“Journalism,” Oscar Wilde once said, is “organized gossip.” Indeed, the foundation of newsgathering can be found in rumor, gossip, and innuendo. In journalism school students are taught to seek out gossip, because, with the right verification, whispered information can become the heart of a front-page news story. Gossip has been part of American journalism from the colonial days. Yet, because gossip is a form of communication most commonly associated with women and typically understood to be of little value, its importance was often overlooked by both journalists and historians of journalism. The dichotomy of “hard” news versus “soft” news contributed to this situation, as gossip fell into the category of “soft news.” This dichotomy defined what topics were newsworthy. Traditionally, the newspaper industry gave more value to hard news: news based on institutions in the public sphere, such as the government, economy, and law. Soft news was what remained—feature stories about home and private life.

Communication scholars have noted that soft news “does not necessitate timely publication and has a low level of substantive informational value (if at all), i.e. gossip, human interest stories, offbeat events.” “Soft news? Hard news?” asked journalism historian Kay Mills. “The sexual implications fairly leap from the page.” As a result of the gendered dichotomy of hard versus soft news, gossip was marginalized to the so-called women’s pages of newspapers.
Although recent scholarship has written women such as Hollywood’s Louella Parsons and Hedda Hopper into the historical record of US gossip reporting, such work remains to be done for the female journalists writing for the women’s pages of America’s smaller, regional newspapers—reporters often dismissively referred to as “newshens.” This chapter examines the role of women journalists and gossip in the women’s pages of American newspapers in the 1950s and 1960s, looking at several genres: the advice column, society and wedding news, and the political column. “Quilted news,” a mix of so-called soft and hard news, is central here. This quilted approach reveals how race and gender roles were changing in this period, and, at many metropolitan newspapers in the post-World War II years, how forward-thinking women’s page editors made changes both shocking and subtle that reflected wider social change and transformed their readership.

The Women’s Pages and So-Called Soft News

Women’s pages were a staple of American journalism from the 1880s through the 1970s. Joseph Pulitzer pioneered the women’s pages in the late 1800s as a way to increase female readership and advertising revenue. One of the first women’s pages began on November 25, 1882 in the *Milwaukee Journal*—nine days after the first issue of the newspaper in a section titled: “Women and the Home—HER DAILY PAGE.” Content included recipes and wedding notices and covered a woman’s place in the home, her role as a wife and mother, and, most importantly, her role as a consumer. From the late 1880s to the 1970s, much “soft news” was located in the women’s pages—sometimes referred to as the society sections. The content has been described as the four F’s: family, fashion, food, and furnishings. There were stories about weddings, women’s club news, and advice columns. From the turn of the century through the 1920s and 1930s, the soft news of household tips, recipes, and fashion images ruled.

These sections also provided jobs for the growing numbers of female journalists. During World War II, women were hired at newspapers in large numbers. For example, the United Press employed 100 women during wartime, which equaled 20 percent of its staff. For the first time, female reporters moved out of the women’s pages in significant numbers and covered the hard news beats of police, courts, and politics. They returned to the women’s pages during peacetime, but took that hard news experience with them.