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Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space

Alice Fahs

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A leading celebrity of his day, Mark Twain did not grant interviews. He disapproved of them on principle. He opposed them for financial reasons – publishers paid for exclusive access to all of his words, written and spoken. And yet, caricaturist and veteran journalist Kate Carew scored an interview with Twain in 1900 on her first profile assignment for Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*. Carew chatted with Twain as she sketched his likeness. Twain, who had forbidden note-taking, did not know their conversation would appear in print. Carew’s editors unabashedly promoted her scoop. Tasked with interviewing a man who refused to be interviewed, Carew inserted herself into the story, telling the *World’s* million or so readers how she got Twain to talk as she told them what he said. This became her writing style, and Carew soon transformed herself into a celebrity. As a public figure, she joined an ever-revolving cadre of similarly-positioned women journalists who “created a set of public conversations about the cultural politics of modern life” (3). Through their work and words, these journalists widened the realm of real and imagined possibility for themselves and their readers. Buoyed by expanded professional opportunities but hindered by the daily indignities and restrictions of sexism, newspaperwomen became key backers of the suffrage movement.

In *Out on Assignment*, Alice Fahs examines the largely overlooked lives and writings of turn-of-the-century women journalists, particularly those working for large daily newspapers in New York City. She links their sizable influence to the introduction of yellow journalism’s

sensationalistic newspapering practices and “the power of publicity” (3). Journalists like Carew contrasted sharply with an older generation of women writers that had emphasized “privacy and the home” (8). Young newspaperwomen considered themselves professionals, not high-society dabblers. They worked because they had to. While they tended to come from middle-class backgrounds, they were usually single – whether widowed, divorced, or by choice. They worked long hours for irregular pay, and few could afford to make journalism a lifelong career. They frequently wrote for the woman’s page, which they disparagingly labeled the “Hen Coop.” However, new story assignments appeared as metropolitan newspapers competed for larger circulations. Yellow journalism’s editors valued splashy stunts and human interest stories at least as much as political and business news. Dismissive and indifferent, male editors nevertheless needed female reporters to cover the “woman’s angle.”

Fahs’ broad knowledge of print culture serves her well as chapter by chapter she explains the cultural and political significance of the staple stories assigned to newspaperwomen. Most male editors ignored the woman’s page, deriding it as an unimportant section reserved for recipes, fashion trends, and society columns. Unlike them, Fahs closely reads what was written there. She describes it as a space that provided “a way of developing a woman’s reading public, of connecting with other women in communities of conversation that sometimes had a national reach, and that continued from paper to paper as various newspaper women weighed in on a given topic” (65). A columnist, for example, might transition from fashion to women’s rights to celebrity gossip in a single column. Elsewhere in the newspaper, human interest stories functioned as a “new representational space” where newspaperwomen “reflected and imagined a variety of new social worlds” (94). Journalists celebrated independent women like themselves when they praised the home-decorating, income-stretching ingenuity of “bachelor girls” – single

women who chose to work in bustling cities without husbands. Experienced with low wages and long hours, reporters often depicted impoverished “factory girls” not as helpless victims but as activists striving to improve their lives. Largely forbidden from covering national politics, women writers turned their global travels into foreign affairs dispatches.

Fahs attributes historical significance to newspaperwomen’s work through the concept of publicity. Publicity drew attention to women’s issues. Publicity transformed journalists into celebrities whose political views attained a national following through syndication. Stories about “factory girls,” “bachelor girls,” and the work of getting an interview mattered because “print representation was an important undergirding of eventual direct political representation” (117). Fahs contends that the journalists who covered the suffrage movement “used the modern practices of newspaper publicity to further political ends” (277).

Publicity, though, had its limitations – both for individual journalists and women’s causes. Successful newspaperwomen encountered strong criticism, particularly from male competitors, particularly if they attempted to cover politics. Adventure stories – firsthand accounts of slumming tours through Chinatown or scaling the Harlem River Bridge – established professional reputations but also threatened to destroy journalists’ credibility. Alliances between newspaperwomen and factory workers proved fragile. Journalists’ interest in strikes and other workers’ campaigns lasted only until the next big story seized their attention. Confined by journalistic conventions, newspaperwomen “provided a form of public representation, but not solutions” (195). They were loyal but unreliable allies in the women’s rights movement.

Out on Assignment is as significant a contribution to the study of turn-of-the-century journalism as Fahs’ highly regarded 2001 book, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865*, was to the study of mid-nineteenth century print culture.

Ironically, Fahs finds herself striving to publicize the work of writers who were widely known in their own time. She correctly criticizes historians for continuing to study women journalists according to the historiography's "well-worn grooves" (2). Historians have been overly content with either profiling the lives of especially prominent journalists or noting the general presence of women as a sort of addendum to "real" journalism. Neither methodology fully recognizes the substance and significance of the work done by women journalists. While fully acknowledging the limitations that sexism imposed on newspaperwomen, Fahs maneuvers past the gender politics of the newsroom by casting women journalists as part of a larger print culture. This emphasis shifts her central focus from the daily workings of newspapers to the meaning of written words. From this perspective, Fahs can cast Carew's interview with Twain not just as an example of sensationalism's excesses or women's acceptance as celebrity interviewers but as an avenue for exploring how newspaperwomen strove to make themselves essential to editors and readers.

Fahs studiously avoids claiming more than her research allows her to support and scrupulously qualifies her words when she lays out challengeable conclusions. Her book is thoroughly footnoted, and her archival research is substantial. When she speculates, her insights are sensible and intriguing. She suggests, for example, that newspaperwomen took to traveling abroad and commenting from countries affected by America's imperial policies, such as Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, because new press regulations prevented them from covering domestic politics in Washington, D.C. Elsewhere, though, Fahs expects readers to draw their own conclusions. She persuasively illustrates the role "bachelor girl" stories played in articulating "a world in which women were no longer dependent on men, but rather independent actors, creating a new public realm out of the domestic interiors of their private lives" (161). But

did these stories reflect a developing trend, create that trend, or, more probably, exaggerate it? Fahs dodges the answer. Instead, she examines one writer's criticism of the genre to deflate its cheerful unreality. Here Fahs approaches the classic dilemma of print culture studies: What did readers really think of the articles and columns they read? Of course, Fahs cannot offer a definitive answer. But based on the meaning that she attributes to women journalists' writings at the dawn of the twentieth century, one can safely assume that Kate Carew's readers finished her columns as aware of new possibilities as Fahs' readers should be when they finish *Out on Assignment*.

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