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Mediated and Mediating Feminisms: Periodical Culture from Suffrage to Second Wave

VICTORIA BAZIN and MELANIE WATERS

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Abstract

This introduction positions the feminist periodical in relation to the material histories and cultures of feminism. In it we make the case for a sustained analysis of feminist periodical culture in Britain from the final years of the campaign for female suffrage to the demise of *Spare Rib* in 1993. We argue, moreover, that the rich scholarship on suffrage and post-suffrage magazines suggests methodologies and strategies for investigating feminist magazines throughout the twentieth century and exploring their media ecologies. Drawing on recent critiques of feminist historiography, we posit that, as mediating objects and sites of activism, periodicals can tell stories about feminist histories, but they can also problematize those stories, refusing to plug historical gaps and resisting the production of a singular and unified history of feminism.

Keywords

Feminism, periodicals, grassroots activism, women's liberation movement, suffrage, feminist historiography.

Biographical Notes

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**Mediated and Mediating Feminisms:
Periodical Culture from Suffrage to Second Wave**

This special issue brings together, for the first time, scholarship on feminist periodicals in Britain from suffrage to the second wave. In doing so, it aims to explore the cultures of feminism through the verbal and visual ‘cacophony’ of feminist magazines (Powell 2011: 441). These periodicals resonate with the voices of individual women testifying to the everyday experience of feminist activism at a grass-roots level. They are archives of feminist feeling, rich resources for an expanding field of scholarship concerned with recovering a sense of how social movements are formed, how they are mediated and how they are remembered. Above all, these magazines are mediating objects that heighten our awareness of the material histories and cultures of feminism.

There is already a substantial and dynamic body of scholarship on suffrage periodicals, which draws from a range of disciplines in order to develop new strategies for interpreting the diversity of forms and perspectives that characterize early feminist print cultures. In this special issue, we ask how the innovative methodologies developed by Barbara Green, Maria DiCenzo, Lucy Delap and Leila Ryan in their path-breaking work on suffrage publications might be recalibrated and repurposed for digging into (and digging out) the complex histories of feminist periodical culture in the post-suffrage era. By situating suffrage papers within a mobile network of publications, groups and individuals that operate across public and counter-public spheres, DiCenzo, Delap and Ryan stress the importance of examining magazines in context and in relation to other titles, but not at the expense of close critical analysis. Rather, an attentiveness to the detail and specificity of individual

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periodicals 'is crucial to an understanding of these early feminist interventions and to dispelling generalizations about them' (DiCenzo, Delap and Ryan 2011: 15). Such insights are, perhaps, even more relevant to the study of post-suffrage feminist periodicals, given the growing complexity – throughout the twentieth century – of the media networks of which they are part.

Bringing suffrage into conversation with the second wave provides an opportunity to reflect on the differences between the feminist periodicals of the early twentieth century and the periodicals that emerged as part of the women's liberation movement. The issues addressed within these magazines, unsurprisingly, are remarkably similar: reproductive rights; equal pay; childcare; and the protection of women from domestic and sexual violence. The singular difference is television, which puts into circulation the visual spectacle of the feminist as white, middle class and heterosexual, an image that occludes the differences within feminism and between feminists. Ironically, the adoption of the term 'liberation' was itself an attempt to connect women's oppression to civil rights and to anti-colonial resistance. In the 1960s, the term 'feminist' was equated with privileged white women's fight for the vote, a fight that in both the UK and the United States led to some feminists resorting to alliances that excluded non-white and working-class women in order to extend the franchise along class and racial lines. The feminist periodicals that proliferate throughout the twentieth century, however, reveal the extent to which that particular narrative is only one strand of what is a complex historical pattern of resistance to inequality and social injustice. As Natalie Thomlinson's research illustrates, there were a number of important black feminist periodicals that emerged in response to women's liberation and which indicate feminism's intersectionality. What Adrienne Rich calls the 'white solipsism' of feminism is, moreover, the subject

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of feminist debate within magazines (Rich 1978: 300). In other words, many of the women writing for feminist magazines were engaged in 'self-consciously and self-reflexively interrogating the privileging forces that constitute white female positionalities' (Rowe and Lindsey 2003: 174).

The complexity of feminist identities is, however, often missing from the mass-mediated image of feminism in the UK. That image is circulated through a series of spectacular mediated events: the grainy newsreel footage of Emily Wilding Davison throwing herself in front of the King's horse in 1913; whistle-blowing, slogan-shouting women's liberationists interrupting the live broadcast of the 1970 Miss World contest in London; news coverage of women dancing on the silos at Greenham Common on New Year's Day in 1983. Vivid and haunting, these signal images linger in the public consciousness as metonymic reminders of feminism's historic victories. This mediation of feminism, however, contributes to narratives of women's liberation in which the movement is understood not in terms of its sustained momentum, but as one in which extended periods of dormancy are punctuated by dramatic surges of radical activity. Whether imagined as a series of waves or as embattled generations of angry mothers and rebellious daughters, the progress of the women's liberation movement is prevaingly envisioned through paradigms of displacement that are now conceptual and rhetorical fixtures of feminist historiography. For the mainstream media, which is seemingly intent on figuring feminism as a gigantic symbolic body that is routinely pronounced either 'dead' or 'alive', stock images, paradigms and timelines provide a tidy shorthand for modern women's history, as well as benchmarks for gauging the reach and power of feminism's appeal at particular moments, past and present. As Astrid Henry, Victoria Hesford and Victoria Browne have noted, these received versions of feminism

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necessarily distort the past of a messily diverse and dynamic political movement, while also downplaying and sometimes even denying feminism's social and cultural impact.

Feminist periodicals are sites of mediation that offer counter-narratives to this dominant image of feminism and its histories. These counter-narratives are in dialogue with public sphere debates and, indeed, are partly shaped by those debates; at the same time, they interrupt the transmission of feminism itself as a singular, unified social movement. Many scholars are returning to periodicals, as sites of feminist activity, in order to recover the complex histories of feminism and to understand how those histories have been elided. As places where these 'forgotten' histories are recorded, periodicals make an essential contribution to the feminist archive. Research on suffrage print culture by Maria DiCenzo, Lucy DeLap, Barbara Green and Catherine Clay, as well as studies of local, grass-roots women's liberation activism by Margaretta Jolly, Eve Setch, Celia Hughes, Jeska Rees and Sarah Browne, are beginning to explore the intricate diversity of a movement that has too often been relegated to the margins of British political and social history. Such micro-level historical approaches reveal a proliferation of feminist experiences that destabilize the notion of a singular feminist history and ultimately undermine a unitary feminist identity.

For Ruth Lewis and Susan Marine, the 'telling of feminist stories is an important yet contentious activity', one in which we invariably risk 'reproducing single narratives of complex sociopolitical discourses and bodies of thought and portraying them as located in a particular time rather than as ongoing debates' (132). How to tell 'feminist stories' without re-inscribing popular myths about the movement's history is a matter of growing concern amongst scholars. For Sue Bruley

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and Laurel Forster in 'Historicising the Women's Liberation Movement', however, 'it is vital that we continue to develop the history' of that movement, whilst simultaneously recognizing that the notion of historical 'recovery' is itself problematic (Bruley and Forster 2016: 3). A corrective approach to history, one which claims to be able to plug the gaps is likely, Clare Hemmings suggests, to 'erase the conditions of its own construction, particularly if it purports to give us the final word' (Hemmings 2011: 13).

Periodicals, as a form of print activism, militate against the homogenizing logic of 'the final word' by creating multimodal spaces that can accommodate the voices of different and dissenting women. While magazines do offer a multiplicity of perspectives, however, they are also selective; contributors are more likely to be women with the time, the educational background and the resources to record their views in print. Reading feminist periodicals does not provide a full account of feminism's histories, but they do offer alternative methodologies that disrupt the narratives of progress, loss and return that Hemmings associates with the 'political grammar' of much feminist theory. To put this in slightly different terms, the material history of print media can 'unsettle' a set of chronological divides that have served as a short-hand for understanding the histories of feminism; those divides separate feminism into discreet decades of political activism. The 1970s are characterized as unreconstructed, essentialist, white and heteronormative; the 1980s as the era of identity politics brought about by black and lesbian feminist challenges to the normative feminism of the previous decade; and the 1990s are defined in terms of the post-structuralist turn that works to deconstruct the feminist subject. Reading *Shrew*, *Red Rag*, *Mukti*, *Spare Rib*, or even returning to *Time and Tide*, *Votes for Women* or *Woman's Leader*, foregrounds the weaknesses of these caricatures and exposes the

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limitations of a teleological narrative that moves inevitably and incrementally towards 'equality' (Hemmings 2011: 19). Interpreting the histories of feminism through periodicals is not simply a form of archival excavation; it challenges the way in which we tell stories about feminist activism.

As periodicals give voice to conflicts within feminism, they also demonstrate that these conflicts, though affectively charged, are by no means fatal. Indeed, these movements' histories are dominated by accounts of the political and emotional fallout from internal division. For instance, the history of the suffrage movement revolves around the split between the so-called Peths and the Panks: those who embraced militancy and those who rejected it. Memories of the women's liberation movement frequently focus on the split between socialist feminists and radical feminists that came to a head at the last WLM conference, held in Birmingham in 1978. The women who remember these events frequently refer to the bitterness of such splits suggesting irreparable damage and decline. From an historical perspective, however, it is evident that feminism simply became redirected into more strategic and focused forms of activism, such as the Greenham Common action, the Reclaim the Night campaign and support of the miner's strike, as well as the advocacy work undertaken by groups such as the Brixton Black Women's Group and the Southall Black Sisters. As the essays in this volume suggest, feminist periodical culture points to the ongoing, everyday activism of women throughout the twentieth century. Feminist activism does not disappear, it simply changes, adapts and responds to the political exigencies of its particular historical moment. The feminist magazine, we suggest, is both a material artefact that resonates with conflict and a metaphor for feminism itself; it is a cacophony of dissonant voices that, in spite of that dissonance, generates contingent feminist identities capable of collective action. In some

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instances, moreover, periodicals demonstrate how collective actions arise as direct consequences of struggles and disagreements within the movement: how so-called negative feelings can inspire and propel political mobilizations.

Tracing the histories of feminism through feminist periodicals is one way of serving the interests of those women actively involved in organising and campaigning for social and political change. It is one way of resisting accounts of history that are overarching and teleological, that stress key moments, individual actions rather than the ongoing, everyday and collective nature of activism. The magazine highlights the micro-histories of feminism, the traces of a history of grass-roots activism that develops out of collective, often conflicted and multiple feminist identities. Such a history reflects the fact that, as Lewis and Marine point out, ‘Feminism is produced by those who write about it, but also by those who do it – activists, as well as writers’ (Lewis and Marine 2015: 124). At the same time, the feminist periodical troubles the apparent distinction between ‘writing’ and ‘doing’, between words and deeds. As Laurel Forster suggests in *Magazine Movements*, ‘the very act of creating the magazine, writing copy, editing, funding the production demonstrates political commitment just as much as other forms of activism’ (Forster 2015: 211).

One might go further, however, and argue that in the age of mass-mediated mechanical reproduction, active mediation *is* a form of feminist activism. As Rosalind Gill suggests, it is important to recognize that ‘feminism is now part of the cultural field’ (Gill 2007: 34). The discursive pressures of feminism on forms of representation and mediation has contributed to a shift in the media landscape. Much has been written concerning feminism’s relation to public sphere debate. Feminism is not necessarily outside the public sphere, nor is it fully contained or circumscribed by the public sphere. Borrowing from methodologies developed in media studies that

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blur the boundaries between producer and consumer, that recognize the active engagement of the consumer in the production and reception of media content, allows for a more nuanced and subtle understanding of the relation between feminism, its histories and its mediation. The ways in which feminist discourse flows across media platforms and social spheres, interacts with consumer culture, and collaborates in and contests the production of gendered identities *is* its history, or rather its histories. In other words, the essays in this special issue all attend to feminism's active engagement in its own mediation. By drawing on methodologies within both media studies and history, as researchers on early twentieth century feminist periodicals have done, the essays on the periodicals of the WLM suggest how the feminist movement is continually defining itself against, and negotiating with, anti-feminist ideas through its active engagement with the media.

The articles in this special issue offer a sustained analysis of feminist periodical culture in Britain from the final embattled years of the campaign for female suffrage to the demise of *Spare Rib* in 1993. It begins with a crisis, as Barbara Green analyses the melancholized 'modes and moods' of the suffrage periodical *Votes for Women* in the wake of its traumatic split from the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in 1912. Once the official organ of the WSPU, *Votes for Women* operated as an 'orphaned publication' between 1912 and 1914, after its editors, Emmeline and Frederick Pethick Lawrence, rejected the WSPU's controversial turn to increasingly radical forms of militancy. By revisiting this critical and under-explored moment in the life of *Votes for Women*, Green draws into focus the 'central role print cultural forms might play in mediating emotional states of being'. Amongst the many significant interventions that Green's article makes into the field of periodical studies is her use of affect theory to shed light on the complex ways in which periodicals, 'as

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forms built to both foster and represent exchange, offer us another way of thinking about transmission and the cultivation of a group's shared affective experience'. While 'attending to the feeling of the page' can, argues Green, 'uncover connections that bond disparate parts of the periodical network into a whole', the case of *Votes for Women* touches on questions that resonate across this special issue about the extent to which feminist periodicals are calibrated to accommodate the emotional aftershocks of political disagreement and disaffiliation: what happens when the periodical is 'less a vast array of points of connection than a fragmented community of severed friendships, broken working relationships, and dismantled professional affiliations'? In its attentiveness to the 'feel of the feminist network' and the ways in which feeling circulates within and beyond the periodical, Green's article opens up exciting new avenues for periodical studies by asking how the scholarly field is itself shaped by the feelings that periodicals evoke in those who read and study them.

Catherine Clay and Maria DiCenzo each explore the legacy of suffrage print culture. Clay's article analyses how the post-suffrage weekly *Time and Tide* (1920-70) manages and negotiates the mediation of its commitment to feminist causes during the interwar period. Bringing to light *Time and Tide*'s alliance with *Woman Engineer*, the organ of the Women's Engineering Society and one of many trade magazines for women that emerged in the wake of the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, Clay examines 'the ways in which *Time and Tide* worked within women's print culture to construct its modern feminist identity'. Through an astute mapping of how *Time and Tide* by turns embraces, exploits and plays down its status as a 'legatee of the women's suffrage movement', Clay investigates how the magazine's strategic positioning of itself in relation to other print media facilitated the fulfillment of its commercial and political objectives: 'to attract the attention of a

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larger public *and* make a feminist intervention in public debates about the “modern woman”’.

DiCenzo, in her article, uses *Time and Tide* and *Woman’s Leader* to unpack some of the complex tensions that surface between equalitarian and welfare feminists in the 1920s. Shaping public sphere debates about social and economic reform that would culminate, eventually, in the post-war establishment of Britain’s welfare state, these periodicals provide a compelling basis for DiCenzo’s argument that feminist media has a significant role to play in progressive policy-making decisions. In her deft reframing of feminist debates about the endowment of marriage and birth control, DiCenzo stresses the importance of periodicals not only as sites at which women’s political opinions can be articulated and queried, but also as spaces where women’s opposing viewpoints are allowed to co-exist. This ‘free exchange of ideas’ is, she argues, not only vital to the continuation and evolution of feminist ideas and actions, but also ‘part of the democratic, consensus building and educational functions the papers facilitated’. Through her rich analysis of interwar controversies about the competing demands of equalitarian and welfare feminisms, as they unfold in *Time and Tide* and *Woman’s Leader*, DiCenzo encourages us to understand post-suffrage campaigns for feminist reform less in terms of their eventual outcomes than as ‘part of longer processes’. For DiCenzo, the ‘challenge of documenting movement media is how to capture and describe these processes – how to avoid rather than effect definitive readings’. Reading across history, DiCenzo goes on to identify the intermittent resurgence of the interwar welfare feminist agenda in various forms throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and reflects strategically about its ‘radical potential’ in the context of recent attempts to scale back the welfare state and the discriminatory impact of austerity measures on women and children.

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In her agenda-setting account of *Shrew*, the peripatetic monthly produced by different chapters of the London Women's Liberation Workshop, Victoria Bazin spotlights feminism's enduringly vexed engagement with the mass media. Through the lens of the Miss World protests in 1969 and 1970, Bazin reviews mainstream and feminist press coverage of the women's liberation movement in order to explore the Gordian predicament facing the movement's women at the start of the 1970s: how, if at all, should feminists engage with a mainstream media that is inherently misogynistic in its structure and ideological orientation? Do the benefits of publicizing the women's liberation movement outweigh the risks of having its political message distorted, disparaged or sensationalized by a masculinist and racist press? How should movement periodicals position themselves in relation to the mainstream media? Bazin, evoking the vibrant political and cultural milieu of London in the late 1960s from which *Shrew* emerged, positions this early women's liberation periodical as a lively forum for the discussion of such questions, a 'textual space where feminist activism and strategy could be debated'. Delving into the archive, Bazin reveals how *Shrew*'s attentiveness to the implications of promoting, managing and modifying feminism's public image 'makes visible a complex image of transmedial exchange that takes place across media platforms and that problematizes the predominantly spatial models that have dominated discussions of periodical culture'. With this idea of 'transmedial exchange' in mind, Bazin analyzes the rhetorical and visual biases at work in representations of the women's liberation movement as white, middle class and heteronormative. Instrumentalizing recent critiques of feminist historiography, Bazin asserts that 'the mediation of feminism is its history'. If, historically, attempts to mediate the movement have tended to spotlight signal 'feminist' events and gloss over the 'complexities and contradictions of the

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feminisms underpinning [political] action’, then the periodical – with its ability to accommodate diversity and conflict – is profoundly significant as a space in which the everyday deeds, conversations and disagreements that characterize grassroots feminist activism might be preserved.

Placing a long overdue focus on black women’s liberation periodicals, Natalie Thomlinson foregrounds the critical role played by print media in defining and representing black and Asian feminisms in Britain in the 1970s and 80s. For Thomlinson, agenda-shifting publications such as *FOWAAD*, *Speak Out*, *We Are Here*, and *Mukti*, not only gave ‘abstract movements material form’, but also ‘made movements’ [emphasis in original]. By directing their minority address to ‘a counterpublic of a counterpublic’, magazines created by and for black and Asian women were invariably limited in terms of circulation, but not in terms of influence. Crucially, Thomlinson situates these periodicals as sites at which emergent debates about intersectionality were formatively articulated; through specific reference to readers’ correspondence and magazine editorials, Thomlinson reveals how the critiques developed therein – of the whiteness of the women’s liberation movement, the racism of the British establishment and the prevailingly patriarchal structures of migrant communities – continue to resonate within feminist discourse today.

The British Library’s recent digitization of *Spare Rib*, part of the Sisterhood and After project led by Margaretta Jolly, will no doubt attract renewed critical attention to this magazine and its contribution to the WLM. As the highest circulation feminist magazine in Britain between 1972 and 1993, its attempt to push the feminist agenda into the public sphere raises all kinds of interesting questions concerning the relation between feminism, media history and social change. Mel Waters examines the ‘circulation of feelings’ in the editorials and correspondence pages of *Spare Rib*,

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arguing that ‘the forces of affect play a vital role in magnetizing the connections between movement and magazine’. Drawing on the rich and resonant body of work that traces the ‘intimate convergences of affect and feminism’, Waters focuses on what Sarah Ahmed has described as ‘bad feelings’, arguing that these feelings coalesce around issues of social injustice. The vociferous and open clashes between editors and readers, the fractured nature of ‘the sisterhood’ and the powerful feelings such dissonance produces are evident in the pages of the magazine. Yet while the history of the second wave has been characterized by the ‘bad feelings’ generated by internal divisions, Waters offers a counter-history that engages with these splits and ruptures as productive and dynamic exchanges vital within any social movement wishing to effect change. In other words, for readers of *Spare Rib* affect is contagious; it spreads between subjects within the magazine and beyond the pages of the magazine itself. In particular, it is felt and articulated as ‘anger’, ‘pain’, ‘rage’ and ‘shock’ in the exchanges that take place between 1990 and 1992 concerning the magazine’s decision to drop the term ‘liberation’ from its masthead; it is also felt in the criticisms levelled at the editors for what is perceived to be a white, bourgeois, heterosexual perspective. For Waters, affect might be evident through the short-circuiting of ‘lines of identification’, in the failed transmission rather than the successful broadcast. Such insights offer a tantalizing glimpse of how the histories of feminism’s failures might be reinterpreted as histories of interruption. Feminist media, in other words, is affective and effective in its ability to momentarily suspend what might be referred to as normative transmission of gender.

In an age of digital and online communication, where transmission appears immediate, transparent and direct, the magazine as a print artefact is a ‘thing’ that reminds us of the materiality of media. In Barbara Green’s words, feminist periodicals

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function ‘as objects in and of themselves’ (Green 2008: 77). They are palpable reminders that forms of communication are just that: forms; the processes of transmission are themselves ‘thick’, textured and layered. Attention to the printed word or image, to the formal properties of the magazine itself, its seriality, its use of repetition, its intermedial relationships with other forms of communication, its compositional and periodical codes, its stylistic features and its typographical layout all contribute to an understanding of how feminist thought and feeling is transmitted through these complex codes of signification. They also alert us to the ways in which media interrupt or short-circuit communication, how the forms of transmission are themselves carriers of meaning, how those meanings might disrupt the flow of information across media platforms. Periodical archives do tell stories about feminist histories, countering dominant progressive narratives of a unified movement, but as material objects they also refuse to tell stories, to plug the gaps of history, to give the ‘final word’ on feminism.

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