on officialdom and official process," says Barbara Cochran, former head of the CBS News Washington bureau. "Ninety-nine percent of the people we covered were men, and white men at that."

Nowadays, says Cochran, who is president of RTNDA, the canvas is much bigger, partly because of the influence of women: "We don't just do process stories. We do stories that tell you more about what it's like to live in our society. Having women bring their experience into play has made a big difference."

When Andrew Tyndall, who publishes a newsletter that tracks network news, recently compared "CBS Evening News" broadcasts from November 1968 and November 1998, he found striking differences. In the earlier era, he says, the subjects tended to be limited to government, politics and the Vietnam War, and it was unusual for a woman to be a news source (a report about the Catholic Church's policy on contraception, for instance, quoted only men).

By the late 1990s, subjects that had all but been ignored earlier - abortion, child care, sexual discrimination in the workplace - were part of the serious news agenda, he said. Women also regularly reported the news, and were often interviewed on it.

Tyndall found something even more remarkable when he looked at Elizabeth Vargas' brief tenure as lead anchor of ABC's "World News Tonight." (Vargas went solo after newsmen Bob Woodruff sustained serious injuries in Iraq three weeks after being named co-anchor.) The hallmark of the Vargas era, he said, was an increased emphasis on "sex and family" issues, those presumably with a strong appeal to women. In March and April, for example, ABC devoted more time to stories about contraception, abortion, autism, prenatal development, childbirth, postpartum depression and child pornography than CBS' and NBC's nightly newscasts combined, Tyndall found. Since Charles Gibson replaced Vargas, the number of such "family" stories has tailed off on "World News Tonight."

In a somewhat ironic coda, Vargas stepped down in May, citing her pregnancy and family responsibilities.

Gumbert, the consultant, worries that anchor chairs and reporting ranks might become so female-dominated that male viewers will be alienated. He says, "The average viewer wants balance, both in the kinds of stories that are reported and who appears on camera. They want to see a reflection of their community. Once that balance gets pushed too far in one direction, then the editorial decisionmaking will change significantly, too. It can't help not to."

That day might not be right around the corner. Despite women's gains, men still overwhelmingly are in charge of stations' news operations. But that seems destined to change, too, the more women dominate the middle-management tier from which top executives usually are hired.

WTTG's Green says, "... A woman may be a sharper judge of (news) content than a man. When you're a female manager, you're required to have the skill sets of both a man and a woman. As a woman ... in a male-dominated business, you have to develop traits like aggression and competitiveness. But a woman has traits that a man might not develop."

But that is not an argument for going it alone, she says: "There are times when I'm very glad there are lots of men in the room. It takes a community of brains to make the right decisions."