



Margaret Colpitts as "Joan Marshall" of CBC Halifax, on the air with announcer Carl McCaull and technician Ross McNaughton.

Beyond Bylines

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MEDIA WORKERS AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN CANADA

Barbara M. Freeman

faith or a political conviction which wouldn't stand the test of a great crisis, and which had to be discarded whenever an emergency arose I would rise up and take it out and bury it in a nice deep grave, and

Icelandic women who worked so hard to get the vote and to the Polish and Ruthenian and other women who took a keener interest in the suffrage petition than many of our British women.

Mrs. McClung also overlooked the fact that unless a discrimination is to be made between provinces it would mean dis-franchising the foreign born women in Manitoba and British Columbia, always a difficult thing to do and a thankless task for any government to undertake.

I am sorry to have to disagree unalterably in this matter with Mrs. McClung who has done and is still doing such splendid work for women, but having pointed out from the public platform, time and time again the tyranny of unrepresenta-

another woman of whatsoever.

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Beyond Bylines

Media Workers and Women's
Rights in Canada

BARBARA M. FREEMAN



WILFRID LAURIER UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Beyond Bylines



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Dr. Ute Lischke, Email: ulischke@wlu.ca
75 University Avenue West
Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5
Canada
Phone: 519-884-0710
Fax: 519-884-8307

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of essays considers the ways in which several of Canada's women journalists, broadcasters and other media workers reached beyond the glory of their personal bylines to advocate for some of the most controversial women's goals of their eras. To do so, they had to negotiate the media's institutional boundaries with their gender stereotypes and expectations of them as women who worked in the field. Here I use the term *byline* in its broadest sense, as a marker of a woman's media identity, whether she was using a pen name, an on-air alias, or her real name. Some of my subjects adopted feminized pen names and broadcast identities that appealed to their editors, advertisers and conventional audiences. While a few of those same journalists could write about bettering women's lives only in limited ways, others were more adept at subversively using their media work to further the feminist cause. There were also those women who, proudly claiming their own names, refused to conform altogether, openly and defiantly challenging the gender expectations of their day and presenting alternative ways of being female.

These essays comprise a series of snapshots, or case studies. Each of the women profiled had to have the courage to express her own convictions, given that there was some force at work, and sometimes several, to keep her silent: the laws of church and state, political backlash, patriotism, peer pressure and, always, gender and racial prejudice and the social niceties that were designed to keep rebellious females in check. These were all women one could label variously as a "heroine," a "role-model," a "character," "eccentric," "driven," "difficult," or "outrageous," all the words we ascribe to women who dare to fight for change. Any one of them might be conservative or liberal or radical; charming or reserved or cantankerous;

self-reflective or stubborn or arrogant; generous or cautious or nasty. Often it was their anger at the ways in which women's lives and work were devalued that prompted them to speak out. Sometimes their courage failed them and they bowed to editorial, advertising or other institutional influences, and at other times they swallowed their fears and sprang free of these constraints regardless of the consequences. What is important to this study is not their lapses or successes as much as their struggles to use the media to persuade women that a better day should come, if not for them, at least for their daughters, granddaughters and nieces. For these women in the media, women's rights talk went beyond legislative amendments to include more equitable institutional policies and practices as well as fundamental changes in social and cultural attitudes.

Media historian Hanno Hardt has coined the very useful term *media worker*,¹ which applies to my subjects because they performed different functions related to news of women and their concerns at different times. Each of them was engaged, to varying degrees, in those lively tensions among political activism, freedom of expression and the demands of the commercial or government-sponsored media work of her time and place. Some of the essays in this book are revisionist in nature, re-examining the journalism of women who were well known. The other chapters cover new ground with studies of media workers who have not yet found a place in the canon of journalism studies or women's history but whose contributions to the advancement of women have been pivotal.

My perspective on them is "bio-critical" and interdisciplinary, combining biography, discourse analysis of their work, the journalism studies tradition within media history and women's history. Biographical information allows us, in the words of Canadian historians Magda Fahrni, Suzanne Morton and Joan Sangster, to "secure a window into a certain historical era, understand unusual or distinctive women who stood apart in their time or explore key themes in feminist history."² Discourse analysis interrogates their words so that their intentions can be understood but also investigates the gendered media language and images of their social milieus, such as photographs and cartoons, as Dutch communications scholar Liesbet van Zoonen has explained.³ The cultures of the specific print, audio and visual media in which they worked circumscribed their efforts and necessarily had an impact on how much they were able to reveal of themselves and how hard they were able to fight for social change. For that reason, my analysis considers the "journalisms" of different institutions, with their own gender dynamics, political agendas and means of financial survival in particular eras.

This approach reflects current discussions about the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the scholarly study of journalism in general, and women in the media in particular. Barbie Zelizer, a leading

American analyst of journalism studies, believes that there should be more cross-fertilization between that field and other academic disciplines, the better to appreciate how important journalism has been to communication within society. In *Taking Journalism Seriously*, she notes that scholars have studied it mainly as a profession, an institution and a set of practices; as textual expression; and in reference to the people who produce it—all useful approaches, but none of them definitive. When any one of them is married with another discipline—for example, sociology, history, language studies, political science or cultural studies—our understanding of the terms *journalism* and *journalists* becomes all the more complex.⁴

In Canada, media history has expanded in the last decade, in line with increasing interest the field, taking a broader view of the connections between journalism and the economy, politics, technology and culture. In the 1990s, most of the literature on print media fell into several fairly distinct categories, which William J. Buxton and Catherine McKercher defined as “historical overviews, first-person accounts, biographies, accounts of particular newspapers or institutions, and focused thematic studies.”⁵ We are short of new historical overviews, but perhaps that is because we are still recovering much of the detail. The current list includes autobiographies from veteran journalists such as Anthony Westell and biographies of prominent media icons, such as A.B. McKillop’s well-received study of Pierre Berton, the late journalist, broadcaster and popular historian.⁶ Communication scholars Florian Sauvageau and David Pritchard have produced a French-language demographic overview of Canadian newsrooms at the turn of the 21st century, while Catherine McKercher has opened up new ground with her study of unions, past and present, in *Newsworkers Unite*.⁷ Media historians have produced important new historical research on media institutions as well—Gene Allen on the Canadian Press news agency,⁸ Marc Edge on the Pacific Press newspaper company and the media conglomerate CanWest Global,⁹ and Mary Vipond on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation during the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁰ Recent thematic overviews include Russell Johnston’s study of advertising and the media in Canada;¹¹ Cecil Rosner’s history of a specific journalism practice, investigative reporting, in print and on the air;¹² and Dwayne Winseck’s analysis of the effects of technological change on the international business of media well before the term *globalization* was coined.¹³ Historian Ross Eaman has recently published his *Historical Dictionary of Journalism*, a useful tool for researchers in the field.¹⁴

While they provide important background on the history of the media, these books and articles do not extensively address women or gender issues, or discuss their place in the journalism studies canon. In her overview of the American scholarship on women in the media, historian Maurine Beasley called for a new interdisciplinary synthesis of women’s history in the media

that is not limited to the professional norms expected of male journalists in newsrooms, with their attendant emphasis on “journalistic objectivity.” Beasley’s model takes into account the interrelated “complexities of women’s social roles” in their personal lives, their activism and their media work. In order to accomplish this new synthesis, she advocated better use of autobiography and biography, oral history, archival research, studies of the organizations and feminist networks in which the journalists were involved, and social histories of women and the family. Those contextual considerations would lead to a deeper understanding of journalism that would be “more appropriate to women’s experience” and would encompass their efforts to convey to their audiences “informative material that has wide popular appeal” using different journalistic forms.¹⁵ She argues, “All women who have made use of journalistic techniques—gathering new information of current value and presenting it in various popular formats—have a claim to be studied as journalists, regardless of whether their primary mission has been to advocate, report, comment or entertain.”¹⁶

The work of my subjects reflected the real-life political, economic and social conditions that most women of their time and place experienced, as amply demonstrated by a number of Canadian historians of women and the family. They have studied women of different classes, ethnic and racial backgrounds, family relationships, working conditions and political perspectives.¹⁷ One of the key themes that tie this literature together is their insistence on women’s self-determination in the face of prejudices of all kinds,¹⁸ perspectives that apply to the media workers investigated here, as each chapter will reveal. Women’s history is also becoming more interdisciplinary, embracing the contributions of scholars from other fields, including sociology, political economy, the law and cultural studies.¹⁹

The ongoing historical research on women in the workforce is particularly germane to my study, but mainly in the context of middle-class or “white-collar” opportunities, which is where most media workers found their niche. As Joan Sangster observes in her recent scholarship on women working for wages, class formation is an integral factor in all their experiences, one that some historians either sideline or misunderstand, however, especially when intent on exploring other intersecting factors such as gender and race.²⁰ Most of the media workers in this study not only identified as middle class but assumed their audiences did as well, or were at least aspiring to a more comfortable material life. The more radical ones questioned standard liberal feminism assumptions, challenging capitalism and patriarchy and striving to bring to public attention the systemic social factors, such as sexism, homophobia and racism, that limited many women’s chances in life.

Whether they worked outside or inside the home, Canadian women engaged in a broad range of pro-woman activism in different eras, which

historians initially described as “waves” that peaked during certain time periods and around set goals. They recognize, however, that women still occupied themselves politically in a variety of ways in the lulls between the suffragist first wave, the “women’s liberation” second wave of the mid- to late 20th century,²¹ and a third, more diversity-conscious wave that has yet to coalesce politically behind specific goals or agendas. Furthermore, there have been overlaps in the activism and goals of each generation.²² As Cheryl Gosselin notes in her summary of the relevant academic studies, feminism is an “evolving intellectual tradition”²³ beyond a specific social movement, has embraced a broad range of political ideas and associations, and should take into account the contributions of women of different cultural and racial backgrounds who may not consider themselves “feminists” as such but are clearly committed to bettering women’s rights. The media workers in this study all held strong and very individual perspectives on the pressing issues of their day.

Much of the existing Canadian historical literature on women in the media is centred on the early women print journalists, and comprises books and articles that are important contributions to our understanding of their work. Because there are scholarly gaps in the literature, I will provide here a brief overview of the history of Canadian women in the media, with reference to the published studies that do exist. In her foundational history, *Women Who Made the News*, Marjory Lang considered the women journalists of the 1880s–1940s as gendered subjects who were usually given assignments deemed appropriate to their female roles. They gratefully regarded their admittance to the field as a new opportunity, even though their male colleagues did not consider their social columns and women’s pages real journalism and did not take them seriously.²⁴ In recent studies of some of these pioneers, literary and communication scholars in particular have become engaged in rhetorical analyses of their writing on a number of topics, not just women’s rights, in order to connect them to their broader cultural milieus. Literary scholar Janice Fiamengo, for example, deconstructs the rhetoric used by six early female journalists when they were writing or engaged in public speaking about topics that had political and cultural currency within and beyond the women’s pages. Sandra Gabriele, who interrogates the concepts of modernity and nationalism in the newspapers of the same era, explores the “gendered mobility” of two prominent women’s page editors, who publicly ventured beyond their domestic spheres into the cities and the countryside, figuratively bringing their readers with them. Biographer Peggy Martin has tracked down an elusive subject in her study of Lily Lewis, who did not succeed as a writer because of her tragic circumstances, a situation that tells us a lot about the demanding field of journalism for women in her day.²⁵ To date, historical research on media workers who were women of colour is limited. The best work includes Jane Rhodes’s

biography of Mary Ann Shadd Cary, who was the editor of a newspaper for the Black community in southern Ontario in the 1850s.²⁶

Other researchers are building on the strong connections between some of the journalists' work and their feminist activism in women's associations. The founding of the National Council of Women of Canada in 1893 and its local councils across the country organized mainly urban, middle-class representatives of various women's reform organizations under one umbrella.²⁷ The NCWC also embraced a number of women's business and professional groups, including, for a time, the members of the Canadian Women's Press Club. In those early years, a journalist's coverage of women's club activities was regarded as central to her training and career, not in conflict with it. She could simultaneously engage in and report on current debates about women's roles in society.²⁸ Although the CWPC was founded in 1904 as a national journalism craft association, the members of the Winnipeg branch, for example, were key promoters of women's provincial suffrage in Manitoba and later became engaged in the campaign for the federal vote as activists and journalists.²⁹ The journalists who produced the early women's magazines in central Canada were also taken by the suffrage campaign, as media historian Anne-Marie Kinahan reveals in her ongoing research into periodicals such as *Everywoman's World*.³⁰ Her findings support Maria Diconzo's spirited argument for including early women's publications as part and parcel of the journalism history canon,³¹ a perspective amply demonstrated by recent studies in Britain and the United States.³²

After the suffrage campaigns were over, women journalists became more intent on professional advancement and less interested in combining their writing with advocacy work, adopting the stance of "journalistic objectivity," even when reporting on women's associations such as the NCWC.³³ There is still much work to be done on the generations between the wars, but Lang's overview suggests that only about a dozen or so women journalists were able to extend their reach outside of the women's pages to cover general news, business, politics and, occasionally, foreign affairs. Several of them were feminist in that they believed in women's right to equal opportunity, but their views were not always reflected in the articles they wrote.³⁴ A number of others have always been difficult to track because they made their living as freelancers.³⁵ The women who worked in the new media of radio and later, television largely replicated their past experiences in print, most of them producing, hosting or reporting for programs aimed at women in the home.³⁶

Similarly, the editors of the few general circulation magazines for women in Canada generally stuck to conventional fare, reflecting women's traditional roles. In her study of *Chatelaine*, historian Valerie Korinek focused on the 1950s–1960s and the relationship the magazine cultivated with its female readers, many of whom were busy raising children in the suburbs.

During that period, a liberal feminist, Doris Anderson, became the editor, and used its pages to actively encourage Canadian women to become more involved in their own political, economic and social progress. Under Anderson's direction, *Chatelaine* began to tackle issues then considered highly controversial, such as abortion³⁷ and lesbianism,³⁸ and was a strong supporter of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (1967–1970), which produced a resounding, if somewhat flawed,³⁹ report recommending changes in the laws that discriminated against women at work and in the home. In *The Satellite Sex*, I recounted some of the struggles of the women's page and feature writers who were assigned to cover that federal inquiry, a national public airing of women's grievances that resonated with them personally and professionally, confined, as most of them still were, to the women's pages.⁴⁰

By then, another major political and professional shift was beginning for women in the media. Their determined attempts to join their male colleagues in taking on general news assignments became the subject of heated discussion among editors and reporters, but slowly and surely the women began to make progress.⁴¹ Most first-person accounts, such as that of veteran journalist Simma Holt, mention, to varying degrees, the sex discrimination female reporters and broadcasters suffered during those years, and biographers have noted the determination of talented writers such as Christina McCall to tackle broader political subjects as well as women's issues.⁴² After 1970, the CWPC saw its younger members and potential recruits flock toward the previously all-male journalists' associations, which were just beginning to open their doors to women.⁴³ At the same time, female media workers were expected to reject or abandon any connection in their personal lives with feminist advocacy groups, especially the new and radical "women's liberation" collectives that had begun to spring up across the country.⁴⁴ The most politically committed women had few choices other than to become involved with feminist media for little or no pay⁴⁵ or, alternatively, to undertake documentary filmmaking. The women of Studio D, the feminist branch of the National Film Board of Canada, spent many years producing documentaries for and about women and their rights, but they were not the only ones making films.⁴⁶

By the mid-1990s, as Gertrude J. Robinson documented, women made up larger minorities than they used to in Canada's newspaper and television newsrooms—28 and 37 percent respectively—but the "glass ceiling," inflexible work hours and other systemic barriers remained impediments.⁴⁷ As Robinson noted, there is an abiding scholarly interest in women journalists' progress toward professional equality with men because, as she succinctly put it, "gender matters."⁴⁸

In this series of case studies, I expand beyond the newsroom to consider the contributions various kinds of female media workers have made to

communications in Canada, and to the advancement of women's rights over a number of time periods. In the current affairs magazines of the late 19th century, Agnes Maule Machar of Kingston, seemingly a model of Presbyterian spinsterhood, sharpened her pen and her voice as "Fidelis" to espouse her belief in higher education for women and better conditions for female workers, bringing these matters to the attention of politicians, businessmen and her sister members of the NCWC. She was a leader among the handful of known female journalists whose work was accepted for publication at a time when men dominated intellectual and political debates in Canada's newspapers and magazines. Several authors who have written about Machar have been most interested in the nature of her religious values, specifically the ways in which she expressed her piety and social gospel beliefs as part of her intellectual perspective on social reform.⁴⁹ As a media historian I am more intrigued by Machar's outlook on women's rights and how she was able to express it in the leading current affairs periodicals, which she daringly used to persuade others, chiefly men, of the value of change.

The newly established women's pages of the Toronto daily newspapers presented another, potentially feminist platform—potentially because women's rights advocates were not always able to exploit these pages as well as they might have, although some of the issues they tackled as journalists may well have had more resonance for their readers than more overtly political concerns. In their Saturday pages, Kathleen Blake Coleman as "Kit," Alice Fenton Freeman as "Faith Fenton," Emily Cummings as "Sama" and Elmira Elliott Atkinson as "Madge Merton" all debated the constrictions, dangers and potential of women's fashions, a more saleable issue for them than suffrage in the 1890s, despite their individual views on women's rights. Freeman and Cummings were both known NCWC activists,⁵⁰ while Coleman was the CWPC's first national president. In *Kit's Kingdom*, I discussed her inconsistent views on the feminism of her time, given the circumstances of her personal and working life. How could a well-schooled journalist like her, who believed in higher education and equal pay for women, dismiss their right to vote so readily for so long, I wondered, given that early in her career she had expressed some support. I felt at the time, and still do, that it had much to do with the conservative editorial position of her newspaper; in fact, she said as much herself.⁵¹ In her analysis of "Kit's" advice columns, Janice Fiamengo mistakenly concluded that I was judging Coleman's subjectivity through a late 20th-century feminist lens.⁵² On the contrary, I was very careful not to do so, and was intent on examining the intricate overlaps between women's "private" and "public" spheres in the late 19th century, as historians were debating them in 1980s, when the book was written.⁵³

Since then, communications scholar Nancy Fraser has challenged the ideas of Jürgen Habermas, who originally envisioned the historical