**Journalism**

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**Definition**

Women journalists emerged as a work force of unprecedented and unpredictable proportions in the course of the nineteenth century. The first pioneering women journalists started to emerge as early as the eighteenth century but only in the nineteenth century when journalism had become the all-encompassing medium for information, education and general cultural influence did women discover this profession as one they could easily combine with household duties and the (mainly) practical limitations of their gender. There were women workers at every stage, every metaphorical cog of the huge press machine. Women assumed all the jobs that fall under the generic title of journalism as well as the jobs that secured the dissemination of news and information. From compositors to newsagents, from contributors on political and cultural life to editors and sub-editors. Women reviewed, analysed, informed and they illustrated. Importantly, however, compared to the number of male journalists there were few of them and women’s names, like those of their male compeers, did not appear under whatever they contributed and hence are difficult to trace and account for.

**Key** **words**

Women, journalists, editor, press, anonymity, information, press organisations

**Women Journalists**

**A New Phenomenon**

Women journalists emerged as a work force of unprecedented and unpredictable proportions in the course of the nineteenth century. The first pioneering women journalists started to emerge as early as the eighteenth century (see also Editors) but only in the nineteenth century when periodical publications had become the all-encompassing medium for information, education and general cultural influence did women discover journalism as a profession they could easily combine with household duties and the (mainly) practical limitations of their gender. Women assumed all the jobs that fall under the generic title of journalism. They were contributors on political and cultural life, they were editors and sub-editors, they reviewed and they illustrated. Mostly, however, their name did not appear under whatever they contributed. Either they used a pseudonym or they remained nameless as did, in effect, so many of their male colleagues.

One of the first and most prominent of the kind, Harriet Martineau, reported in her *Autobiography* on how she slowly grew into the profession and managed to do that without neglecting her duties as a daughter in the house:

I was at the work table regularly after breakfast, -- making my own clothes, or the shirts of the household, or about some fancy work: I went out walking with the rest, -- before dinner in the winter, and after tea in summer: and if ever I shut myself into my own room for an hour of solitude, I knew I was at the risk of being sent for to join the sewing circle, or to read aloud, -- I being the reader, on account of my growing deafness. But I won time for what my heart was set upon, nevertheless, -- either in the early morning, or late at night. (Martineau 1877)

As with Barrett Browning’s writing heroine Aurora Leigh, women writers’ first choice of the road taken was usually not journalism but fiction or poetry or, more often even, translation: “In England, no one lives by verse that lives;/And, apprehending, I resolved by prose/ To make a space to sphere my living verse /I wrote for cyclopedias, magazines, /And weekly papers, holding up my name /To keep it from the mud. I learned the use / Of the editorial ‘we’ in a review”

Only when they discovered that creative writing was not generating the required income did women think of writing for journals, very much like men did at the time. Journalism, including reviewing, was – like translating – a kind of traineeship slowly easing the often unskilled woman writer into a profession. Virginia Woolf, in a speech on “Professions for Women” of 1931, attests to the feelings of joy and disbelief when she was paid for a review and thus enabled to buy herself a Persian cat. It was the money, clearly, that made her ambitious. Next she thought she had to write a novel which would allow her to buy a car. Interestingly, her success as a novelist did not stop her from writing reviews. Therefore, alongside her career as a novelist there was the smooth route of journalism that she continued to follow and that also supplied her with the benefit of a ready-made network. Then again, George Eliot’s first publications were translations of a philosophical and religious nature such as *Das Leben Jesu* by David Friedrich Strauss (1846). With her own motto being that “translation does not often demand genius,” Eliot, at the start of her writing career does not seem to have deemed translation as an impressive skill (Scholl 92). The next career step was her involvement with the *Westminster Review* and her work as the active editor for that august publication. This, according to Rosemary Ashton in the *ODNB* entry, is where she “found her voice as an author.”

Ironically the job that helped George Eliot decide on which road to take was not acknowledged as such for a very long time. Only recently with ground-breaking work like that by Fionnuala Dillane did researchers start to focus on George Eliot the journalist-cum-editor (Dillane 2013).

The seen and (mostly) unseen appearance of women in the printed press definitely represented a huge threat for some men of letters. The exact percentage of their involvement is hard if not impossible to determine. Barbara Onslow gracefully eludes a precise answer to the question of numbers though she does mention a significant increase towards the end of the century based on the number of members of the Society of Women Journalists which by 1896 had reached the modest number of 200 (Onslow 2000). Mostly, therefore, women’s impact on journalism and their contribution to the press was felt or even imagined rather than based on hard figures. Soon it became *bon* *ton* to complain about the influx of young women in the journalistic profession and especially their notorious unfair reviewing practices. Andrew Lang, himself a powerful critic, denounced the practice of women reviewers after a negative review of Stevenson’s *The Wrong Box* in the *Critic* when, in a letter to Brander Matthews, he observes wryly: “The fair sex has *no* sense of fair play”. The American physician and part-time writer Silas Weir Mitchell remarked rather contemptuously in this respect “the monthly magazines are getting so lady-like that they will soon menstruate” (Earnest 1950). Others tried to explain the attraction of the profession to young middle-class women. In an article for the *Fortnightly* *Review*, for instance, Janet Hogarth remarks it is a determined movement within the “Monstrous Regiment of Women” driven by a “distaste for teaching” and a “loathing for the conditions of domestic service.” Hogarth’s article, like so many other pieces on women and journalism, warned against the hardship to be associated with the profession and the hurdles women did not see or did not know about before making this choice. Women had simply not acquired the skills or were not equipped with the education to assume the influential position of the journalist. The contemporaneous comments on women’s lack of the necessary education but also their inability and innate flaws are countless. Even women themselves tended to distrust women’s competency to contribute to periodicals. Frances Low, for instance, herself a hard-working woman of letters who became a full-time journalist in October 1888 (see *ODNB*) wrote a text book for women journalists in which she did not mince her words. First she warns against optimistic expectations with regard to wages: Women with qualifications will usually earn less than male journalists who have had “no training at all.” (Low 1904) She then overtly advises the averagely cultivated woman against taking up the profession if she “would not find herself in middle age doomed to hack work and a poverty close to destitution”. She makes an exception for reviewing which she clearly considers as the most sought-after prize of the journalistic profession. This position she claims can “only be secured through a literary reputation or by intimate acquaintance with an editor” (Low 1904, Demoor 2000). But women generally simply do not have the skills. This deficiency is explained at length by Arnold Bennett in his little *Guide to Journalism for Women* (1898). While allowing for some exceptions such as Jane Austen and Alice Meynell, Bennett believes that women, in general, display a lack of restraint. They suffer, in his words, from “a garrulous, *gesticulating* efficacy” (Bennett 1898). The struggle of women journalists to obtain well-paid work in prominent journals continued to be covered in the pages of the *London Daily News* of 9 October 1901. A journalist signing herself “T.R.” there complained about the privileged treatment of men under the title “The Bitter Cry of the Female Journalists” because even a well-known women’s paper like the *Queen* made room for men’s contributions rather than women’s. This was followed by a number of letters about the subject by both men and women (*London Daily News*, 9 October 1901). By 1904 the *Northern Chronicle and General Advertiser for the North of Scotland* would claim: “There are thousands of women journalists, so-called, in London where hundreds would serve” (Anon, *Northern Chronicle*).

**Facts and Figures**

At the beginning of 2020 an *ODNB* search tracing the term “journalist” in the “statement of occupation” produced the names of 990 journalists of which a mere 129 were female. This was already a huge step forward from the previous (solely) paper version of this dictionary when journalist was considered a denigratory term and women’s work was not acknowledged in any way as much as it was at the end of the twentieth century. Many of the additional entries, in the online edition, on formerly unknown women are the somewhat belated result of the feminist research eruption of the 1970s and 1980s when archives were revisited by empowered female academics to discover an unknown wealth of forgotten lives of women in all layers of culture and also in the field of journalism. A recent tweet by Oxford Brookes architecture historian Elizabeth Darling acknowledges the importance of embedding women in the *ODNB*, “the national dictionary of record”. This came after a tweet by Elizabeth Kennedy Smith announcing that 275 entries on women had been added in the years 2018-2019. The more recent entries on women journalists in the *ODNB* are often the result of that ongoing work. Other reference works reveal a similar ambition to redress the balance. In the *DNCJ*, for instance, one in six journalists/editors listed at the back is a woman. This, the editors knew, is not a reflection of the historical reality but of present day increased interest in forgotten women writers. At the same time, however, one has to realize that in *ODNB* entries such as the one for George Eliot, “journalist” is still not part of the “statement of occupation” in spite of a relatively long section on her journalistic career in that entry. This has nothing to do with gender but with a continued scholarly take on the profession of the journalist as less respected and certainly less prestigious than that of novelist. Dickens, for instance, does not have “journalist” either in his statement of occupation.

From what Frances Low writes in her manual, it appears that she understands the commercial and political importance of periodicals. She also, most helpfully, adds a list of potential publications to which the aspiring woman journalist might want to contribute and the amount paid per column or a set number of words. It is an interesting list of British and American Newspapers and Magazines that might hold some surprises for the present-day scholar. Thus, she claims a contribution to the mainstream and prestigious *Athenaeum* weekly yielded 15s per column (ca 770 words) whereas the more reactionary *Punch* paid 2 pounds per 1,000 words. The *Athenaeum* editors’ policy was, more than elsewhere, geared towards assigning book reviews to educated women and the “marked file” revealing the names of the anonymous contributors indicates that men were not necessarily paid more for their work (Demoor 2000). The file uncovers the amounts paid for each piece of text from 1906 onwards. In that year Arthur Symons earned 6 pounds for a four-column review of two books which is significantly more than the two pounds Marie Stopes was paid for a two columns and a half review of one book. The latter payment, however, is exactly what was paid for the exhibition review of two columns by Laurence Binyon. Binyon and Stopes at the time were still unknown figures so it would appear that status decided on the amount of payment and not gender or even the length of the contribution. Similarly the journalist Andrew Lang, at the time of diminished stature compared to his renown in the 1880s and 90s, was paid a mere 1.15 pound for a two-column review. This situation of relative gender blindness came to an end when, after the First World War, contributions, also in the *Athenaeum*, were generally signed and the journalists’ names became a brand standing for quality and informed judgement (Demoor 2004).

All the contemporaneous warnings of the hurdles women journalists had to cross in the nineteenth century and attention devoted to the right and wrong ways of setting about a journalistic career inspired young women to take up this job nevertheless. After all, for a young woman, journalism seemed like a huge adventure amidst a dearth of interesting jobs for middle-class women. Soon these journalists began to organize themselves and met under the umbrella of professional organisations

**Professional Organisations**

The need for organized support and help materialized in 1894 when Joseph Snell Wood founded the Society of Women Writers & Journalists ten years after the establishment of a National Association of Journalists on 25 October at the Queen’s Hotel in Birmingham with Harry Flint as the first president (Bainbridge 1984). By 1890 the latter organisation counted 2500 members, with only 65 of those being women. So the number of 200 women who joined the Society of Women Writers & Journalists in 1894 was comparably high and, as Livermore and Bowden observed “given that the number of women in journalism at that time was small, almost every practising woman journalist must have belonged” (Livermore and Bowden 1994). The names of the presidents and vice-presidents of the society reveal a number of recognizable and eminent writers such as Mrs Humphry Ward, Alice Meynell, Annie S. Swan and Flora Annie Steel for the early years. Livermore and Bowden made a point of mentioning the number of male honorary members and patrons and they emphasised the international character of the organisation. More importantly in the development of the organisation is the launch, in 1910, of the society’s own journal: the *Woman Journalist* (1910-1957). Copies of the journal are scarce, since even the archive of the Society cannot boast a full run of the journal since “the Boer War [sic], World War I and II, not to mention later fire and floods, all took their toll of our archives” (Livermore and Bowden 1994). With the journal being launched as late as that and the absence of issues commenting on the early years one needs to rely on other sources to obtain information on women journalists’ organisations.

Very fact-like and more positive were the brief reports written by the journalist G.B. Stuart for the *Athenaeum* gossip columns. In July 1894 she reports on her own attendance of the first international press congress in Antwerp. The congress was spread over three days and she presented on the afternoon of the second day:

The afternoon was devoted to the reading and discussion of Miss Stuart's paper on “Women in English Journalism.” Miss Stuart and Miss Drew were the two women

delegates of the British Institute of journalists, and their presence in that body on a

footing of absolute equality was the subject of much comment. Miss Stuart's paper, after

dealing with the specific qualifications which women possess for journalism, touched on

their increasing number and power during the last thirty years, and maintained that they had created, not usurped, their present position; and this drew some interesting remarks from M.de Zagoulaïeff (*Novoié Vrémia*), of St. Petersburg, as to the similar employment of ladies on the Russian press[[1]](#footnote-1)

Catherine Drew, mentioned here, was a founding member of the Ladies’ Press Association and later became a vice-president of the Institute of Journalists but on Stuart herself nothing is to be found. Another report on the same congress this time taking place at Bordeau, France, was written and supplied a year later by Helen Zimmern. Surprisingly, there is no mention there of women journalists. Even so G.B. Stuart was the regular reporter on women’s matters for the *Athenaeum* until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. The interesting and steady factor here is that the context of the report is the *Athenaeum*, a prestigious weekly and a famous Victorian institution that did not hide its feminist sympathies under the editorship of Norman MacColl. Notably the gossip column at the end of each dedicated section was used as an influential instrument in informing likeminded women of what was happening in the name of the Woman’s Cause both in Britain and abroad. Contributors spotlighting women’s work in journalism and other areas of professional life and culture were Miss Bucheim, Lucy Clifford, Charlotte Stopes, Alice and Helen Zimmern, Lady Dilke and, of course, G.B. Stuart. The *Athenaeum* is an interesting case in its attention for what was happening on the socio-political scene of women’s rights and women’s fight for equality. It is also proof of the fact that editors were instrumental in giving women journalists a platform and paying them for it. If Frances Low had warned women about the financial discrimination awaiting aspiring journalists this was not the case for the women reviewers contributing to the *Athenaeum*.

While women were clearly organizing themselves to achieve more and faster, and publications on the profession were usually meant to warn them against taking it up, there were many objectionable fictional depictions of the profession.

**Caricatural Depictions**

The emblematic journalist of the twentieth century is undoubtedly superman’s girlfriend Lois Lane. Sexy *and* clever she appears everywhere and knows everything, yet she does not see that the elusive superman she is in love with is also the dull and unattractive Clark Kent right beside her. Nineteenth-century women journalists, however, were as a rule not presented in such a positive light. Journalists, like writing women and feminists, were presented as deformed old women. *Punch* especially liked to parody them as in these cartoons published in May and June 1894 (Figs. 1 & 2):



Fig. 1 “Passionate Literary Types;” *Punch* May 1894



Fig. 2 “Passionate Literary Types;” *Punch* June 1894

But not every writer toed this line of disgust and rejection. George Gissing, for one, turned his female hack writer, Marian Yule, into a new woman a man could easily fall for if his name were not Jasper Milvain. He describes Marian as elegant, youthful and piquant in unusual ways: “A girl of perhaps two-and-twenty, in a slate-coloured dress with very little ornament, and a yellow straw hat of the shape originally appropriated to males; her dark hair was cut short, and lay in innumerable crisp curls… The girl, to a casual eye was neither pretty nor beautiful, but she had a grave and impressive face, with a complexion of ivory tone; her walk was gracefully modest … (Gissing 2012).

In the end, however, Milvain breaks his engagement with the clever Marian, lured away by the much more wily and maritally ambitious Amy Reardon. Here too, even though merely fiction, the world of journalism is very much like the natural world painted by Darwin and Huxley: a world where the fittest survive and a natural selection based on the skill to adapt seems to be the one criterion that helps creatures to thrive. Aspiring women journalists too had to know about who to approach and which route to follow.

**Summary**

While there were women journalists from the eighteenth century onwards their numbers grew substantially in the course of the nineteenth century. Women wrote mainly anonymously or pseudonymously, so the exact numbers of women actively involved in journalism, are unknown, but they succeeded to prove themselves at every stage of the production of the printed press. The – largely imagined – huge numbers of this growing yet hidden community was felt as threatening to the professional male journalist who reacted by presenting women journalists as unskilled and unschooled and produced unattractive caricatures of the professional woman journalist so as to put off aspiring women writers. At the same time women reacted by producing informative manuals and clamouring for a better education, but, especially, by organizing themselves and establishing professional societies. By the beginning of the twentieth century the woman journalist was a fait accompli.

**Cross references**: *Aurora Leigh*; *Autobiography* (Martineau);Barrett-Browning, Elizabeth; Blind, Mathilde; Critics; Editors; Eliot, George; Fashion Journalism; Martineau, Harriet; Meynell, Alice; *Punch*; Suffrage Journalism; Ward, Mrs Humphry; Webster, Augusta; Woolf, Virginia

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1. “The Press congress at Antwerp” by G.B.S[tuart] 21 July 1894,p.96-7. In the Aberdeen Evening Express of 11 July 1894 no mention was made of the women representatives attending the conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)