

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN GENDER AND HISTORY

Women and the Media

Feminism and Femininity in
Britain, 1900 to the Present

Edited by
Maggie Andrews
and Sallie McNamara

ROUTLEDGE



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Women and the Media

The media have played a significant role in the contested and changing social position of women in Britain since the 1900s. They have facilitated feminism by both providing discourses and images from which women can construct their identities, and offering spaces where hegemonic ideas of femininity can be reworked. This volume is intended to provide an overview of work on Broadcasting, Film and Print Media from 1900, while appealing to scholars of History and Media, Film and Cultural Studies.

This edited collection features tightly focused and historically contextualised case studies which showcase current research on women and media in Britain since the 1900s. The case studies explore media directed at a particularly female audience such as *Woman's Hour*, and magazines such as *Vogue*, *Woman* and *Marie Claire*. Women who work in the media, issues of production, and regulation are discussed alongside the representation of women across a broad range of media from early 20th-century motorcycling magazines, Page 3 and regional television news.

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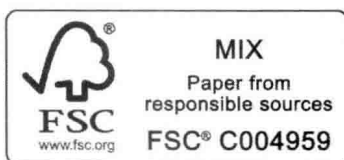
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Introduction

Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara

This volume seeks to encourage interdisciplinary work across the boundaries of History and Media, Film and Cultural Studies. Its aim is to encourage those studying Women's History to pay greater attention to considering the role media has played in the contested and changing social position of women in Britain since the Edwardian era. There is a range of academic work on women and contemporary media (Byerly 2005; Thornham 2007; Bell and Williams 2009; Waters 2011) to which we hope to provide a greater awareness of the historical precedents of media and film texts and their production and consumption practices. The volume does not seek to write a history of the British media, as these already exist (see, for example, Williams 2009), but rather to encourage study of the media to become an integral part of the study of women in the twentieth century. In so doing it builds upon the greater interest in Cultural History within Women's History in the last 20 years (see, for example: Noakes 1997; Langhamer 2000; Andrews and Talbot 2000; Rappaport, 2001; Oram 2007). Similarly, we want to acknowledge the historical work that has been done analysing particular media genres, and how they may reflect, shape and articulate culturally constructed gender discourses. For example, Margaret Beetham's research on women's magazines in the long nineteenth century (1996) used magazines to explore shifting notions of class, education and employment in the period. Alternatively, Sue Harper's analysis of women in British cinema (2000) explored not only the representation of women in cinema since the 1930s, but also the influences of those working in the film industry on these representations and discussed the agency of women who were employed in film production. Building upon such foundations this volume brings together a range of work which works across the disciplines of Women's History and Media Studies.

This volume seeks to embrace, with varying degrees of success, the very real problems that interdisciplinary work involves; that is, dealing with twin axes of uncertainty. When the contested terrain of historical analysis meets the multiple readings that media and film texts offer, a complex process of analysis is required. There is a tendency when historians utilise media as a source for research for them to ignore the innate polysemia

of popular texts, the multiple layers and contradictory meanings that a magazine article, newspaper front page or film present; instead, they may misinterpret 'a' reading of the text for 'the' reading of the text's meaning. Similarly, those with a background in Media, Film and Cultural Studies may slip into an assumption that there is one history of an era, that it is possible to gain a tangible understanding of, for example, the Second World War, which can contextualise a particular media text, production process or audience engagement. Interdisciplinary work requires scholars to engage with both the multiple histories of an era, to acknowledge that history involves competing explanations of fragments of evidence, and that 'a' history is rarely everybody's history.

The twentieth century witnessed a wide range of changes to the political, economic, social and cultural lives of women in Britain (see, for example, Alexander 1994; Bruley 1999; Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2001; Rowbotham 2012). Many facets of the everyday life of women in the twenty-first century would have seemed unattainable dreams to most of our great-grandmothers: state funded nursery places, opportunities to attend universities, National Health Service-funded abortions, automatic washing machines or sexual discrimination legislation, for example. There is much historical debate over what is responsible for such changes, their relative importance and even how widespread women's access to them is. For example, it is open to debate how significant the political enfranchisement of women has been (Thane 2010) compared to changes in employment or educational opportunities. Some historians suggest the introduction of birth control in the post-war world has resulted in sexual liberation (Cook 2005), while some of us are less convinced. More recently, some women have begun to question whether greater involvement in paid work outside the home, albeit frequently on far from equal terms with men, whilst offering greater economic independence, has perhaps increased the challenges and pressures in the everyday lives of women. Interdisciplinary research needs to utilise new source material and different theoretical and analytical frameworks to engage with these debates.

If there has been change in twentieth century women's lives, there has also been a high degree of continuity; women retain many of their domestic and caring responsibilities, and on average they earn less than men, own less property, and hold fewer positions of power. Those changes which have occurred in the lives of women have been fragmented, inconsistent, and sometimes temporary in nature. Arguably, women's experiences in the twentieth and early twenty-first century have been framed by shifting and competing discourses of both feminisms and femininities; discourses which are marked by both changes and continuities. Discursive constructions of femininity have been constantly contested, reworked, dislodged, stretched and re-interpreted; this contestation and reworking of discursive formations has to a significant degree taken place within popular culture (Hall 1981). Analysis of the production, consumption and textual construction

of media and film texts has the potential to shed light on the twin pulls of change and continuity.

The greater involvement of women in the public sphere in the twentieth century perhaps precipitated an increase in media texts which were produced by women, featured representations of women or were aimed at a female audience. The media became in the twentieth century a significant area of women's leisure, its consumption offering spaces and places in which women could gain education and information, grab a little time for themselves, interact with others and feel part of a community. Furthermore, media texts have provided the lexicon of images and ideas from which women construct their sense of themselves, who they are, and their identity, offering spaces where hegemonic ideas of femininity are reworked and feminism is facilitated. Those campaigning for changes in the social, economic and political position of women in society have always found spaces and places in which to articulate their views in the media; the Edwardian Suffragettes were exceptionally media-savvy. Their campaigns, marches, protests and militant activities were always designed to gain maximum coverage in the daily newspapers. When Emily Wilding Davies stepped out onto the racecourse during the Epsom Derby on June 4, 1913, she did so at Tattenham corner in full view of the plethora of press and film cameras. She created a media event as her carefully managed funeral did 10 days later (Andrews 2011). The suffragettes took advantage of the widespread mass newspaper readership established at the turn of the century by the introduction of mass-circulation dailies for the working class—*The People* (1881), *Daily Mail* (1896), *Daily Express* (1900) and *Daily Mirror* (1903). The media has played a significant role in the contested and changing social position of women in Britain since the Edwardian era and yet has arguably tended to be side-lined within many areas of Women's History, despite Maria DiCenzo and Lucy Delap's interesting study of the suffrage periodicals (2010).

Where Historians have used media texts as source material, their emphasis has been on broadsheet newspapers. The longevity of *The Times* (first published in 1785 as *The Daily Universal Register*) and the speed with which its archives were first placed on microfiche and then digitised has perhaps led to an over-reliance by historians on a newspaper which spoke on behalf of and to only a small percentage of the population. For the historian of women, magazines and popular newspapers may be of greater interest; it is perhaps these 'mental chocolate boxes' (Winship 1987) which gave an insight into the anxieties and dreams which shape women's consciousness. Margaret Beetham's work on women's magazines draws attention to the ways magazines at the *fin de siècle* located the new femininity of consumption within the dominant ideology of the domestic (Beetham 1996). The popularity of the address to middle-class women readers is attested to as the first edition of the new monthly, *Woman at Home* (1893–1920), sold 100,000 copies; the publishers had anticipated 30,000 would make it viable (Beetham 1996, 158–159).

Twentieth century historians have the benefit of a plethora of visual and aural sources to complement print media unavailable to those who studied earlier periods. Since the Lumière brothers first exhibited at the Polytechnic Hall in London's Regent Street in 1896, a wide range of film texts have been produced and preserved and enabled work such as that of Christine Gledhill to illuminate the portrayal of the changing role of women in early twentieth century film (2003). The emergence of radio broadcasting in the 1920s and television in the 1930s has left a further range of material to be studied, including scripts and programme files from the early days, and an increasing number of snippets or complete programmes in later years. These have provided key sources utilised for example by Sian Nicholas in her exploration of Home Front broadcasting in wartime (1996) and Andrews's recent work on domesticity and broadcasting (2012).

Faced with this plethora of material, and a growing awareness that it is untenable to suggest that a particular film, radio programme or magazine is a reflection of either 'reality' or women's experiences at particular point in time, historians may well be stymied as to how to use media texts as a historical source. In an academic milieu shaped by a post-modernist turn at the end of the twentieth century (Morgan 2006; Morgan, Jenkins, and Muslow 2007), there is a tendency to focus on discourse analysis and this extends to media and film texts. There are a number of chapters which are informed by this approach within this volume. Indeed, analysis of language and discourses has been shaped by Cultural Studies and can be identified in a range of women's and gender history written at the end of the twentieth century and in the new millennium. It is an approach which owes much to those who have undertaken interdisciplinary work across the boundaries of literature and history (Beauman 1983; Humble 2001; Light 1991; Showalter 1987, 2009) and prioritises analysis of the text. Privileging the text is perhaps problematic when looking at film, television and radio. Magazines and newspapers are in many respects social media, part of everyday life, enjoyed in the discussion and debate they stimulate with friends, the communities they offer symbolic entry to, as well as via the pleasures of the text. For Women's History an analysis of media which looks beyond the text is important to maintain its relationship with some of its antecedents, for example the social history movement, adult education and public history.

The academic analysis of media texts in Britain came to the fore in the 1970s, influenced by the development of Cultural Studies and in particular the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) which, founded in 1964, developed analysis of culture in relation to political structures and social hierarchies. It paid significant attention to the study of the media. Early work at CCCS, such as Dorothy Hobson's seminal study of the audience of the popular daytime soap opera *Crossroads* (1964–1988), explored the use of media texts in women's everyday lives (1982). It was perhaps overshadowed by other academic approaches, particularly in Film

Studies, which placed a strong emphasis on representation and its effects, which followed the publication of Laura Mulvey's influential work 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975). Mulvey argued that within the institutional framework of mainstream Hollywood cinema in the 1930s and 1940s women were objectified by the male gaze. This argument has been over-simplified and somewhat over-utilised ever since, to the detriment of many other areas of analysis.

By the end of the 1990s, the initial focus on representation in examining women's complex relationship to the media had been replaced by a range of more theoretically nuanced approaches. Richard Johnson's development of the Cultural Circuit (Johnson 1986) as analytical tool was taken up by the Sociology department at the Open University (duGay 1996) and later by Penny Summerfield as a historian looking at wartime film (2008). This approach suggests that to understand how media and cultural artefacts create meaning it is necessary to consider how meaning is shaped by practices of: production, consumption, identity, regulation and representation. Arguably, however, much analytical work tends to slip towards greater emphasis on one or more of these factors as can be seen in this volume.

In recent years, analysis of media texts has leant more towards the use of a communication studies model which emphasises the inter-relationship of production, text and audience (Evans and Hesmondhalgh 2005). The questions and approaches needed for consideration of each of these diffuse and contradictory areas needs to be considered by historians. For example, what is the significance of individual and institutional influences on the production of a media or film text? How have they framed its content, meaning, reception and visual style? Examples of this can be seen in this volume. Consideration of audiences and their processes of consuming texts also requires attention to which identity groups, when, where and how texts were consumed. Historians looking at print media tend to analyse it as a whole, examining the content methodically, sometimes focussing on a particular area such as the letters page, but the reader would not necessarily have done so. Readers may engage with the headlines, the front page and back page or particular features which address them only, yet how such issues can be brought into the analytical framework by historians analysing the text remains complex. The audience research, for example, that the BBC undertook with listeners of early radio talks in the inter-war years or *Woman's Hour* in the post-war era emphasises the very varied responses that media texts have evoked. The multiplicity of interpretations and engagements that women had towards media texts in the past is a reminder that national histories are not individual women's histories. Indeed, the 1990s working class women, lesbian and bisexual women, women of colour or those from a range of marginalised communities emphasised how problematic it can be to generalise femininity and the category of 'woman'. However, although the overarching certainties of feminist scholarship in the seventies and eighties may have now gone, this volume suggests that