

Why did a feminist press develop during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and to what extent can it be considered a successful enterprise?

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Abstract

The periodical press, as a medium of communication and as a (supposed) reflector of public opinion, flourished during the latter half of the nineteenth century. However, feminist issues were largely excluded from the commercial papers, triggering the evolution of specifically feminist periodicals, from the *English Woman's Journal* to the *Women's Penny Paper* and the *Freewoman*. Beset with financial difficulties and the handicap of attempting to penetrate a male-dominated cultural discourse, such publications nonetheless enjoyed certain success.

Keywords

Victorian periodical press; mainstream press; feminist press; *The Freewoman*; *The Women's Penny Paper*; language; public sphere; discourse

Introduction

The following study investigates why, and with what success, feminist periodicals developed around the turn of the twentieth century. The scope is necessarily broad, covering the very first periodicals of the 1860s up until the final edition of *The Freewoman*, which was published in 1912, thereby providing sufficient breadth for analysis. It represents a part of periodical press history that has mostly been ignored by historians who “largely fail to acknowledge the existence of a separate women’s press in this period” (Levine 1990, 293). When the topic has been explicitly approached by academics, it has chiefly been examined from the perspective of media history and social movement theory, as in the works of DiCenzo, Delap and Ryan, who situate the various feminist presses in light of the public sphere theories of Habermas and Fraser. Levine takes a more systematically historical approach, and starts to consider the ways in which modern feminist critical theory can be applied to the development of feminist periodicals. I intend to build on Levine’s tentative application of feminist theory, considering the relevance of contemporary critics such as Cixous, Irigaray and Showalter, in order to ascertain the reasons behind the development of an exclusively feminist press. Having also considered the feminist press in light of public sphere theory, I shall conduct a more in-depth analysis of primary resources, namely the two published volumes of *The Freewoman*, in order to ascertain the levels, and indeed types, of success enjoyed by such publications.

I- ‘A subaltern counter-public’: the exclusion of the feminist press from the mainstream public sphere

Any consideration of the development of a feminist press must acknowledge the context of its existence, which in turn dictated the conditions from which it evolved. The mainstream press had evolved into a key medium of communication by the late nineteenth century. This was partly a result of the abolition of stamp duties on newspapers in 1855 and the repeal of paper duties in 1861 (which abolished the excise duty on paper, making newspaper production still cheaper), but also as a consequence of the 1870 Education Act. According to Carey’s *Revolt of the Masses* “it was to cater for the post-Education-Act reading public that

the popular newspaper came into being” (2002, 6). Brown asserts in her chapter in *Investigating Victorian Journalism* that by the 1890s the British press was operating on a national scale, and by 1892 there were seventy-four daily morning and eighty-five daily evening papers in the United Kingdom (1990, 133). There was suddenly a new manifestation of authority on public life; ‘the overall influence exerted by the press....was palpable’ (Levine 1990, 294), and it became imperative that women’s interests should receive a share of this new, highly representative, mode of expression.

Neither the mainstream journals nor the daily and weekly newspapers acknowledged feminist issues within their widely circulated pages. While it was becoming increasingly recognized that a progressive female readership existed, the press did little to cater for it: ‘women’s issues were generally either passed over or subjected to ridicule’ (Levine 1990, 294) and the column inches specifically attributed to female readers only served to hinder the interests of feminism further. Levine documents the emergence of a sector of the mass press ‘aimed specifically at a women’s market defined in traditional, respectably feminine rather than feminist terms’ (1990, 295), something openly criticised by the contemporary feminist presses, as the comments of Amelia Lewis (of the *Woman’s Penny Paper*) demonstrate: “‘A LITTLE gossip for the ladies.’ That is what an ordinary middle-class periodical, should it be ambitious of extending its circulation [to the weaker sex] thinks it is necessary to include within its table of contents” (DiCenzo 2010, 13). Another WPP editor laments how barren the periodical landscape was for women; “only women know to their bitter cost, how little they can learn from the reports in the *Dailies* of debates on their particular questions...” (WPP quoted in DiCenzo 2010, 12). The concerns of the progressive female were either overlooked or trivialised which, I shall argue, triggered the formation of an explicitly feminist media agenda.

It is useful for our purposes to situate the feminist press in light of the public sphere theories of Habermas and, more recently, those of Fraser. As DiCenzo suggests, Habermas defines the notion of a public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something

approaching public opinion can be formed” (2010, 23). Widely criticised for its apparent gender exclusivity, such a definition certainly fails to account for the highly politically charged, but much under-represented issues of the female half of the population within the media. Nancy Fraser, in *Re-Thinking the Public Sphere*, goes some way to countering Habermas’ limited theorisation by considering “subaltern counter-publics”, which she describes as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs” (quoted in DiCenzo 2010, 26). Under-represented by the literary “public sphere”, the feminist presses created an alternative platform of communication and took control of their own self-representation.

An incident highlighting the exclusion of women from the public sphere is related, at some length, in the *Women’s Penny Paper* (1888-1893). Wanting to be able to address the political questions of the day, particularly those affecting women, a journalist from the *WPP* requested entry to Parliament’s reporter’s gallery. The doorman’s refusal (later documented in the *WPP* under the heading ‘Women in the Reporter’s Gallery’) referring to the male journalists, who would “much resent their intrusion” and his fear that “the consequent outcry would be terrific” (*WPP* March 1890). Considering the incident in light of Pierre Bourdieu’s “Fields of Cultural Production” emphasises the plight of feminist publications. This denial of access to the political ‘sphere’ immediately affects the validity of the female agent within the cultural (literary) sphere in which she is trying to establish herself. DiCenzo claims the event “offers a useful illustration of the ways in which women used journalism to attempt to access and participate in the political sphere” (2010, 10) though their failure to do so appears better to highlight the walls preventing female penetration of a male-dominated discourse. The imperviousness of the political sphere to female penetration is echoed by the *WPPs’* editor at the time who, following the event determinedly commented that “We do not expect that the door to this august body, as typified by the Press Gallery, will be opened to us at our first approach, but we shall try again . . .” (*WPP* quoted in DiCenzo 2010, 12). Rather than representing a Habermasian reflection of public opinion in

its entirety, the mainstream press constituted a “powerful and exclusionary institution” (DiCenzo 2010, 8), and its failure to represent the concerns of *all* its readers stimulated the development of an exclusively feminist press.

II- ‘A language of their own’: What triggered the development of a feminist press in the late nineteenth century?

Having considered the exclusionary nature of the mainstream press as a trigger of feminist periodical development, the following discussion will demonstrate the restrictions of language itself on the feminist literary projects of the late nineteenth century, arguing that the concept of language as a phenomenon which empowers men and disempowers women adds a further dimension to my consideration of the late nineteenth century feminist press.

Levine quotes Josephine Butler (1828-1906), a firm advocate of women’s rights, who suggested that the “conspiracy of silence of the press has done us this service....it has caused us to create a literature of our own” (Levine 1990, 299). The popular press consolidated a linguistic structure adhering to a patriarchal logic (which only acknowledged the traditional feminine ideal within its pages); women were forced to forge their own literary path, fighting off the restrictive male discourses which oppressed them. The idea that the public press was a masculine discourse which monopolised what was said not only to, but about women resonates in Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, which considers the utter inaccessibility of language and its meaning to women. She claims that, as a woman, “one cannot hope to tell the truth” (2002, 4), given that truth is an entirely naturalised discourse created by those in power (men), to which women do not have access, a female affliction tangibly manifested in the ‘press gallery’ incident. The male monopolisation of the press, and their dissemination of a “truth” oblivious of the real concerns of those it should represent, highlights, as does Woolf, the helplessness of the female in the face of a phallogocentric literary discourse, clearly echoed in Showalter’s affirmation that “all language is the language of the dominant order, and women, if they speak at all, must speak through it” (1981, 200). It can, therefore, be argued that the development of the feminist

press was an attempt to escape from male appropriated language, or, as Showalter puts it, from “the dictatorship of patriarchal speech” (1981, 191). Levine acknowledges such a possibility, asserting that the feminist presses “sought to create another and female voice”, which represented “a challenge to and a means of circumventing reliance on male-run papers” (299), thereby fulfilling Showalter’s call for a woman’s writing that works within “male” discourse to deconstruct it (191).

The feminist appropriation of journalistic language in the late 1800s could, therefore, be seen to represent an early manifestation of what Cixous has termed *écriture féminine*, a specifically female discourse unconfined by patriarchal logic, allowing women to “seize the occasion to speak” (1975, 351), or what Irigaray asserts as the attempt of woman “to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse”, her intention “to resubmit herself” in a way which refuses subordination to a masculine literary discourse (1977, 795). Levine’s interpretation certainly fits with such a reading: “it was not just a literature of their own that such ventures helped to create, but a language of their own, and through these twin media a critical, piercing re-definition of political culture” (1990, 300). The relevance of these theoretical concepts to the feminist presses’ evolution can be seen immediately through a glancing perusal of the first few editions of *The Freewoman*, a weekly periodical published between November 1911 and October 1912. *Freewoman* reader Florence Harris wrote in the correspondence section of its second edition that “The *Freewoman* supplied a need of which we feminists were only subconscious until its appearance” (30 November 1911), a clear acknowledgement of a much-needed platform for female communication, the articulation of which represented a female liberation from the imprisonment of the pages of the mainstream press.

III- What level of success was enjoyed by the feminist presses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

As well as circumventing a reliance on male-appropriated language, the feminist presses leading up to and beyond the turn of the century also had to contend with a male-

empowering publishing industry. The following section considers the publishing structures of various feminist presses, paying particular attention to the short-lived and highly controversial *The Freewoman*. There was no one formula which dictated the methods of production adopted by such publications, and what follows is an attempt to gain an insight into the various financial and editorial arrangements used by a number of different weekly, fortnightly and monthly periodicals and the ways in which they were able to function.

While all feminist publications served to further the interests of women in social and political society, it is important to distinguish that while some were more general in scope, offering an “independent propagandist function” (Levine 1990, 293), others were created as the mouthpiece for specific campaigns, such as *Shield* (1870-1886) and the *Woman’s Suffrage Journal* (1870-1890), representing respectively the repeal for the Contagious Diseases Act campaign and the National Society for Woman’s Suffrage. Editorial structures were highly varied and dependent on the publication in question but, as a rule, ownership largely dictated editorial policy, undoubtedly due to the fact that many publications were kept afloat by their editors. Some were run by a single editor whose views almost entirely reflected the contents of the publication, as was the case with the *Woman’s Signal*, which “engineered its own demise with its excessive concentration on temperance” (Levine 1990, 297), the passionate cause of the paper’s editorial director Isabel Somerset. Conversely, *The Freewoman’s* last edition claimed that it “never accepted the notion that the editorial chair was that of a privileged pulpit from which opinions might issue unchallenged” (10 October, 1912).

The financial struggles of many feminist presses bore a direct relationship to the quality and professionalism of its contributors. In some cases this led to a dilemma of principle; many self-consciously feminist presses were committed to paying their contributors as an assertion of the value of women’s labours, but inevitably small circulation figures (*The Freewoman’s* were around 2000 to 2500 copies) meant that the returns were insufficient to replace the necessary cash outflow. Finding adequate channels to the market also proved

difficult for the numerous small-scale feminist periodicals. Many of the suffrage papers, often those aligned to a particular cause with a pro-active and already-formed readership, used volunteers to maintain circulation, and *Votes for Women* (1907-1918) campaigned to get their copies on newsstands and in stores. While such efforts highlight the detachment of the women's presses from the far more commercially viable mainstream ventures, they also suggest that such papers had a far greater degree of control over their production. Through specific outlets like the Suffrage Shop and the female street seller, they also had a great deal of power over their distribution.

The Freewoman itself enjoyed just under a year of circulation, but epitomised the insurmountable barrier which overcame so many of its contemporaries; financial failure. The papers' final editorial feature read "we have been hemmed in on every side by lack of funds" (10 October 1912). *The Freewoman* was published by Stephen Swift and Company, who also ran their own progressively orientated publication, and close analysis of the paper suggests it was based in Adelphi. Under the "Notices, Terms and Subscriptions" section, readers are instructed to send letters regarding editorial matters to 9 John Street, and letters regarding publication to 10 John Street; "all business communication relative to the publication of *The Freewoman* should be addressed to the Publishers STEPHEN SWIFT & CO LTD., 10, John Street, Adelphi, London", suggesting that *The Freewoman's* editorial team worked adjacent to their backers, either in relatively separate next-door establishments or in a co-joined working environment. The paper was co-edited by former suffrage activists Dora Marsden and Mary Gawthorpe, both of whom had previously been instrumental within the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). They were co-editors in name alone, however; Gawthorpe's ill-health prevented her from any truly active involvement, but her name provided excellent publicity for the paper given her known imprisonment as a result of active campaigning. Individually priced at threepence, *The Freewoman* cost more than the many penny papers already in circulation, its "terms of subscription" reading "Yearly, 14s; Six Months, 7s; Three Months, 3s.6d" (23 November 1911).

Although *The Freewoman* was hampered by myriad difficulties and folded less than a year after its launch, an investigation into its readership nonetheless permits us to see how feminist publications were, to an extent, able to circumvent not simply a language denied them, but an entire publishing structure hostile to feminist access. It is worthwhile at this point to consider Simone Murray's analysis of Darnton's "Communications Circuit" which, according to Murray, overlooks a feminist publishing history. She identifies the fact that "Darnton's model is posited upon the concept of *successful* communication" and takes issue with his lack of regard for 'what founders in the system' (2004, 16). From a feminist perspective, Darnton's circuit constitutes "an instrument for non-communication and for the frustration of oppositional innovation" (2004, 16). What follows is an argument that the exclusion of the feminist press from a publishing circuit designed to empower masculinised, mainstream ventures triggered the development of a mini "communications circuit" which allowed the feminist press to survive and, in some cases, to prosper.

According to Green's online "Introduction to *The Freewoman*", there existed a feminist "periodical network" which represented an "extensive and vibrant community" of readers, contributors and publishers. This is certainly supported by the substantial and highly reactive interplay between authors, editors and readers, the debates between them often taking over up to a third of any entire edition. Green asserts that "this robust periodical culture was constructed through, and supported by, suffrage organisations, discussion groups, women's bookstores and publishing houses that together comprised a feminist (or counter) public sphere within English society" (2011, 6). In this way, the arbiters of feminist periodicals excluded themselves from a publishing structure which they could never participate in on equal terms, and created their own circuit. Born of specifically female economic, social and political concerns and featuring far more dynamic relationships between authors, editors and readers, the circuit appropriated by the feminist press also included a higher level of control over sales and distribution. There is evidence that *The Freewoman* perpetuated this community-based micro-circuit within its pages; the first volume advertises: "FEMINIST PUBLISHERS & BOOKSELLERS: A large variety of Books dealing

with questions of all kinds affecting WOMEN always in stock at the INTERNATIONAL SUFFRAGE SHOP..." (23 November 1911). Such an inclusion demonstrates the importance of community to the development of the feminist press which, unable to survive in a publishing environment dominated by male control, created its own "communications circuit" in order to be heard.

Conclusion

The reasons behind the development of a feminist press during the latter half of the nineteenth century were two-pronged. Unacknowledged by the growing "public sphere" embodied by the mainstream press, feminist periodicals developed as a "subaltern counter-public" in order to co-exist alongside a medium which consistently denied them access. Furthermore, the mainstream press's appropriation of a language that failed to engage the attention and represent the interests of the growing section of society that supported the women's movement stimulated the evolution of an alternative linguistic structure which accommodated feminist issues. These conditions of development undoubtedly account for the financial struggles of publications such as *The Freewoman*, and converge in my analysis of a mini-communications circuit as a model better fitted to describe the way the feminist press was able to circumvent a publishing structure hostile to their endeavours.

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