

Writing A Movement: A Women's Suffrage Press Historiography

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Women have fought for their rights for centuries. In every period in modern history, women have found ways to assert themselves in the search for their place in the world, equal in rights and privileges to men. The women's suffrage movement in the United States represents one of the more concentrated periods of women coming together to fight for a seat at the table. The early women's movement emerged from a world where a woman's place was in the home and a man's place in the public sphere.¹ When women attempted to take part in important social reform efforts like temperance and antislavery societies, their efforts were downplayed. Because of this, they began to form their own groups. Working together, women found their voices and in 1848 convened the first national convention to discuss women's issues.² They continued holding conventions yearly until right before the Civil War and explored a wide variety of subjects, including women's roles in society and the nature of marriage and divorce.³ After the Civil War, many supporters of women's rights helped found the American Equal Rights Association (ERA) to work on a national level towards expanding women's rights.⁴ Unfortunately, male political leaders put women's efforts on the back burner, instead focusing on the passage of the 14th amendment. The press contributed to this by either diminishing the suffrage movement or not giving them any media attention at all.

Because of this, women began to create their own newspapers, journals, and periodicals to capture the issues they found unfair. From organizational, to regional, to national media, the women's suffrage press had a diverse array of approaches to reaching those who already believed in the movement and reaching out to new people to convince them that women

¹ Martha Solomon, *A Voice of Their Own: The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840-1910* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 6.

² Solomon, *A Voice of Their Own*, 7.

³ Solomon, *A Voice of Their Own*, 7.

⁴ Solomon, *A Voice of Their Own*, 8.

deserved the right to vote. The study of the women's suffrage press only started about forty-five years ago, with the new interest in women's history, but it has come a long way from its earliest form. While early scholarship for the subject took a narrow approach, focusing on public memory and small case studies, subsequent approaches began to incorporate excluded and diverse voices. The most recent scholarship has arrived at a more comprehensive view of the media's role in the suffrage movement and its central role in reshaping public views of the movement.

The history of the analysis of American suffrage media begins in 1976 with Lynn Masel-Walters and her analysis of the key early suffrage newspaper, *The Revolution*. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony started *The Revolution* in 1868, women's suffrage was a distant glimmer in their eyes. While the paper only lasted two years, Masel-Walters argued that it was a crucial publication in the history of suffrage journalism for its early championing of voting rights and women's rights overall. *The Revolution's* editors proposed a new amendment to the Constitution where all citizens of the United States would be allowed to vote regardless of sex. They wrote profusely about the idea of "educated suffrage" and how women were already getting involved in the cause.⁵ The paper reported on suffrage meetings and lectures on woman's rights being held across the country. It also documented the progress of the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and worked to obtain signatures for a women's suffrage petition to be sent to Congress.⁶ Masel-Walters points out that in addition to arguing in favor of suffrage, throughout its existence, *The Revolution* also attacked the arguments against women's suffrage, breaking down the religious, political, social, and economic reasonings. However, the paper also

⁵ Lynne Masel-Walters, "Their Rights and Nothing More: a History of 'The Revolution', 1868-1870." *Journalism Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1976), 246.

⁶ Masel-Walters, "Their Rights and Nothing More", 246.

split the suffrage movement for the first time, a divide that lasted thirty years. Those who were more open to the idea described the newspaper as having “an irrepressible spirit.”⁷ More conservative suffragists believed the paper went too far with “impracticable” ideas and was too inflammatory as a first attempt at capturing the main issues. Masel-Walters concluded that while its time in print was short-lived, *The Revolution* was the first major national forum for the debate around women’s equality. Every other publication after that followed its lead in some shape or form. Masel-Walters solidified the study of suffrage periodicals’ emergence as “an exciting new field within the historical profession.”⁸

Another early work from the late 1970s expanded on Masel-Walters’ study of individual suffrage periodicals that reached a national audience to examine specific regional newspapers. In “‘The New Northwest’ and ‘Women’s Exponent’: Early Voices for Suffrage,” Sherilyn Cox Bennion identified two important newspapers in the northwestern region of the United States that, despite aiming at different audiences, strongly supported women obtaining the vote. Abigail Scott Duniway founded *The New Northwest* in Portland, Oregon in 1871. It continued until 1887. Bennion links Duniway’s activism to her personal life. Duniway grew up watching her mother work herself to the bone like so many other pioneer women. After she opened and ran her own millinery shop, she heard many stories from women whose husbands ran off and left them with debts to repay that they never knew about or appropriated the money that they were making.⁹ She soon came to realize that if women could vote, they would be able to assert their independence and elect people who protected their rights. In contrast, the *Woman’s Exponent*

⁷ Masel-Walters, “Their Rights and Nothing More”, 244.

⁸ Linda Steiner, Kitch Carolyn, and Brooke Kroeger, eds., *Front Pages, Front Lines: Media and the Fight for Women’s Suffrage*. 1st ed. Columbia: University of Illinois Press, 2020, 21-22.

⁹ Sherilyn Cox Bennion, “‘The New Northwest’ and ‘Woman’s Exponent’: Early Voices for Suffrage,” *Journalism Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (1977), 288.

was founded in Salt Lake City, Utah by Mormon women for Mormon women. Bennion explained that the audience differed because the women of Utah, particularly Mormon women, were used to the idea of suffrage. Although women could not become Mormon priests, they had always held voting rights in the church.¹⁰ Additionally, Utah granted women the vote in 1870, only the second state to do so. The editors wanted all women to share in the benefits of the vote. Both northwestern papers were primarily conservative in approach. The editors believed that women should have the right to pursue a career, but their primary responsibility was home and family. While both papers balanced their suffrage conversations with practical advice for women, *The New Northwest* was primarily a suffrage paper while the *Woman's Exponent* covered all subjects "interesting and valuable to women."¹¹ Bennion's article began to capture the diversity of opinions and approaches to the subject as the field slowly developed.

A few years later in 1980, Lynn Masel-Walters following Bennion's shift to regional papers, published "To Hustle with the Rowdies: The Organization and Functions of the American Woman Suffrage Press," on the internal processes of press creation. Rather than focus on articles, Masel-Walters focused on the early papers' internal organizations, procedures, and the personnel involved in putting together a suffrage paper.¹² She believed that by focusing on the form of the press rather than solely the message, one could learn a lot about the lives of the creators and the readers. Masel-Walters writes extensively on the financial components of running a suffrage press. One of the biggest problems with Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Revolution* was that it relied on one donor for financial support, George

¹⁰ Cox, "'The New Northwest' and 'Woman's Exponent'", 288.

¹¹ Cox, "'The New Northwest' and 'Woman's Exponent'", 289.

¹²Lynne Masel-Walters, "To Hustle with the Rowdies: The Organization and Functions of the American Woman Suffrage Press," *Journal of American Culture* 3, no. 1 (1980).

Francis Train.¹³ But when his interest died, so did the paper. Although Stanton and Anthony tried to turn to personal funds, subscription fees, and donations, they were not enough to keep the publication alive.¹⁴ After this, other papers worked diligently to achieve financial security by obtaining money from more stable sources such as family trusts, stock companies, and trusteeships.¹⁵ Editors also conducted day-to-day operations as frugally as possible. Contributors were not typically paid for their articles. Staff who were unable to volunteer their time without compensation were given minimum wages to support themselves.¹⁶ The size of each issue depended on the changing prices of supplies and the publication's available funds. Editors bargained with whomever they could for equipment, services, and space to produce the newspaper. How effectively a paper's editors and staff could deal with internal issues and respond to external events determined whether or not the publication survived.

The next major shift in suffrage press historiography was in 1991 when Martha Solomon, in *A Voice of Their Own: The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840-1910*, expanded both geographically and temporally in a broad work that analyzed all the major women's suffrage papers from the nineteenth century into the early twentieth century. Solomon argued every suffrage newspaper encouraged women to think of themselves as "competent, sensible [and] important" people with a common cause, although they devised diverse strategies to attract and influence readers.¹⁷ For example, Solomon points out that early journals like the *Una* and the *Lily* chose to weave women's rights issues into poems and stories, hoping to briefly touch on the ideas and concepts without scaring away their audience. Solomon covers niche journals written for specific

¹³ Masel-Walters, "To Hustle with the Rowdies", 169.

¹⁴ Masel-Walters, "To Hustle with the Rowdies", 170.

¹⁵ Masel-Walters, "To Hustle with the Rowdies", 171.

¹⁶ Masel-Walters, "To Hustle with the Rowdies", 172.

¹⁷ Martha Solomon, Martha., *A Voice of Their Own : The Woman Suffrage Press, 1840-1910. Studies in Rhetoric and Communication* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991) 14.

audiences by specific groups of women, including the paper Sherilyn Cox Bennion analyzed, the Mormon *Woman's Exponent*. The paper started with the Mormon belief that submission was incompatible with piety and purity, calling on women to enlarge their sphere and take leadership in their lives. Solomon also for the first time in a history of the suffrage press examined how suffrage newspapers, in particular the *Column*, addressed and combatted the counterarguments to suffrage. To counter the idea that women, if given the vote, would not vote, the *Column's* editor responded by pointing to evidence that men also failed to vote in “low interest” elections like school board and municipal votes in large numbers. If low voting justified denial of suffrage, the *Column* asked whether or not men's rights should be taken from them.¹⁸ In response to the claim that families and family life would suffer if women voted, the *Column* demonstrated that when states allowed women to vote, the divorce rate was consistent with or even lower than states where women could not vote.¹⁹

Additionally in the 1990s, historians began to study suffrage press that reached national audiences. In 1996, Nancy Burkhalter's article, “Women's Magazines and the Suffrage Movement: Did They Help or Hinder the Cause?”, took the field into new territory, looking not at suffrage papers but at popular woman's magazines of the early 20th century, exploring their positive and negative impacts on the suffrage movement. Burkhalter contrasted the coverage of suffrage by the *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* with that of the *New Republic* and *Literary Digest* between 1918 and 1920. Burkhalter argued that the editors of the former papers focused on showing readers that giving women the vote would not have a major impact on the traditional role of women. In contrast, the *New Republic* and *Literary Digest* more

¹⁸ Solomon, *A Voice of Their Own*, 139.

¹⁹ Solomon, *A Voice of Their Own*, 140.

outspokenly advocated for women's suffrage. Most of the women's magazines Burkhalter examined started as magazines for the home. They incorporated suffrage articles sparingly. However, Burkhalter found that over the course of these two years, women's magazines and general publications began publishing more pro-suffrage articles, covering the major events at a time when suffrage was close to victory. The *Digest* and the *New Republic* discussed the pros and cons of the suffrage movement, offering their direct opinions. In contrast, the *Journal* and *Good Housekeeping* ignored many of the issues until the movement became more of a "sure thing."²⁰ Only then did they begin to cover it by focusing on how it would make women's home lives easier or allow them to work more efficiently. Burkhalter concludes that women's magazines, by dulling the more radical concepts of the movement, conveyed the idea that women's suffrage could be easily and successfully merged with traditional values. In her conclusion, Burkhalter encouraged future researchers to consider the dual purposes of women's magazines, those that "[published] articles that did not advocate suffrage while, at the same time, ironically, urging women to educate themselves and to fight for equal pay in the workplace."²¹

Janet Cramer in another 1990s piece argued that turn-of-the-twentieth century non-suffrage women's periodicals, such as *The Courant*, *The Socialist Woman*, and *Woman's Era*, employed similar themes when they covered women's suffrage, justifying it on the basis of motherhood, women's moral superiority, female altruism, and the evolution of the Nineteenth Amendment. However, they also, while emphasizing female qualities, insisted on women's equality with men.²² Cramer took a broader approach to the suffrage movement in her article, "Woman as Citizen: Race, Class, and the Discourse of Women's Citizenship, 1894-1909",

²⁰ Nancy Burkhalter, "Women's Magazines and the Suffrage Movement: Did They Help Or Hinder the Cause?" *Journal of American Culture* 19, no. 2 (Summer, 1996), 19.

²¹ Burkhalter, "Women's Magazines and the Suffrage Movement", 23.

²² Steiner et al, *Front Pages, Front Lines*, 21.

exploring how different women's groups understood the suffrage movement and how the press created a new vision of women's civic identity. Cramer was the first historian to pick up on Steiner's notion that the suffrage newspapers, journals, and magazines strived to create a political and civic community and expand upon it. She cites *The Courant*, a regional paper whose writers were continuously conflicted about how to portray the images of "woman as citizen." These Midwest club women writers valued respectability and social service above all else. However, they worried that the broader public opposed suffrage based on the assumption that it threatened traditional values. While *The Courant* wanted to endorse giving the vote to women, it could be seen as aligning its audience with wage-earning women, in direct conflict with their more traditional principles. To reconcile these dual desires, they used the publication to advocate service to less fortunate women, whom they called their sisters. They built on traditional ideas about women's nature to argue that the vote would help homemakers achieve goals like sanitation and education.²³ In contrast, Cramer included in her study, *Women's Era*, whose editor Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin focused on the advancement and "racial uplift" of African American women.²⁴ As one of Boston's African-American elite, St. Pierre Ruffin knew very well that working in one's own home rather than serving in someone else's was a sign of freedom and status for black women. But as times changed, she worried about the increasing call for women to step into public life. St. Pierre Ruffin believed that the "promotion of the African-American race was vital for self-interests and morale."²⁵ Ultimately, she argued securing the vote for women was the only way to gain total equality and justice.

²³ Cramer, Janet M. "Woman as Citizen: Race, Class, and the Discourse of Women's Citizenship, 1894-1909." *Journalism & mass communication monographs*, no. 165 (1998), 9.

²⁴ Cramer, "Woman as Citizen", 17.

²⁵ Cramer, "Woman as Citizen", 17.

Along with Cramer, Linda Lumsden emerged as one of the foremost scholars of the examination of media coverage and impact on the suffrage movement. In one of her early articles, she analyzed the opposing strategies of the *Woman Citizen* and *The Suffragist* on whether to continue advocating for women's suffrage during World War I. The *Woman Citizen* focused on supporting women's war work to demonstrate to male politicians the importance of women's contributions to the war effort. However, in doing so, they reinforced gender roles, embracing the idea that women should serve their country and not themselves.²⁶ However, the *Woman Citizen* found women's service one way to argue for their worthiness of the vote. Conversely, *The Suffragist* ignored the war entirely and even dismissed women's war work. The paper instead chose to focus exclusively on the passage of a federal suffrage amendment. The writers firmly rejected traditional gender roles by focusing on women and their plight over the nationalistic angle of the war. Lumsden published a second article the following year that examined ten newspapers' coverage of the 1913 national suffrage parade and pageant in Washington, D.C. That parade became a significant event that changed the public's perception of the movement. The fact that a drunken mob broke up the parade, opened up a broader discussion about a woman's place in public life.²⁷ Suffrage newspapers incited outrage about the attack and managed to convince the public that women had a legitimate right to assembly, one step closer to the conclusion that women should be allowed to vote.

Most recently, a group of scholars edited a volume, *Front Pages, Front Lines: Media and the Fight for Women's Suffrage*, the largest compilation of historical research on the suffrage press. Published in 2020 by a multitude of contributors who had been studying the subject for

²⁶ Linda Lumsden, "Excellent Ammunition: Suffrage Newspaper Strategies During World War I." *Journalism History* 25, no. 2 (1999), 53.

²⁷ Linda Steiner, et. al, *Front Pages, Front Lines*, 22.

years, this collection pulls together new research on the media issues related to the women's suffrage movement. It also explores overlooked topics, exploring new topics like African-American and Mormon-oriented media, elites within the movement, and suffrage as a part of a larger social transformation. Sherilyn Cox Bennion's chapter is a new case study of the *Woman's Exponent*, examining its content, supporters, and how the paper became a part of the national movement. Robin Sundaramoorthy and Jinx Broussard surveyed the role of African-American women in the suffrage movement and how the black press treated them in their papers. They found that the women themselves were celebrated in the writing, but the black press covered the actual cause they fought for with much less enthusiasm. Brooke Kroeger focused on the top movement leaders and how they brought other women onto their teams, cultivated political and financial resources, and continued to reach out to contacts in their social and professional worlds. Overall, *Front Pages, Front Lines* provides a multi-faceted contribution to the field that intertwines several different issues, theories, and problems.²⁸

But this does not mark the end of this scholarship. Historians in the future may choose to continue compiling broad volumes made up of chapters with unexplored topics. They may choose to revisit and offer a new perspective on several of the regional newspapers that have been covered thus far. Whichever direction the studies go, woman's suffrage press historiography will continue to grow as we search for new understanding of the fight for women's rights.

²⁸ Steiner, *Front Pages, Front Lines*; 8.

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