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Historical Roundtable: American Women in Journalism

By Mark Bernhardt, Kathleen Cairns, Carolyn Kitch, and Julie Williams ©

Bernhardt

From the colonial era, American women have been practitioners of journalism. Yet historians long overlooked women's contributions to American journalism. The growing attention to women's history in general that came out of the 1960s began rectifying this neglect. Women rarely received full credit for their contributions and faced restrictions on their roles within the profession. However, the ongoing scholarship has greatly expanded our knowledge of who these women were, what they did, the obstacles they faced, and how they worked to overcome them. This roundtable discusses some of the developments that have taken place in the scholarship about women in American journalism.

Bernhardt: *What drew you to this field and inspired you to focus on your*

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specific area of women in journalism?

Kitch: In every degree I pursued, my "secondary" area was women's studies, and gender is a theme in most of my work. I spent eleven years working in New York as an editor for *McCall's* and *Good Housekeeping*, where I learned about the history of women's magazines, the women editors who built long careers at such places, and the remarkably loyal audiences they served. At the time, such periodicals were one of the few arenas of journalism where most of the staff were women, and I remain grateful to those mentors. My commitment to women's studies developed not despite my background at women's magazines, but because of it.

Cairns

Kitch

Williams

Kathleen Cairns is a third-generation Californian. She grew up in the San Gabriel Valley east of L.A. and earned a bachelor's degree from California State University Long Beach, with a dual major in history and journalism. She spent a dozen years working as a reporter in Southern California before moving to UC Davis, where she earned a Ph.D. in history. She spent twenty-five years teaching at CSU Sacramento and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo before retiring in 2016. She is the author of six books, all focused on women in California history.

Carolyn Kitch is the Laura H. Carnell Professor of Journalism at Temple University. She has authored or edited five books, the first of which, *The Girl on the Magazine Cover: The Origins of Visual Stereotypes in American Mass Media*, established her lasting interest in media history, social memory, gender, and magazines.

Julie Hedgepeth Williams is a media historian, author, speaker, and professor. She spent the 1980s as a press woman herself on a small-town newspaper. In 2021 she received the Sidney Kobre Award for lifetime achievement from the American Journalism Historians Association.

Cairns: Before entering academia, I spent a dozen years as a reporter in Long Beach, Calif. When I started in 1977 women still largely were relegated to Life/Style sections. It took me two years to move into the newsroom, and even longer to get good assignments. When I applied to graduate schools in 1989, I knew I wanted to focus on journalism history. My major professor at UC Davis was one of the premier media historians in the country, and a second professor had long wanted someone to focus on women of color. Three notable journalists from California — Ruth Finney of Sacramento, Charlotta Bass, and Agness Underwood, both from L.A. — had papers I could easily access. My dissertation, which tracked the progress of women in the profession, became my first book: *Front Page Women, 1920-1950*.

Williams: I was drawn to the study of women in journalism when I found out — was FLOORED to find out — that the first woman editor in the (future) United States began editing her newspaper, *The South Carolina Gazette*, in 1739. The editor was Elizabeth Timothy, and she took over the newspaper after its editor, her husband, died in an "unhappy accident" the last week of 1738. Elizabeth had six young children to support and was pregnant besides, and she pleaded with her subscribers to be kind to her as "his poor afflicted Widow with six small Children and another hourly expected." The baby arrived some six weeks later, and as far as I can tell, she didn't miss an issue. She had seven small children to feed and a business to run, after all. Then I discovered other women journalists in the colonial era. What a blast! And what an eye-opener!

Bernhardt: *Which authors do you see as having laid the groundwork in the study of women in journalism?*

Williams: A really early scholar was Jessie E. Ringwalt, who wrote in 1872 of early women printers in America. If Ringwalt is any indication, women's concerns haven't changed much. Ringwalt lauded one early woman printer as handling her job and her role as a mother with dexterity. Ishbel Ross is often quoted as an early historian of women in the press, writing in 1936. She felt that early female journalists had succeeded when they were told they wrote like their male counterparts. Sidney Kobre also did much work on early press women. In one 1937 article, he faulted the press on its flippant, almost silly coverage of a "girl bandit" who was actually a feared serial robber. Those writers all happened before the feminist movement that heavily influenced scholarship of the 1960s and especially the 1970s, but those early scholars laid a groundwork for feminist scholars to discover women's contributions to the early press.

Kitch: While earlier accounts of journalism history included women who fit into the field's interest in great journalists at great institutions, a more expansive approach began in the 1970s, inspired by that era's feminist activism, the rising numbers of women pursuing journalism careers, and an increase in women on journalism faculties. Two foundational books appeared in 1977: Marion Marzolf's *Up from the Footnote: A History of Women Journalists*, and Maurine Beasley and Sheila Gibbons's *Women in Media: A Documentary Source Book*, first published by Donna Allen's Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press and later expanded as *Taking their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism*. Over the following decade, this documentary work grew with books by Jean Collins, Madelon Golden Schilpp and Sharon Murphy, Barbara Belford, Kay Mills, and Marlene Sanders and Marcia Rock.

Perhaps because they were launched in the same era, the two main journals in our field attended to gender even in their early years. In *Journalism History*, calls for "conceptual change" came from Susan Henry in 1979 and Catherine Covert in 1981, both of whom argued that a fuller understanding of women's experiences could enable us to create more inclusive methods and to reconsider how we periodize time. In 1983, the very first issue of *American Journalism* opened with Linda Steiner's study of women's suffrage periodicals, in which she argued that readers found a sense of shared political identity despite geographical separation. So in our field there were early models for theoretical engagement with women's history.

Cairns: Journalism differs from other fields of study because the subjects are writers themselves. Thus, the actual journalists laid the groundwork for studies of women in the field. They wrote stories, penned autobiographies, and were subjects of biographies. From the beginning, they recognized that members of the public saw them as curiosities, crossing into male territory by working outside the home. It didn't matter that they worked on "women's pages," they had careers! Editors and publishers didn't realize they were helping to shift boundaries, but the women themselves realized it — at least most did, even though they kept quiet. By the 1930s, a few women had moved into newsrooms, writing "hard news" — politics, crime, editorial columns, alongside male colleagues. This made them even more noteworthy, to scholars, among others. For example, in the 1930s Iona Logie, a female doctoral student (unusual in itself) demonstrated their growing influence by interviewing dozens of female journalists for her dissertation, "Careers for Women in Journalism." And First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt promoted their work by barring male reporters from her weekly press conferences. As a result,

more newspapers and magazines hired them in order to gain access to the Roosevelts. Their growing prominence also can be seen in 1930s and 1940s films such as *His Girl Friday*, and *Woman of the Year* which featured female reporters in the title roles. Films such as these reflected the higher profiles of real journalists, and they reflect the tug of war between gender expectations, and the ways career women navigated and exploited them. The lead characters often extolled domesticity, but audiences could see that it paled beside the exciting world of journalism. Of course, male bosses and partners in these films largely seemed to have control, but the female characters usually prevailed in the end — they were too valuable to lose! Biographers and scholars wrote about real women journalists, but the lives of reporters themselves shaped the stories.

Bernhardt: *Discuss how the field has evolved to include different approaches for analyzing women's contributions to journalism.*

Williams: Above I mentioned Jessie Ringwalt, Ishbel Ross, and Sidney Kobre as early scholars. Ringwalt is considered a historian of the Romantic school, which examined the "great women" of the press to discern what made them great/how they were great. Ross and Kobre fall into the Developmental School of historians, where women's writings were compared to the practice of good journalism (in the scholars' day, anyway). Two other schools became popular in the 1970s — the Cultural School and the Feminist School. One Cultural historian, Barbara Belford, deliberately eschewed comparing women's press writing to men's. Instead, she was interested in what made women become journalists in the first place and how their writing was shaped by economic factors, among others. Not surprisingly, the BIG change in scholarship

that bloomed with the women's movement was the Feminist School. That school tended to examine women in press history as discriminated against or oppressed by men. Susan Henry and Marion Marzolf, for instance, each complained that historians often wrote of colonial woman printers as of little interest. As Henry said, these women couldn't vote, so for years male historians considered them pointless to address. As Henry and other feminists pointed out, these early women in the press were actually fascinating… and important.

Kitch: The analytical trends that have shaped the broader field of communication also have shaped journalism history research. Our work has included documentary profiles, textual analyses of women journalists' rhetorical strategies, and ideological and structural analyses of media messages about women. I would add that we should be interested not only in what women have contributed to journalism but also how journalism has treated, represented, and addressed women. One promising recent development is that researchers now are interviewing women journalists to learn about their work experiences and about how they cover issues of importance to women audiences. This is research about the present, not the past, but it is creating a respectful and informative record that should be useful for future journalism historians.

Cairns: In the 1970s, women journalists had just begun to advocate for "equality." They sued the *New York Times* over pay, and demanded access to speakers at the Washington Press Club, where they had long been relegated to the balcony. By the 1990s and early 2000s, however, white women had achieved relative parity; they were war correspondents and TV anchors. At this same time, a few women of color began to breach longstanding barriers in media: Oprah Winfrey, for example,

and Connie Chung. Meanwhile, women of color began attending graduate schools in larger numbers. When it came to dissertation topics, they too focused on journalism, but cast their nets wider. More than one focused on Ida B. Wells-Barnett. The cultural implications were impossible to ignore. Black-owned newspapers, and publications focused on other underrepresented groups, were inherently political, because they worked within an environment that had long ignored, dismissed, or attacked their issues and concerns. Thus began a rethinking of the role of journalism in fueling political change. Was it a panacea; of course not, but it was a start.

Bernhardt: *How has the focus of the field changed as journalism has expanded into a greater variety of media forums?*

Cairns: The major questions/issues confronting scholars today would be: What is journalism, and what constitutes "media"? Before the last two decades or so, the answer might have seemed straightforward: newspapers, magazines, non-fiction books about political, cultural developments, and significant people, and a few other sources. The products of these outlets were generally vetted by "experts" on the topics at hand. To publish a book, for example, authors had to garner critical reviews from other writers in the field. Media venues came under the "Fairness Doctrine," created in 1949, and essentially abandoned by 2000. Now, anyone who wants to tell a story or garner attention can create a newsletter, a personal blog, or a podcast. S/he can be an "influencer" or self-publish a book, no credentials or media background needed.

Of course libel laws still apply, at least to some extent. Television is a bit different because it takes vast amounts of money to broadcast pro-

grams. Billionaire owners can hire whomever they want and present the "news" with whatever slant they prefer. As we've seen recently, there are some limits due to lawsuits, but it's a moving target. However, respect for traditional journalism still can be seen in mainstream films. The 1970s saw *All the President's Men*. More recent films have included *Spotlight*, about the *Boston Globe's* Pulitzer-winning investigation into pedophile priests; *The Post*, focusing on court battles over publishing the Pentagon Papers; and *She Said*, about the *New York Times* reporters who helped to fuel the "Me Too" movement. We seem to be in a transitional period, where at some point new "rules" will have to be written.

Kitch: Our research has expanded thematically and methodologically, and it has grown to include the study of broadcast news and strategic communication. Yet the field is still dominated by newspaper history, due to both tradition and availability, given that newspapers are better archived and more digitally accessible than other kinds of media. That continuing focus has worked against the diversification of what we consider to be legitimate topics of study, especially with regard to gender, since less-studied industries such as magazines and public relations have had more women workers. Moreover, there is little dialogue between journalism history and the rapidly growing scholarship on journalism studies. Becoming part of that broader conversation would help us to situate our work theoretically and internationally.

Williams: Hah! I'm so rooted in newspaper history that I have little perspective on more modern media. However, I have learned from scholars who have looked into women in broadcasting — something I need to know more about! I remember a fascinating study about how women were treated as they picketed television stations for more appro-

priate children's programming. These were ordinary mothers with kids in tow, and the executives treated them with disdain. No, your kid can't use our bathroom — that sort of thing. The execs treated them as, well, silly girls who were just flies to be shooed away. That intersection between audience and people in charge was a good area for study, very refreshing.

Bernhardt: *What are some of the challenges faced by scholars working in the field?*

Kitch: In their own time, women creators and audiences of media, including journalism, often were seen as peripheral to those enterprises, and so they were not documented in any systematic way. Academic libraries have tended not to archive popular periodicals — women's magazines are a main example — or to do so haphazardly. In earlier eras, women journalists were often isolated professionally and personally in ways that made it less likely that their papers would be saved by others. It is difficult to study women as audiences, for the same reason that women's social history is hard to recover: record-keeping and statistical data have tended to be organized around the structures of men's lives. Finally, scholars doing this kind of research are routinely asked if it is really needed. That happened at the "groundwork" stage of the field in the 1970s; it happened to me at a conference last month.

Williams: It seems scholars have long been amazed that press women of the past did "a man's job." Women have been much ballyhooed for making a breakthrough or taking charge. And yet, I get the feeling that women who took over newspapers or started them in the colonial or party eras weren't exactly thinking of themselves as breaking through,

but rather as just doing a job. I think that might be the biggest challenge for scholars — to get past the "gasp" factor of historic women in the media. I hope that makes sense. I wish historic women of the press could be judged for their accomplishments (or misdeeds) from other angles besides "breakthrough" or "oppression." And of course, I'll be the first to admit that the "gasp" factor was what got me interested in earliest colonial women journalists. I wouldn't be following my own suggestion there. But it could be enlightening for scholars to consider themes beyond breakthrough/oppression.

Bernhardt: *What are some of the important works that specifically examine diversity in the field?*

Cairns: Growing diversity in media has been one of the most positive developments over the past few decades. In the 1970s and 1980s, journalists of color working on newspapers, magazines, or on television were largely "tokens." Their "outsider" status was reinforced by the fact that often they became the subjects of stories about minorities in media — virtue signaling, "look how diverse we are!" And they always got the stories about "minorities" doing anything interesting, or important. When I left newspapering in 1990, my newsroom had two Black journalists, and three Latinos/as out of dozens of reporters. And no editors. As more minority journalists joined news staffs, they are no longer tokens; thus stories about them have fallen by the wayside. Sadly, so have many of the nation's newsrooms, where there are fewer reporters/editors altogether.

Kitch: With regard to the intersectional experiences of women working in the Black press, influential works include Jane Rhodes's *Mary Ann*

Shadd Cary: The Black Press and Protest in the Nineteenth Century (1998) and Jinx Broussard's *Giving a Voice to the Voiceless: Four Pioneering Black Women Journalists* (2004). There is a need for more research on the social and labor history of minority journalists as groups, and on factors of ethnicity, religion, class, and gender identity in news practice and coverage. Models for such work include Frankie Hutton and Barbara Straus Reed's *Outsiders in Nineteenth Century Press History: Multicultural Perspectives* (1995), Rodger Streitmatter's *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (1995), Jan Whitt's *Women in American Journalism: A New History* (2008), and Linda Lumsden's *Social Justice Journalism: A Cultural History of Social Movement Media from Abolition to #womensmarch* (2019).

Bernhardt: *In what ways do you see the study of women in journalism having been influenced by more general trends in the study of women's history?*

Kitch: Our field has followed trends in women's and gender studies more broadly. Scholarship began by "recovering" and inserting women into existing historical narratives but soon shifted to considering what different kinds of stories we could tell by acknowledging gender as "a useful category of historical analysis," as historian Joan Wallach Scott famously put it in 1986. More recently there has been increased attention to intersectionality, alternative journalism, and social justice, along with a commitment to diversifying not only the scholarship but also the scholars. This last development has occurred across disciplines but promises to broaden what kinds of questions are asked — and what kinds of evidence are considered valid — in journalism history research as well.

Cairns: Studies of women in journalism have largely reflected trends, rather than fueling them. Journalism programs in colleges, for example, grew in stature and among young people as the result of Vietnam, protests, and the Watergate break-in. The focus on women in journalism emerged in the 1970s with Second Wave Feminism, which questioned women's second-class status in virtually every endeavor. Among those leading the way were journalists, including Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem. Both used journalism as a platform, Friedan with magazine columns, and Steinem with *Ms. Magazine*. The few women reporters at major publications including the *New York Times* challenged inequalities in pay and hiring via lawsuits and sit-ins. Reflecting the growing interest in and debate, many colleges inaugurated Women's History and Women's Studies programs in the 1970s. This endeavor coincided with rising numbers of women working in journalism. Still scholars had to work hard to piece together historical narratives of women's lives and experiences. It took years for these disciplines to be taken seriously by the academy.

Williams: I'm going to twist the question a little, with apologies. I'm not in the women's history field and so shouldn't attempt to speak about it, but as a consumer of media, I notice that women are often addressed in the news as either a victim of men or equal to men. Just today I heard an article on NPR about how few works by women artists hang in major galleries, because most curators over the centuries have been male. The article certainly brought a need to light, and it shows a favorite media theme of women being judged and discussed as to whether they're victims of or equal to men. I have certainly heard that theme in many interesting papers about women journalists in history. Popular themes in the depiction of women in the press are certainly

reflected in many studies of women journalists.

Bernhardt: *What are some significant questions in the field that you feel need to be addressed?*

Williams: I'd like to see more on the ordinary woman in the press when no one thought it was odd for women to be in the press. For example, I don't get the idea that people in general thought it was odd that frontier women worked at and ran newspapers, partly because women were so valued on the prairie — there were too few women to go around, and men were tied up busting the sod. Therefore, women were often hired at newspapers, even sought out for that job. It was one of the career fields open to women at the time. One of the women of the press whom I've studied is Carrie Ingalls, Laura Ingalls Wilder's younger sister. Carrie did every job at small (even tiny) newspapers all over South Dakota, moving from town to town in the classic pattern of the frontier press. It didn't seem to be an oddity to her boss or her advertisers or her subscribers that she set type, ran the print shop, started papers, closed papers, edited papers, ran the business side of papers. I think it's fascinating that the job was just a matter of course to her and to her readers. Since Carrie wasn't considered odd in her job, I was able to analyze Carrie as a textbook frontier press worker and community builder rather than as, say, a breaker of the glass ceiling or a woman stomped by a male boss. I'd like to see more studies of press women who weren't considered an oddity, and given that, what themes describe their work?

Kitch: We now know much more about women journalists who had major careers in journalism despite considerable odds against them. That work remains important and is ongoing; one recent and very com-

prehensive such contribution is Brooke Kroeger's *Undaunted: How Women Changed American Journalism*. Yet there is a more ordinary and continuous story of women's journalism history that remains largely untold. That includes the history of women who worked at small news institutions across the country, covering the events of everyday life; the parts of the field in which women's employment was the norm, such as newspaper women's pages and women's magazines; and the many women who worked for elite institutions as uncredited editorial "researchers" or in other support roles. That untold story also includes women audiences. Such work has begun with recent books by Kimberly Wilmot Voss and Dustin Harp about the history of newspaper women's page editors and their readers. We still need more social and labor history focused on women's workplace experiences over time.

Cairns: The primary question today relates to whether journalism as it has long been practiced can survive in a society where too many people do not read more than a few paragraphs or listen to more than 30-second soundbites. This makes it impossible to grapple with complex issues and/or ideas. Newspapers once taught immigrants to speak English, and how to be "American." Black-owned papers shaped a sense of community in a world of oppression. At times of great crisis, news outlets fostered a sense of national identity. Now, it seems, we are too angry, apathetic, and antagonistic, to trust any news source with which we don't agree. This does not bode well for our survival as a nation.

CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO TABLE OF CONTENTS