

Sylvia Chase and the Boys' Club of TV News

When we started at the networks in the early '70s, most of us tried to hide our gender. Sylvia spoke out.

By Lesley Stahl

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Back in the early 1970s, the TV network news organizations wanted to show the world that they were "equal opportunity employers." And so, CBS, ABC and NBC scoured the country for women and minorities. In 1971, Sylvia Chase was a reporter and radio producer in Los Angeles, and I was a local TV reporter in Boston. CBS hired her for the New York bureau; I was sent to Washington. Sylvia, who died last week at age 80, and I were CBS's affirmative action babies, along with Connie Chung and Michele Clark. To ensure we had no illusions about our lower status, we were given the title of "reporter." We would have to earn the position of "correspondent" that our male colleagues enjoyed.

We were more like apprentices, often sent out on stories with the seniors, like Roger Mudd and Daniel Schorr. While we did reports for radio, the "grown-ups" — all men — did TV, but we were allowed to watch how they developed sources, paced their days and wrote and edited their stories.

Up until then, most women in broadcast journalism were researchers. At first, the four of us in our little group were grateful just to be in the door as reporters. Things began to stir when the women at Newsweek sued over gender discrimination. Then,

46 women filed a claim against NBC News. At our shop, it was Sylvia who organized a committee to go to the president of CBS, Arthur Taylor, with demands for more airtime and better assignments. She asked me to join.

I remember worrying about the men who viewed the women's agenda as a personal assault on themselves, and knew that women who "made waves" were often penalized. I was a coward and didn't go. I let Sylvia carry the banner, while, I'm ashamed to admit, I crouched.

The few women who came before us at the networks were, for the most part, confined to the women's beat, doing stories about health, education and the arts. In Washington, they were assigned to the first lady, never to the West Wing.

That began to change after Sylvia met with Arthur Taylor. She was the best reporter in our group, becoming a correspondent in no time, covering hard news and making regular appearances on the "CBS Evening News With Walter Cronkite."

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This was the time of Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan and Bella Abzug. It was inappropriate for those of us in journalism to join their marches, but we could cover the women's movement and the issues it raised. Sylvia especially fought to get those stories on the air, like one about how women in unions were treated. As far as I remember, she even persuaded CBS to start a daytime magazine show patterned on "60 Minutes" with just those kinds of in-depth reports.



The cast of “20/20” in 1979. From left, Dave Marash, Sylvia Chase, Hugh Downs, Geraldo Rivera and Thomas Hoving. ABC News, via Getty Images

We had parallel careers that took different paths. I was covering Watergate and then the White House; Sylvia, in New York, did longer investigative pieces, including a few on “60 Minutes” like one on a peace movement in Ireland led by women.

She stood out for her deep, strong, caramelly voice and her aversion to appearing in her reports. “She was famous,” the correspondent Rita Braver recalled, “for *not* wanting to be on camera.” Sylvia, Rita said, was the only correspondent she knew, “who had to be coaxed to do an on-cam.”

At lunch one day in New York, Sylvia and I talked about our lives, about how we both married young and divorced young. She told me she had nothing like the easy early life I had. She’d had to get herself to and put herself through college, at U.C.L.A. She was also more of a free spirit than the rest of us. With her boyfriend Stanhope Gould, a CBS News producer who was a “hippie” with a ponytail and sandaled feet, she organized a wild annual dinner that was called “Wretched Excess!”

We women were in the door, but still clawing our way into the club. “Do it the way the men do it” was the motto. So we lowered our voices, and wore brown, boxy jackets to shroud all curves and protrusions. As one of my friends back then said, “I adopted the affect of a librarian.” Fearing that it would remind our bosses that we were of a different gender, almost none of us breast-fed our babies.

There was a presumption that we few women competed with one another, that we were, as they’d say, cat fighters. But we became pals and supported one another in our shared attempts to prove that women could cover any kind of story as well as, if not better than, the men.

Sylvia left CBS in 1977 to work at ABC News and was among the first anchors of its new magazine show “20/20,” where she continued to distinguish herself with award-winning, crusading investigations like reports on exploding gas tanks in cars, and was named by TV Guide as “the most trusted woman on TV.” Toward the end of her career, she worked at PBS with Bill Moyers.

When Sylvia and I started out, there was no “Me Too” movement. We simply endured the pawing, convinced it was “just the way things are.” Our generation was able to change a lot of the way things were, but obviously not enough. Sylvia must’ve been as stunned as I am that many young working mothers today, for instance, are still afraid to ask for time off to attend their kids’ soccer games, lest they be seen as “less available” than the young fathers who are their colleagues.

Nearly 50 years ago, when Sylvia and I were hired at CBS, there was only one female chief executive in the Fortune 500 (Katharine Graham at The Washington Post). In 2018, there were 24, just 5 percent, and down from 32 the year before. With an electorate that’s around 53 percent female, we hold 23 percent of the seats in Congress. But there are now more women than ever — over 100, and a Madam Speaker. We still have never had a female president, but Susan Zirinsky was just named president of CBS News. A first, and a triumph.

I wish I could pick up the phone right now and talk to my friend Sylvia Chase about it.

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