Dr. Donna Allen, born in Petosky, Michigan on August 19, 1920, passed away on July 19, 1999. She was a pioneer feminist, a civil liberties, civil rights and peace activist, a historian, and a writer and editor who in her later years took up an innovative campaign to organize women to create a more democratic communications system.

In 1972, Dr. Allen founded the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, which still continues today under the directorship of her daughter Dr. Martha Leslie Allen, in Washington, D.C. From 1972 to 1987, the elder Allen edited the Media Report to Women, while Martha Allen edited the annual Directory of Women's Media (1974 to 1989). Together, these two publications reported on the ways that women were creating their own media or making inroads into the commercial media. Dr. Allen constantly wrote articles and pamphlets and gave speeches, not only across the U.S. but in other parts of the world, on the need to restructure mass media on the principle that everyone should have an equal voice. Working long hours and without salary, she housed the Women's Institute in her home and she and Martha raised much of their own income by typesetting.

Dr. Allen insisted that equal access to one's fellow citizens provides the first principle for a democracy. Through her own experiences as an activist and educator during the 1940s, 50s and 60s, she discovered how the mass media trivialized, ignored, distorted and otherwise misinformed the public about crucial issues such as national health insurance, labor rights, and racism, sexism, and war. She documented the ways money and white men typically rule the airwaves and dominate production and dissemination of the printed word in the commercial mass media. She dedicated the latter part of her life to restructuring mass communications so that the media is no longer controlled by a wealthy few.

Documenting how the dominant media stereotypes, distorts, or ignores women, minorities, and others outside its wealthy circle of owners, Dr. Allen searched for ways for women to create a new system. She did not try to prescribe how it should be created, but reported on the many ways women sought to speak for themselves instead of being spoken for by others. The Women's Institute organized international conferences and teleconferences of women and found ways to help women create their own means of communication. Operating on almost no budget, by the time of her death Dr. Allen and her associates had helped to create a significant network of women dedicated to creating a new kind of communications system.

The Women's Institute's founding statement, now adhered to by some 500 women associates in communications and academia, holds that "for the right of 'freedom of the press' to be meaningful, there must be a realistic means of exercising it -- for all of us, not just for the multi-millionaires among us." Such a democratic proposition seems like common sense, yet it runs counter to the increasing monopolization of the media by corporate elites. Simply changing the way the mass media cover news would not solve the problem that restricted ownership poses for democracy. According to Dr. Allen, "It is not enough that those who own the national media attempt to report the information from the diverse elements of society, to speak for them. By definition, democracy assumes that all citizens vote, speak and participate politically as equals."

Dr. Allen's journal reported on the many efforts people who have been left out of ownership and access to the media have organized to gain access. But more importantly, she encouraged and supported women who tried to create their own journals, broadcast, internet, and other means of communications, and tried to put the idea of a communications system accessible to everyone on the agenda for activists. In contrast to profit-oriented journalism based on control by reporters and editors, and on sensationalism, personal attacks, and repetition of a few stories while ignoring a vast range of important things people are doing and saying, she formulated feminist principles for more respectful and democratic communications which did not attack others and let people express their own point of view and information directly to the public. She believed a women's media operating on such principles could nurture a more peaceful and just world order.

Dr. Allen's consuming preoccupation with creating a media that allowed people to speak for themselves grew out of her own lifetime of activism and experiences as a woman who broke many of the boundaries of her generation. Allen was born in Petosky, Michigan in 1920 to a hard-working family of German immigrants, who stressed education and the idea that all people were entitled to equal rights and equal respect. They applied these ideas to women as well as men. Unlike many women of her generation, Allen earned a bachelor's degree, in history and economics from Duke University in 1943. She married the same year, and became involved in government and labor issues during World War II. She ultimately had four children (Dana, Indra, Martha, and Mark), yet continued her education with a Master's degree in economics from the University of Chicago in 1952, and taught classes at the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University from 1953-55. She and her husband Russell Allen, who worked as a labor economist and educator for individual unions, the AFL-CIO, and universities, moved to Washington, D.C. in 1957, where she also earned a Ph.D. in history from Howard University in 1971.

Despite the fact that Dr. Allen had worked as a legislative assistant to Illinois Senator Paul H. Douglas, written briefs for labor boards during the Truman administration, and in 1965 published Fringe Benefits: Wages or Social Obligations? with Cornell University Press, she felt that, largely because she was a woman, her ideas were discounted or ignored. She experienced the anti-communism of the 1950s directly when she spoke out against the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 and criticized CIA counter-revolutions in Guatemala and elsewhere. When she became one of the founders of Women's Strike for Peace, opposed to militarism and nuclear weapons, she came under more serious attack. In 1964, the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities subpoenaed her and two other peace leaders. Tried in a U.S. district court, they received suspended sentences of four to twelve months in jail for contempt when they refused to testify before HUAC in closed hearings (the sentence was overturned in 1966).

Attempts to silence Allen only caused her to redouble her efforts to reach her fellow citizens. She criss-crossed the country throughout the 1960s to speak against militarism and war for Women's Strike for Peace and for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and against HUAC as well. Her home in Cleveland Park became a center for civil rights and anti-war organizers. She wrote literature supporting the black freedom struggle in the South and experienced brutal confrontation with military police at the Pentagon protest with Dr. Benjamin Spock and others. She ran as a peace delegate to the national convention of the Republican Party and the National Conference for a New Politics in Chicago in 1968. A committed civil libertarian, she worked from 1965 to 1974 as the legislative director for the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation, which succeeded in abolishing HUAC and stopping the anti-civil liberties criminal code reform bill of the Nixon Administration. Her three daughters and a son also became active participants in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

As a labor economist and as an activist, Dr. Allen found herself and her colleagues frustrated at every turn by a mass media which typically failed to cover or distorted events and rarely allowed people like herself to speak directly to the public they were trying to reach. Allen told professor of journalism Maurice Beasley that “in the year ’68, I decided that this was hopeless, that everything we did was undone by the media, as fast or faster than we could do it.” The mostly male owned and dominated mass media frequently ridiculed women activists, as at the demonstration against the 1968 Miss America pageant. Dr. Allen attended, distorted the media as the misguided action of misfit "bra burners." She found that even liberal and movement publications did not take women seriously, leading her to create and edit Media Report to
Women organize the **Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press**.

Dr. Allen did not claim to have a prescription for how to create a more democratic media. Her main effort was to help people to see the necessity to do so. In her dissertation at Howard University, she examined how a largely Republican-owned mass media sabotaged national health insurance legislation after World War II, derailing a program supported by the majority of working people in favor of a profit-oriented system that still excludes many from coverage. In other research, she documented the ownership of the media by big banks and other corporations which made a mockery of media claims to "mirror" society. She examined possibilities for an extension of the Federal Communications Commission's "fairness doctrine" requiring broadcast media on public airwaves to allow greater public access and suggested ways the print media could allow column space to average people instead of inserting the authority of editors and reporters between them and the public.

As a democratic pluralist, however, her preferred method was to outnumber and outcommunicate the media monopoly through a proliferation of broadcast, print, artistic, and internet outlets. However, she chose to do it. Dr. Allen's goal was to get us to think about the importance of democratizing and opening up our means of communicating with each other. Otherwise, she felt there would be little hope for the new kind of society of equality she and many of her associates over the years sought to build. Socialists would say that a democratic media is not possible until capitalism is radically altered or overturned. Dr. Allen concluded that we would never be able to significantly change the social order until we restructure communications so that ideas can be fairly heard, allowing people to think and speak for themselves.

Dr. Allen not only provided a model of respectful activism but helped to foster a movement to make democracy a functioning reality by equalizing the power of communication. She struggled heroically to popularize the need for a democratic and feminist communications system. Her nearly thirty years of work has seen a growing influence of women and a growing awareness of the threat to democracy posed by a media monopoly of the wealthy few. The idea of a respectful journalism and the need for a new and more democratic means of mass communication still seems far from accomplishment. Dr. Allen, however, saw in new print publications, and the internet, cable television, and other new communication technologies increasingly greater possibilities for letting people organize and speak for themselves. As anyone who knew her can attest, she was nothing if not optimistic about the possibilities for changing the world.

**************

Bibliography:


---

**Dr. Michael Honey** teaches labor, ethnic, gender and African- American studies and U.S. history at the University of Washington Tacoma, and is an Associate of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press.