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Spring 5-1-2018

### On the Record: The Power of Women's Ideas in the Changing Media Industry

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#### Recommended Citation

Homan, Jacqueline, "On the Record: The Power of Women's Ideas in the Changing Media Industry" (2018).  
*Renée Crown University Honors Thesis Projects - All*. 1267.  
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On the Record: The Power of Women's Ideas in the Changing Media Industry

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## Abstract

I am publishing a book, titled *On the Record: Notes from 20 Powerful Women in Journalism*, and a corresponding website, [ontherecordbook.squarespace.com](http://ontherecordbook.squarespace.com), aimed at high school and college students who want to learn about and make a difference in journalism and digital media. The book and website consist of interviews with women in those fields with a focus on ideas — how they're generated, how they become successful and how they shape the changing industry, with additional resources and information for students. The book will be self-published, printed and distributed to high schools and libraries in the Syracuse area, and the website will be promoted online, especially to students and journalism social network groups.

The goal of the project is to encourage young women to make positive changes in the media, especially during a time when honest and skilled journalism is so necessary, and female empowerment is critically important. In my research, I found that about 62 percent of newspaper and news site bylines were by men, while women constituted 38 percent of contributors. Moreover, I found that those figures have remained largely unchanged since at least 1999, fluctuating between 35 and 38 percent women. It became clear to me that there is a lack of progress in achieving equality in journalism. Through this book, I want to show young women that they can become successful journalists and digital media mavens, they can write about any subject area from politics to culture to science to fashion and they can look up to the women who are making positive changes in the industry now.

## Executive Summary

In the four years I've studied magazine journalism at Newhouse, the industry has evolved rapidly. While monthly print publications used to be the dominant form of storytelling, the rise of new forms of media and more time spent online and on mobile devices have transformed the entire industry. Now referred to as “magazine brands,” publications must focus on rapidly increasing amounts of content, establishing a presence on every emerging social platform and often requiring even print editors to contribute to digital, where the interest and energy now resides. Journalism and digital media also have transformed as a result of societal change. Political coverage and human rights issues have commanded their way into teen and fashion magazines. Truthful journalism, as opposed to “fake news,” became a rallying call during the last election season. But throughout all of these changes in technology, world issues, and consumer behavior, the magazine industry has not died — it has adapted and thrived.

As the industry continues to change drastically, many existing formulae for success are being rendered useless. We are seeing more and more that progress in the industry comes from leaders who reject conventional strategies and take risks. For example, Leandra Medine, the founder of *Man Repeller*, was pursuing a path toward magazine journalism when she had a bold idea to start her own online fashion blog as a side project. Despite her young age of 20, she used her digital savvy to grow the fashion blog into a multi-million-follower women's interest website and media company with more than a dozen employees and a worldwide fan base.

Innovators such as Medine inspire young women who want to enter the changing field of journalism and make a difference in the industry. I wanted to hear her thoughts about the industry, and I wanted to share those insights with those younger than me who are considering this as a career. To do that, I interviewed Medine and 19 other women with careers in journalism and digital media to create a new guidebook to the industry — one that doesn't abide by rules and conventions (no cover letter templates or interview dress code advice here), but instead encourages innovation. I think it is critical for girls interested in these fields to understand that the jobs are changing and to offer that understanding through these diverse 20 women — with different titles at different companies — and their stories of adaptation and innovation. The result is *On the Record: Notes from 20 Powerful Women in Journalism*, a book that I'm writing, designing, publishing and distributing to high school and college women, and a corresponding website, [ontherecordbook.squarespace.com](http://ontherecordbook.squarespace.com), to expand the audience and make the content more

accessible. The content of the interviews focuses on what exactly these women do, how they overcome challenges, how they generate innovative new ideas and what they recommend for young women who want to enter the field.

I'm focusing on women with this project because female empowerment in the field of journalism is extremely important today. According to a 2017 Women's Media Center study, men receive 62 percent of bylines in print, internet and TV news, while women have only 38 percent. Alarmingly, those figures have remained largely unchanged since at least 1999, fluctuating between 35 and 38 percent women. It is clear that there is a lack of progress in achieving equality in journalism. The study also found that men are quoted in stories significantly more than women when men are the reporters, but more women were quoted when women reported the story. If we want better female representation in the content of the media, we need better female representation in the media workforce. The study also found that female journalists most often reported on lifestyle, culture and health, rather than politics, criminal justice, technology or sports. For these reasons, it is important to show young women that they can enter the field of journalism and can look up to the women who are making positive changes in the industry now.

The women I interviewed for the book hold a variety of positions to highlight that girls are capable of doing anything. I want to demonstrate that while women report on fashion and lifestyle topics — and I have included some in the book who do that phenomenally — they also can cover politics, science or any of the other more male-dominated topics. I spoke with Susan Matthews, a science editor at *Slate*, and Seema Mehta, a political writer for *The Los Angeles Times*. I spoke with women whose jobs have changed with technological advancements, like Jenna Pirog, the first-ever virtual reality editor at *The New York Times*, and Kayla Isaacs, whose production job at *Refinery29* specifically focuses on the brand's Snapchat Discover edition. I spoke with women on the top of the masthead — editors-in-chief like Neha Gandhi of *Girlboss* and Gabrielle Korn of *Nylon*, and those who are CEOs of their own media companies, like Leandra Medine of *Man Repeller* and Kate Beckman of *Fresh U*. The interviewees range in age, race, ethnicity and job types so that every reader can find someone with whom they identify.

To promote the book and website, I am reaching out to dozens of high schools (particularly those that have student journalism programs) to request that teachers of journalism classes share the website with their students. I am also distributing the book to lower-income

schools in underserved areas, including some local Syracuse schools that may not have many journalism resources available for their students. This will create a lasting impact and ideally inspire young women at these schools to further explore how they can use journalism and digital media to share their views, voice their opinions, report on the world around them and prove that they are capable of achieving big goals.

## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Executive Summary.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>Critical Statement .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction.....	1
Background and Influences.....	2
Experience and Skills.....	5
Choices.....	7
Meaning.....	9
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>11</b>

## Acknowledgements

I couldn't have created this book without the help and support of my family, friends and mentors.

My book came to life through the incredible illustrations by my friend Claudia Lewis. Claudia, thank you for your time and dedication — I am inspired by your endless creativity.

This project was completed for Syracuse University's Renée Crown Honors Program and partially funded through the program's Crown Funding Award. I am eternally grateful for the Honors faculty who encouraged me, reviewed my work and had faith in my ideas. Special thanks to my Capstone Coordinator Kate Hanson, who has kept my project on track; my Capstone Advisor and magazine faculty advisor Melissa Chessher, who has been my go-to support system within my major; and my Capstone Reader and publication design professor Claudia Strong, who has taught me the power of graphic design and who has believed in this project from the start.

Additional thanks go out to all of the incredible professors and faculty in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications who have contributed to my overall learning and enabled me to create this project, especially Cheryl Brody Franklin, who introduced me to many of the women I interviewed.

To all of the women I interviewed in this book, thank you for sharing your wisdom and allowing the next generation of journalists and digital media professionals to learn from you. I appreciate every one of you.

Above all, thank you to my family, especially my parents, Jeff and Chris Homan, for giving me the world. Thank you for encouraging me to follow this career path and working hard to help out in every way possible. Because of you, as I wrote when I was six, I know I can do it all.



## Critical Statement

### Introduction

When I was nine years old, I had the headquarters address of *American Girl* magazine memorized: 8400 Fairway Place, Middleton, WI. I wrote to the magazine once a month, submitting short stories, entering contests and writing letters to the editor about how I wanted to be an editor myself one day. I eventually did the same thing when I began reading *Discovery Girls* magazine at age 10 and *Girls' Life* magazine at age 12 and *Seventeen* magazine at age 14. In a handwritten letter, I wrote to Editor-in-Chief Ann Shoket at *Seventeen*, "A lot of kids think they know what they want to be one day, but I'm at a place in my life now where I KNOW I need to work at this magazine to be fulfilled." The "place in my life" I was actually at was eighth grade, but needless to say, I have known for a long time that I wanted to work in the magazine industry.

In the four years I've studied magazine journalism in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, the industry has rapidly evolved. While monthly print publications were the dominant form of storytelling when I was younger, magazine brands have since focused on rapidly increasing amounts of content, establishing presence on every emerging social platform and often requiring even print editors to contribute to digital, where the interest and energy now resides. The rise of new forms of media and more time spent online and on mobile have transformed the entire industry.

Magazine journalism and digital media have also transformed as a result of societal change. Political coverage and human rights issues have commanded their way into teen and

fashion magazines. Truthful journalism, as opposed to “fake news,” became a rallying call during the last election season. But throughout all of these changes in technology, world issues and consumer behavior, the magazine industry has not died — it has adapted and thrived.

There is one area that could still use much adaptation, though. According to a 2017 Women’s Media Center study<sup>1</sup>, men receive 62 percent of bylines in print, internet and TV news, while women have only 38 percent. Alarmingly, those figures have remained largely unchanged since at least 1999, fluctuating between 35 and 38 percent women. It is clear that there is a lack of progress in achieving equality in journalism. The study also found that men are quoted in stories significantly more than women when men are the reporters, but more women were quoted when women reported the story. If we want better female representation in the content of the media, we need better female representation in the media workforce.

Through this book, I want to show young women that they can become successful journalists and digital media mavens, they can write about any subject area from politics to culture to science to fashion and they can look up to the women who are making positive changes in the industry now. It is up to all of us to demand equal representation.

## **Background and Influences**

From the age of eight or nine, I grew up poring over every word of every magazine I had, hoping that someday I could be the one writing those words I cherished. As a kid, I looked for resources about careers and how to get involved. That may seem extreme, but I know that other

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<sup>1</sup> The Status of Women in the U.S. Media 2017, Women’s Media Center

pre-teens were that way about those magazines too. In that time, so many of us craved the interactivity and involvement that those magazines brought through their contests, quizzes and in the case of *Discovery Girls*, my personal favorite at the time, real-world meet-ups with readers. I wanted to delve into the magazine as much as possible, and working there was my ultimate goal for that reason. The first few magazines of my childhood, *American Girl*, *Discovery Girls* and *Girls' Life*, represent my passion for the industry.

The next stage of my magazine life, the *Teen Vogue* and *Seventeen* and *CosmoGirl* era of early high school, was when I took my aspirations to the next level, learning everything I could about the industry and seeking out mentors. I wrote to editors-in-chief, hoping they would write back and advise me. Not surprisingly, they did not write back. I so badly wanted to start right then and there, interning and writing for them. Instead, I started my own fashion blog to hold me over. Through blogging and searching out other high school bloggers, I found even more people who were like me and wanted to work in magazines and wanted to do it now.

A pivotal moment for me was in 2012, my junior year of high school, when I was accepted into a weekend program in New York City called Teen Vogue Fashion University. It was for 16-24 year olds, and though I had seen the advertisements for it the previous two years and wished I could attend, I finally reached the age and was thrilled to be accepted into the competitive event. It was marketed as a weekend where “the business of fashion is taught by its stars” with seminars by designers, stylists, entrepreneurs, editors and more. As an aspiring editor of a magazine like *Teen Vogue*, my passion ignited even more when I finally got to meet some of the editors and see everything I had dreamed about up-close. The event was wildly popular, drawing thousands of applicants every year, gushed about by everyone who attended. The attendees formed Facebook groups and blog networks to keep us in contact. I still consider it one

of the best weekends of my life. Upon reflection, I don't think the event was so successful because it was about fashion. I think it was because it was about community and becoming part of something we loved, *Teen Vogue*.

Since then, especially in the past year or so, women's and teen magazines have changed their content coverage drastically. While *Teen Vogue* used to be known predominantly for fashion, it's now known for its political coverage, liberal outlook, sex and wellness education and activism. Teen Vogue Fashion University is now defunct, and in its place, *Teen Vogue* is now hosting a similar weekend event this year, but focused on activism instead, bringing together politicians and teen activists instead of designers and stylists.

I didn't have the realization until my junior year of college that I don't necessarily need to work in fashion. All this time trying to intern at fashion publications, running Syracuse University's on-campus fashion magazine as editor-in-chief and creating my own fashion blog was because that's what my magazines used to give me. It was my dream throughout high school to work at *Teen Vogue*, and while I am interested in fashion, what I really loved was the magazine and community that the magazine brought. Five years ago, every teen and women's magazine I read and cherished was focused on fashion. I thought that if I wanted to work there, I had better focus on that. But because of this drastic change in content, I want girls and young women to realize, hopefully sooner than I did, that magazines and journalism can be about anything and everything. I want them to have role models who write about anything and everything, just as I had my role models who wrote about fashion.

In its fashion days, *Teen Vogue* published a book called *The Teen Vogue Handbook: An Insider's Guide to Careers in Fashion*. With this project, that's what I'm going for. I want to channel the teen and young adult audience who wants a career guide, but wants to learn about all

kinds of jobs in journalism. *On the Record: Notes from 20 Powerful Women in Journalism* is my attempt to reach my younger self — a girl extremely passionate about working in media — for today's audience — girls who are smart, strong and should hear that they can do anything.

### **Experience and Skills**

I gained the skills necessary to produce this project as a result of my classes in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications and through my many internships and extracurricular experiences the past four years.

Perhaps my most important of these achievements is *Zipped*, SU's premier fashion and beauty magazine, which I joined freshman year as an assistant features editor. I also joined *Jerk*, an alternative magazine, as a web writer, and I added on *The Daily Orange* as a weekly style columnist my sophomore year, but *Zipped* was my main priority due to my huge interest in fashion and beauty at the time. After being promoted to features editor my sophomore year and managing editor my junior year, I was absolutely thrilled to be named editor-in-chief my senior year. I consider my issues as editor-in-chief of *Zipped* the culmination of everything I have learned the past four years. After months of putting together a staff, meticulously editing stories, choosing fashion and beauty looks, overseeing several photoshoots and holding production weekends to design and lay out the stories, all while also managing the website and public relations aspects of the brand, I could not be prouder of my final work for the magazine. Balancing all of that work gave me the skills needed to balance this Capstone project, which similarly had so many different components. As I interviewed women, edited the content,

designed and laid out all the pages, created a website and crafted a distribution plan, I took everything I learned from my time leading *Zipped*.

I also gained a wealth of knowledge from my internship experiences. Prior to Syracuse, I held a short high school internship with *Girls' Life* in Baltimore, where I wrote style articles for the website. Since that was one of my favorite magazines growing up, and I was still only a junior in high school at the time, that was a dream come true for me. After sophomore year of college, I held a role in my hometown interning for *Cincinnati Magazine*, where I learned the ins and outs of magazine writing and had stories published both online and in print.

My junior year, I took on the Newhouse NYC program in hopes of landing an internship with a national publication. To my surprise, I was offered two and began work at both *Us Weekly* magazine and the digital publication *Man Repeller*. At *Us Weekly*, I pitched ideas in daily meetings and wrote stories for the website, even covering red-carpet events and interviewing some of my favorite celebrities. This role gave me the expertise to interview the 20 women in my book, even some of the incredibly popular editors-in-chief who I view as celebrities themselves. At *Man Repeller*, I was responsible for writing and scheduling hundreds of social media posts and assisting with editorial responsibilities. I have since become a freelance writer for the site, reporting monthly stories on activism and other topics. This role has been pivotal in my realization that I do like to write about more than fashion, and it opened me up to see how a “fashion website” can truly do it all and do it well.

My junior spring semester was spent interning for the local Syracuse chapter of the nonprofit Girls on the Run, which is a program that teaches girls confidence and leadership through a creative running curriculum. It was such a fantastic experience to be able to help empower young girls in the Syracuse community through the program, for which I directed all

social media efforts. This experience is also part of the reason that I want to donate my book to Syracuse schools. I have met some of the incredible young women in the area who don't always have the resources that I had growing up. I hope that I can teach some of them about journalism and give them the motivation to want to try it out, especially with the possibility of Newhouse so close to them.

Most recently, I interned for *NYLON* Magazine, where I also practiced writing topics outside of fashion and beauty. Many of the connections I made at *NYLON* were helpful when choosing subjects for my book, and I even interviewed the editor-in-chief as one of my book interviews.

### **Choices**

Originally, I planned to include 50 interviews in the book. I soon realized that while that would have been an extreme amount of work for me to complete in the time that I had, it also would have been too much for my audience. I think that 20 different careers and publications are plenty for the reader to get a taste of many different jobs in a book that is more digestible than it would be with many more interviews.

I also wanted to make the book very skimmable because the typical high school and/or college student is usually busy and easily distracted. To achieve this artistically, for each interview, I made the question bold and colored to make it stand out. I hand-annotated the answers with underlines, circles and stars to highlight the most important things and give it a note-taking feel.

It is important that my design captivates the audience, so I tried to create a really clean and simple design aesthetic that matches what is popular with teens today. I also worked with an illustrator, who created really colorful, fun, appealing depictions of each woman interviewed in line drawings. The line drawings match the note-taking aesthetic through their look, and the decision to use these illustrations throughout made the book cohesive. I had originally thought about asking each woman for a photo of herself and including those in the book, but I quickly realized that the different types of photo quality and backgrounds made for a messy look. The illustrations still communicate what the women look like on a more abstract level and entice the reader to open the book with the collage of them on the cover.

When choosing women to interview, I kept in mind four things: a variety of magazines and publication topics, a focus on digital and new landscapes, a variety of ages and career levels and diversity in race and ethnicity. Looking back reflectively, I think I should have included people with better diversity of college backgrounds, as about half of my subjects are Newhouse alumni. Choosing Newhouse alumni made it easier for me to secure interviews and find the women, as many were recommended to me by professors, but it meant that it wasn't as diverse as it could have been. I also wish that I had included some women in TV and broadcasting journalism careers. Because my personal academic focus is on magazine and digital journalism and social media, I primarily chose women in those fields, but really journalism encompasses more than that. If I were to continue the project, I would add in more types of journalism. However, I still think that I did achieve a good amount of variety and diversity, and I am proud of what I created.

As far as the content for the interviews, I wanted to focus on the nitty-gritty of their jobs: how they come up with ideas, what their challenges are and how they overcome them and what



they feel are their accomplishments. Delving into these topics, rather than just asking simply what they do and how they got there, is more personal. I figure that anyone can search their name and find out where they went to college, what they majored in and their basic career path from LinkedIn, but not everyone can know how they actually channel their creative energy and problem-solving skills to thrive in their challenging jobs. These are things I would have loved to know about them when I was first learning about journalism, and there are things they said that I still find useful today. I am proud of the fact that the advice given in the book can be applicable to people just learning about journalism, people studying and interning in journalism and even people who are already years-in in their journalism careers.

I decided that I wanted the website to be simple and beautiful, showing the illustrations and the content of the book, but on the internet. This will provide access for people who cannot afford to buy a print copy of the book, so they will still receive the same experience. The project was never about me making any money selling the book; I simply want to share the project with as many people as possible. I think the website will allow me to do this.

## **Meaning**

There are so many takeaways that I got from this project, including three main pieces of advice from the women I interviewed.

The first is that ideas are all around us. Ideas have always been a central part of this book and something I wanted to write about. A former professor, Colleen Sullivan, once told me that in the magazine industry, ideas are everything. When I asked every woman how she

brainstormed ideas, I got a mix of responses about the actual process, but there was one thing in common among most. Ideas come from everywhere, from reading, watching, talking and interacting with the world and people around us. There's no magic formula to coming up with a good idea, but everyone can do it through just living life. When I came up with the idea for this project, I thought about what I wished I had when I was younger, but the specific ideas came from talking it out with those around me.

The second piece of advice is that the changing industry means types of jobs are changing and so are the necessary skills. I think most people know that the internet and social media has caused quite the conundrum for print magazines, but even beyond that, everything in the world is changing so fast now that it's hard to keep up. It was refreshing to hear from the professionals I spoke to that they're sometimes scared too, but we just have to play it by ear and stay flexible and keep learning.

Finally, it was reassuring to hear it reiterated that every single one of the women has had a unique path, and most started small or at places they never envisioned. As I begin my job hunt, I need to keep their advice in my head and understand that there is no wrong path.

My hope for this project is that it inspires young women to want to learn about journalism and media. We need more intelligent, witty, kind, powerful women in the industry to represent us fairly. If there are any girls or women of any age out there that read my book or website and decide that they can do it, that would be my proudest achievement.

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