even saved lives.

Beneath the Glass

Behind the scenes, women continue to support the innovation of diverse programming delivered via new platforms and technologies. Having been involved with federal communications regulation, I know that progress on these fronts is crucial, because it ensures that more quality programming will be developed and will be able to reach more people—especially families.

According to a 2007 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation, two-thirds of parents say they are "very concerned" about American children being exposed to inappropriate media content. A leader on this front is Disney-ABC's Anne Sweeney. She has been atop many of the industry's



XX FACTOR. For FCC Commissioner Deborah Taylor Tate—pictured above with Foundation of AWRT Honorary Trustee Pierre C. Bouvard at the 2008 AWRT Leadership Summit & Business Conference in March—increasing the presence of women in the electronic media is not simply a question of ensuring equality or shoring up the bottom line. “[W]omen bring a unique perspective, voice, and approach to programming,” Tate writes, “that is beneficial to the industry and to the American public as a whole.”

“most powerful” lists, and deservedly so. From *High School Musical* to the *Hannah Montana* phenomenon, Sweeney has developed innovative, family-oriented content, and has been committed to reaching audiences across a variety of new platforms, such as VOD, broadband, mobile, and the Internet.

I mention these visionary women and their accomplishments to demonstrate the importance of continuing to improve opportunities for women in electronic media. Although the landscape is vastly improved from the time of Edythe Meserand, women are still underrepresented throughout the industry. When it comes to upper-management and boardroom positions, the glass ceiling still looms overhead. According to a 2007 study, women own just 3.4 percent of the 11,884 radio stations in the United States. Only 7 percent of the directors of our 14 largest radio companies are women. Likewise, women own only 4.97 percent of the country’s 1,349 full-

power commercial television stations.

This country needs more women in the media industry, not just for equality’s sake, or because women can improve bottom lines, but because women bring a unique perspective, voice, and approach to programming that is beneficial to the industry and to the American public as a whole.

Access to Capital

So how do we get there? I believe a crucial first step was taken by the FCC this past December, when we adopted more than a dozen proposals that hopefully will lower the barriers for women and minorities pursuing leadership roles in the media. Developed by the FCC Diversity Committee, the Minority Media and Telecommunications Council, and the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters, the proposals include extending the deadlines for construction permits, modifying our equity/debt-plus-attribution rule, and

including non-discrimination provisions in advertising sales contracts.

Another proposal, which I have long championed, is to convene an “access to capital” conference in New York City, to bring together investors with women and minorities seeking to enter the media industry. I believe this event will lead to the creation of new financing opportunities and partnerships, and perhaps as women succeed, they will reinvest in the next generation of women.

Women are making more waves in the media industry than ever, but there is still critical work to be done. Most importantly, I hope we all will strive to make a difference not only in the ownership statistics, or in our individual careers, but in the use of the airwaves to educate, inspire, and even save lives. ♪

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