

[The Washington Post]

Style

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 2001

Television's Talking Heads Lack Female Voices

By PAUL FARHI
Washington Post Staff Writer

After eight weeks of talking-head analysis and expert opinion about the world, post-Sept. 11, here's one sure thing you can learn from watching TV: Almost all of the people who seem to know anything are men.

Men know about Afghanistan. They know about anthrax. They

know foreign policy and military strategy. They know about terrorism and counter-terrorism. Judging by what's on TV, men have something wise to say—or just something to say—on most of the subjects of concern to Americans these days.

Women? The reporters on TV sometimes are women, and occasionally so are the "hosts," but the sources and experts—the author-

ities—typically aren't. Unless Condoleezza Rice happens to drop by, the people charged with explaining the world and its discontents tend overwhelmingly to be white and male.

Check out the guest lineups of the news-chat shows that stud Washington's airwaves—from "Face the Nation" to "The Beltway Boys" and beyond. Professors of Middle East studies? Men. Think-tank pros?

Men. Cabinet officials and ex-officials, members of Congress, medical authorities, espionage and terrorism experts, military types? Men, men, men—it's a ship all filled with men.

Of the 98 weekend "public affairs" programs whose guest lists were published in this newspaper in the past month, only 12 included a fe-

See EXPERTS, C10, Col. 1

News-Chat: The Air Club for Men

EXPERTS, From C1

male "expert." And that figure falls into the single digits when you exclude "To the Contrary With Bonnie Erbe," a PBS show begun 10 years ago to address the lack of women on such programs.

Since Sept. 11, the dominant figures of the TV thought establishment include a flock of "formers": former CIA director James Woolsey, former national security adviser Sandy Berger, former U.N. ambassador Richard Holbrooke, former secretary of state Lawrence Eagleburger, former White House adviser David Gergen. Sen. Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), a recently popular TV guest, is a twofor: a senator and doctor. Law professor Jonathan Turley may be the Energizer Bunny of TV experts; he was a go-to analyst during the Clinton impeachment proceed-

ings and the Florida election stalemate, and he's still going as the chatter turns to Afghanistan.

Rice, the national security adviser, certainly gets face time when she wants it, as do the likes of Jessica Stern of Harvard University, New York Times writer Judith Miller and aviation expert Mary Schiavo. But from there the number of female members of the Frequent Guest Club grows short, fast.

"It's not like there aren't any women out there," says Barbara Cochran, a former CBS News bureau chief who heads the Radio and Television News Directors Association. But, she says, "you just have to make it a goal to find them." News producers, she says, "need to spread [their] nets a little wider."

Adds Erbe: "To be honest, I thought this would have changed by now. But it hasn't."

Why do men dominate TV's expert class? Let's consider a few competing theories:

■ White males really do run the country, so their domination of the news airwaves accurately reflects the American power structure.

Senior government officials—a staple of news-chat shows since the beginning of news-chat shows—tend to be white males. So are former senior government officials, who often have a vested interest in speaking out about current policies (and the clout and connections to get themselves on the air). The same is true of corporate America, Hollywood, think tanks, academia and the scientific establishment.

But that seems to fly in the face of female achievement in many fields for a generation or longer. At last count, there were 367,000 women in the U.S. military, many with senior rank (6 to 8 percent of colonels and captains are women). The number of female physicians has nearly tripled since 1980. Women hold one of every three college faculty jobs in America, says the American Association of University Professors. Patricia Ellis, executive director of the Women's Foreign Policy Group, which promotes female expertise in foreign affairs, points out that dozens of women have held ambassadorships or high-ranking positions in the State Department. "A lot of talented, competent people are not being heard," she says.

However...

■ Men run the TV news business. So who's on the air tends to mirror who produces the program.

According to research by Bob Papper, a professor of telecommunications at Ball State University, women constitute about 40 percent of the workforce in TV news opera-

CARS FOR A CURE

**give cars.
new cures.
tax saving.
life giving.**

Donate your car, truck, newer RV or boat. We pick up free.

**1-888-CAR-5500
www.cancer.org**

Vehicles in good condition only.





CIA ex-director James Woolsey is one of a flock of former officials dominating news-chat shows.



FILE PHOTO

Condoleezza Rice is one of the few women to get face time on TV, but one of her national security predecessors, Sandy Berger, below, often gets the call.



ions. Yet they make up only about 20 percent of news directors, the top newsroom job. The number of minorities is even lower: About 25 percent of the total workforce is composed of minorities, but only 8 percent of news directors belong to a minority group. And virtually all of the top spots at the broadcast and cable networks—from news anchors to senior producers to news division presidents—are white men.

Papper says a news director who is female or of minority heritage may be more "tuned in" to representing diverse opinions. "Human nature says we're more likely to be comfortable with people who look like us," he says.

But sometimes, it's more mundane than that. Sometimes...

thing.

"Everyone is in a hurry in this business," Papper adds, "so you end up calling who you know. Is that discrimination? It's not the insidious kind of discrimination that says, 'I will consciously eliminate other kinds of people.' So we put the same people on day after day, week after week, because we know them, and we know they do well on TV, and we have their names at the top of our Rolodexes."

The critical question is whether it matters who the messenger is if the message is timely, accurate and useful. In other words, are viewers better served if a female bioterrorism expert discusses anthrax than, say, someone like Anthony Fauci, who happens to be white and male?

All things being equal, it does matter, says Thomas Kunkel, dean

of the University of Maryland's journalism school. "Whether we like it or not, people tend to believe the people they read and see on TV," he says. By going to the same sources repeatedly, he suggests, television reinforces the false notion that only white and male are synonymous with expert and authority. Besides, it's impossible to know what you'll find if you don't go looking in the first place.

And that's not only bad journalism, but bad for democracy, says Jannette Dates, dean of Howard University's communications school. "It is a service to society to get other perspectives into the mix," she says. "You have to get outside the tried and true. If there's one arena where it's most important to think outside the box, it's the news business."