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Ithaca College

School of Journalism

Speech delivered by Jessica Savitch - 1975

Introduction:

Good evening and welcome. I'm very pleased tonight to be able to welcome one of Ithaca College's graduates. A person who makes us proud to say that we go to Ithaca College and our graduates or will be graduates someday of the School of Communications. The woman we are about to uh listen to and discuss some of the media with is a woman who has made her career in Houston, Texas, and now in Philadelphia at KYW Channel Three and Eyewitness News It is my pleasure and honor to present to you Jessica Savitch. Jessica.

Jessica Savitch:

It is a pleasure and honor for you. It is something that I never thought was going to be accorded to me. To be back in the school from which I graduated, able to sit here and talk about an industry I never thought I was going to be able to get a chance in is almost amazing that it happened in seven years is even more amazing. I am now fully qualified to come up here and talk to you about a woman in the media, talk to you about broadcast, journalism, some of the ethics and some of the precepts. That's terrific.

Seven years ago no but nobody would give me a job. I graduated from Ithaca College and despite the fact that during my tenure in Ithaca had worked for the entire four years commercially. And I traversed the whole nation looking for work. I finally got a job at CBS in New York, which sounds like a terrific job. You'd all like to work for CBS in New York someday, right? When you consider that I went to work for CBS New York as a gopher. “Jessica gopher the wire paper, Jessica go for the anchor man's laundry, Jessica go for this and go for that.” And there were male gophers on the staff. All of the male gophers got to ascend up the ranks and go into other jobs, and all the women gophers continued to go for coffee. And it wasn't even easy to get a job as a gopher. Because first of all you had to go through the people who said, “Well, you can't be a desk assistant because the hours are

long.“ And I said, “That's all right. I don't mind.” They said. “the hours are also late. You risk getting mugged in New York City late at night,” I said, “that's all right. I'll take the risk.” And they said, “well, we'll call ya.” Finally they called me and they said, “well, we've looked over your credentials.” (I was in graduate school at the time taking politics at night), “We've looked over your credentials and we don't think we're going to hire you because your journalism background isn't strong enough. You've got television radio background, but you don't really have a journalism background.” So I was very upset and the next day they hired a hardcore unemployed person who hadn't graduated from high school for the desk assistance job that I wasn't bright enough or didn't have the journalism credentials that were good enough to get. What they really meant to say was,” We don't want women desk assistance. We've never had any women desk assistance, and we don't want them now.” Five years before that point they could have said that and I would have gotten to go home and just live with that. But they were at the stage where they couldn't say that to me, so what they said was, “your journalism background isn't strong enough." It was that nebulous that it was nothing that I could really pin down. My journalism background was certainly strong enough to be able to carry coffee. I was able to do that before I went to college. I am still fairly good at carrying coffee.

After I got to New York City and went to wait, work my way up, nobody would hire women, so I traversed the entire nation looking for work again and wound up in Houston, Texas. For so many years, people didn't want to hire women in communications simply because we were used to stereotypes. We had never seen any women in communications. We had never any reason to believe they would be good or not good. We just weren't used to seeing them there. Have you ever gone to a supermarket and bought a package and bought it for years and had the package change on you? It's disquieting. You're not really sure. It may be the exact same thing in the package, it may be an even better product in the package, but the package changes and the label changes and it's disquieting for you. For so many years we got our news in the news package. You turned on television and the package was always white, was always male, and was always middle-aged. That was the news package, the avuncular Walter Cronkites of the world. and the Walter Cronkites on the local level. Not that there was anything at all wrong with Walter Cronkite, who was an excellent journalist, but that he was the only type of television journalist you saw. There were no other packages.

I wanted to be an on-air reporter. I never even thought about being an anchor woman. I wanted to be a reporter. I was told that I couldn't be a reporter because it meant I had to carry the gear. In small markets you carry the old Pro 6 Auricon heavy cameras and I was too small to carry the gear. I was also told that I would be put in dangerous situations that women couldn't handle. I was also told that when men did shoot film for me, they didn't want to shoot film for me in dangerous situations because they were afraid being a woman I couldn't handle myself. I had to go along and disprove all of those things. I got a job in

Houston, Texas. I was the first woman street reporter that city ever had. There had never been a woman reporter on television in Houston. It cost a great deal of unrest in the newsroom. We worked in rotation. We carried our own gear. And the men in my newsroom used to do things like sabotage my gear. There was an unwritten rule in Houston where the first person on the scene had to set the lights at a press conference - the old Translux, you kids don't deal with this, we had the old Translux cases. You're so well equipped up here at Ithaca College it's amazing. But we had the old heavy Translux light cases and we had to carry them upstairs all by ourselves. And all the other crews from the other stations used to hide around the corner and wait for me to get there so that I have to carry all the lights up the steps and set all of the lights. And there there were there were subtle kind of things like that.

After six months in Houston as a reporter, the weekend anchor job opened up. And there were five reporters on staff, four men. and I was on staff. And they put up a notice and they said, before we hire an anchor person - actually they said before we hire an anchor man - before we hire an anchorman from the outside, we'll audition all the reporters inside. And if anyone is good enough, we'll take one of our reporters and promote them. Auditions are Thursday after the newscast. And after the newscast on Thursday night, I walked right by the notice. I saw it and went home. And didn't even think about going back and auditioning for an anchor woman's job, for an anchor job. And I went home and the news director called me and said, “Why aren't you here auditioning?” And I said, “I’m not here auditioning. They're auditioning because it's for anchor.” And he said, “so?” And I had to sit down and think about that - so, so why not? And the answer was because I was a woman. I had never seen a woman in the job before. Therefore I had no reason to believe that I even had a shot at it. Now I sat down and thought about it and said, you know, I'm the best reporter they have on staff here. I'm better than those four guys that they're auditioning. Why am I here? I went back and auditioned and got the job, became the first anchor woman in the South.

It is not easy to be a first in this industry. For one thing you have to see yourself in a role. When I was growing up, I'm 28 years old, but I'm on the other side of the generation gap for most college students today. And when I was growing up, and anyone asked the women in our class what we wanted to be when we grew up, we all said one of three things. A nurse, a teacher, or a mommy? Or any three combination of those three, and not, believe me, that there is anything wrong with any one or any combination of those worthwhile jobs, but that in all honesty that was all we saw available to us. It never would have occurred to me to say when I grow up I would like to be an anchor woman. When I grow up, I would like to be Walter Cronkite. I noticed there were marked differences between Walter Cronkite and myself. And so without even engaging my brain or intellectualizing it, I knew that it would be a problem and that I couldn't be a Walter Cronkite because I was a woman.

We have begun to change. I was asked today about stories. The type of stories we cover. Don't we in the news cover stories about men? And that is true. We do. Because news is geared to the power structure And the power structure is stories about politics, is stories about medical breakthroughs, stories about social change, stories about people who occupy important positions in the power structure and most of them were men. So sure all the stories on the news are mostly about men, but that's changing. And the more women we see in power positions, the more stories we'll do about them. The more stories we do about them, the more kids growing up will see women in these different positive roles, will see themselves possibly ascending to a point where they are in those roles, and we will begin to then see more women on the news. It's a cyclical kind of thing.

I would like to say that the industry is open to women completely now. I would also like to say that President Ford has come up with a cure to the economic situation and that the Easter bunny will be here on Easter. Um no, we are nowhere near where we should be. You are the ones who were beginning. You are the ones who were starting the change. I would also like to say that women got into the industry because everybody woke up and said it was unfair That would be untrue, too. Women got in the industry because there were enough women who pushed for it, number one. And number two, in the late 1960s, Blacks and racial and ethnic minorities pushed the Federal Communications Commission into adding an addendum to the FCC requirements, which said stations must file affidavits saying what they are positively doing to implement the progress of Black, racial and ethnic minorities. It excluded white women. You saw a lot of black women getting into television, you didn't see a lot of white women. In 1972 or thereabouts, the FCC amended that, and stations are now required to file affidavits to renew their licenses saying what they are positively doing to implement the progress of women, not only in their own shops, but in promoting positive images for women. That was really when the industry finally began to open up and we are just seeing it open now.

Still the decisions that are made in the industry, most of the decisions are made by upper level management. And that is the one area where you do not see women in television. Women in decision-making capacities, news directors, program directors, general managers, corporate vice presidents, presidents. You don't see women in those jobs. And there is where the decisions are made. You can only do so much in a line position. I can only do so many stories, promote a positive image by being the kind of anchor woman I think we should have. I can only do so much. Women like myself can only do so much. The rest has to be done by women who will hope to enter management level. I hope that there are women in college now and communication schools that are looking toward television management. It is the one area where we so badly need women

I've also been asked by men on campus and men off campus, white males, how they can end discrimination against them. That now with the push toward letting women in the industry,

with a push toward letting Blacks in the industry, racial and ethnic minorities, that the one person who's now in the minority and discriminated against is the white male. He can't get

a job. He can't get in the front door. He can't be considered. And to that I say I'm really sorry, and that's very true. This industry isn't is so competitive There are only certain number of jobs out there. Nobody's going to open up a new station. Maybe there'll be some more jobs in industrial television, but there are not a lot of jobs. The competition is stiffer. True, they're opening up jobs to minorities, so therefore white men are pushed aside. My co-anchor Mort Crim lost a job to a black man at one point in his career. And it was a job he really wanted. And the program director took him aside afterward and said, "Mort, you were really the best man for the job. And you should have had it. But you weren't Black, and I had to give the job to a Black person. And I'm sorry." And that black person came up to Mort afterwards and said, "Mort, you were the best man for the job. I know that. I know I'm not as qualified as you are. And I'd like to feel sorry, but I don't. Because for all the years that you've been auditioning for jobs, I haven't been able to get in to see the news director." For all the years, all the people here that are not able to get jobs because they're going to women, I say you at least are able to get into the program director. You're at least able to get in to see the news director. You're at least able to be considered. For years and years and years and years we weren't even in the running. We weren't even considered.

Last night I flew back to Philadelphia to do a show called the 53% Minority. It was about women. I had just finished talking to some women on campus. In the plane going back, I was reading about the women on the show. Flo Kennedy, spokeswoman for the women's movement. Nancy Wittig, one of the ordained Episcopal ministers in Philadelphia that the church has ousted and will not let practice. And a woman psychologist who said that she is dealing with a lot of conflict, women who are in conflict, who say that they're succeeding and their heads are in the 1980s, but their guts are back in the 1930s and they're having trouble dealing with with the women's movement, etc. But it occurred to me going back to a show that by the way was produced by a woman and associate produced by a woman and two of the people on the floor crew were women and I was anchoring. It occurred to me that we have come very far, but that we won't have not really reached true equality until people are going to go into entry-level jobs, men, women, Blacks, whites, whatever are going to go in and look for these entry-level jobs. And people are going to evaluate them in terms of their excellence, in terms of their ability to do a job and not on the on terms of whether they're white or whether they're Black or whatever. And I think that when young children grow up and begin to perceive the news in all types of packages and people in all different kinds of roles, I think that is when we will have truly gotten to a point of real equality and liberation for all people in our own industry, and in all others.

I'd like to take a couple of questions. My management always makes me tell you that my opinion's all my own and do in no way reflect the staff and management of Westinghouse or

its parent company in New York. Let me take a couple of questions. Anybody? It can be on the industry or women's roles in the industry or lack of them or whatever - if you yell them out.

In Philadelphia the questions I always get are things like “Where do you get your clothes? Who does your hair? Um, and other and other incisive questions.” It's a pleasure to be on a college campus where people have a working knowledge, or at least a rudimentary working knowledge of broadcasting, can at least formulate intelligent questions. None of them are doing it right. You're all shy. Well Dr. Kashk is giving me enough time to do maybe one. You want me out here by seven thirty, right? Go ahead.

Question & Answer session

Q

Do you ever plan on having your own station? I plan on having my own station.

A

Do I plan on having my own station? I should make that much money. It should only happen that I should make the millions of dollars necessary to buy a broadcast station. I would be really lucky if I could own a little teeny station in the Midwest. I am toying with the idea of, Well, there are those that that say that my career will be over in another ten years because old women are not good on television. Those are the same people that said that women's voices were non-authoritative and that women didn't like to look at other women on TV because they were afraid of losing their husbands. In other words, they were men that came up with those ideas. Um, but possibly later on in my career I'm looking for an alternative career after this one is over in my mid thirties or early forties. And I think I might try station management.

Q

But you don’t hear Barbara Walters saying that…

A

No, you don't hear Barbara Walters saying that, but you hear an awful lot of people who say to me, “What are you going to do when you get old?” And I say, “and when is that going to be?” And they say, “well, in another ten years.” I say, “okay.” In other words, it's depends on what are you going to do when you grow up. Any other questions?

Q

Being an anchor person, do I miss the on-the-street reporting that I used to do?

A

Most certainly? Unfortunately, our industry is set up in such a way now that you start out as a reporter and if you do well at it, you become an anchor. And there's the glory and there's the money and there's the recognizability and that’s where everybody wants to be. So what you get to do is you get to read the news. The other day a young kid gave me a great definition of what an anchor person does. Little kid in the third grade. Teacher asked him what an anchor person does and the kid got right up and said, “Um, an anchor person is when you make a whole lot of money when you read all them words right on the television.” And that's not all that far from wrong. Hopefully you get to write, I write a lot of my own material and I plan my day and I plan my schedule as such so that I can cover every once in a while a breaking news story and work over a period of time on investigative reports. And so therefore I keep my hand in reporting. But the industry is set up now that really you could become very easily Ted Baxter. You could, especially at a major station where there are writers and producers where you come in and and get somebody to make you up and fix your your hair and get your script and sit down and read the news and have no input whatever. That makes for a very shallow individual. That makes for a very two-dimensional individual. It doesn't make for a good news person. A good news person writes and also reports. I miss what - I'll tell you what I really miss the most. I miss coming in in the morning and going out and doing a couple of stories and meeting all different kinds of people and going through all kinds of challenging situations and hoping that I'll be able to get it together and get it on the air on time. I miss the challenge of that.

Q

One of the criticism of broadcast journalism now today is that you look at the star image rather than the journalist.

A

People today are looking for the star image rather than the journalist. Yes, unfortunately, that's true. We're getting into the showbiz area of news. There are those who say, to my face, that were I not a woman I would not be making it now. There are those who say that were I not a somewhat attractive woman, I would not be making it now. To that I have to say that for a quarter of what they're paying me in Philadelphia, they get the prettiest model in town to read the news. Um, they could get the prettiest model on the East Coast maybe for what they're paying me, I don't know, to come in and just read the news. There's an awful lot of premium placed on appearance. However, television is a visual medium. It is not - it's not radio and it's not print. Visuals are a part of it. It's like when you meet another person who's going to talk to you. You consider how they look, but it's a part. Television news is really, the presentation of television news is more of the gestalt theory, where looks are a part, where communicative ability plays a part, where real news skills and writing ability plays a part. All of it comes together and either works or doesn't work and is able to translate to a television screen and communicate with the person. It's a tough, tough kind of thing to really break apart. But looks plays a part and to some people who really are more interested in the superficiality of the industry, looks play an important part, a really important part.

Q

Do you feel about your ten thousand dollars worth from this school? Do you feel any better?

A

I don't think it was that much when I was here because I know I wouldn't have been able to pay it. I struggle too with what I had to work with. The degree is important. I tell you what is important. Television news is nothing if it does not cover people. If it does not involve people. All the stories you cover about people. People and their power structures, people and their relationships, people and their hang-ups, people and the interesting things that they do. In order to cover those people, you need the technical skills you have available to you learning on a lot of technical levels that I didn't have at that point. But experience is important. A good education is also important, a good liberal arts education, because stories that you will be doing in news will be about history, they'll be about sociology, they'll be about psychology, they'll be about art. You'd be surprised how little bits of information come into play in stories that that you are doing. That's really important. Get all you can out of the technical aspects. But be advised that when you graduate you'll have to start very small. You'll have to get a lot of just good line writing experience at a wire service or reporting experience at a small radio station, and you'll have to work your way up city by city. But never underestimate what education does. If the degree, if you hand the degree to

somebody, they're gonna say so what, but it's what went behind that. It's the education and the background, the sum total of experience that you then bring to the stories that you do.

Q

Do you see the industry also being open to women as far as camera and technical things?

A

Yes, it is open as far as camera and technical things. Well, here we have women who are on cameras, cameras one and two. TV Guide just did an article about my station. It was written by a woman who was a camera person, a studio camera person at my station. She's barely five feet tall. She has to weigh all of about 90 pounds. She's very small, very attractive, very nice, very bright, very articulate, good camera person. She's worked her way up to director. It was all about my station. One night, my co-anchor and I were anchoring a newscast. I was anchoring with Mort, and on camera one was a woman and on camera two was a woman and there was a woman running the teleprompter and there's a woman floor person. And there was a woman upstairs on the on the videotape machine and there was one on the slide projection. There are a lot of women on the crew. We have a lot of women technically. And Mort was doing a commentary. He does commentary, and he was doing a commentary on increasing jobs for women. And as he was reading it, I was over there going like this (thumbs up) to the women on the floor and they were all applauding. You could hear yelling through the headsets, and all of a sudden Mort finished his commentary and started laughing and I said, "You see, you're doing your commentary and the studio is unmanned again tonight. There just were no men on the crew." We have a lot of people who take over technical jobs. We have women directors, women producers, women associate producers, women researchers, women on camera, women on sound gear, women on projection, women on teleprompter. We have women in all aspects, and most stations do, and they handle the job beautifully. They're in the union. They're called the Union Brothers because it's still the Brotherhood, but they have the jobs, they're holding them down, they're doing very well. It's opening up. As I say, the one area that you're gonna have a tough time in is upper level management. Any other questions at all?

Closing remarks:

Thank you very much. I have enjoyed this. I wish each and every one of you good luck and I want to add that the industry, like McLuhan says, is the fastest and most expedient way of

reaching the largest amount of people ever known. It changes constantly. You will be a real working part of that change. Since we are not governed and we are only regulated by the FCC, so much of what we do, whether we're good or whether we're bad, depends on decisions made at individual levels and commitments made at individual levels. You'll be a real working part of changes in our industry. Do what you can with what you have, where you are, work your way up and plan on an individual level what you want to make is a contribution. The industry is crowded, but it always needs good people. Thank you.

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