

Speaking Out: The Role of the Press in the Suffrage Movement

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Elicia is a senior undergraduate history major who wrote this article for Dr. Pete Voelz's History of American Journalism. This past year she also wrote a paper on "Royal Bastards," about illegitimacy at the late-Stuart Court, and she delivered a paper on that subject at the Phi Alpha Theta Southern Illinois Regional Conference at Carbondale in April.

The fight for suffrage was an important movement for women, and the press proved valuable to the cause. Both male and female journalists wrote in support of suffrage and against it. Various newspapers and journals were created in the struggle for rights. Most of these publications come from the nineteenth century when the suffrage movement was decades away from achieving its goals. These publications strove to inform and to motivate and are a lasting testimony to those who spoke out for equality.

The first "acknowledged ...'feminist' newspaper to spring from the fledgling woman's rights movement of the nineteenth century" was the *Una*.⁽¹⁾ Paulina Kellogg Wright Davis in Rhode Island created this groundbreaking newspaper in February of 1853. The *Una* was designed to speak to the "real women" of all classes.⁽²⁾ In June 1853, the paper voiced its dedication to the cause. "We ask to be regarded, respected, and treated as human beings, of full age and natural abilities, as equal sinners, and not as infants or beautiful angels, to whom the rules of civil and social justice do not apply."⁽³⁾ The women who ran the newspaper saw women as an "oppressed group," and they believed that women should know the truth about their condition. William Lloyd Garrison wrote in the July 1853 issue about "the irony of allowing women to 'sing' but not to 'speak' that 'our Redeemer livith.'"⁽⁴⁾

The *Una*, which sold for \$1, counted women's rights activists such as Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Coffin Mott, Susan B. Anthony, William Lloyd Garrison, and Elizabeth Blackwell among its subscribers. Unfortunately, the newspaper that was directed towards all women began to deal more and more with the issues of the wealthy, well-educated white woman.⁽⁵⁾ This proved to be the

downfall of the *Una*.

The *Una* was not the only paper devoted to women's equal rights. *The Revolution* occupied "an important place in the history of suffrage journalism and the feminist struggle."⁽⁶⁾ Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony published this paper from 1868-1870. In one edition, Julia Ward Howe wrote imploring "our sisters...to make common cause with us" to organize not "against men" but "against superstition."⁽⁷⁾ In addition to equal rights, the paper also dealt with divorce and prostitution.

Cady Stanton and Anthony had printed 10,000 copies of *The Revolution's* first issue. It received mixed reviews. The *Daily Times* deemed it "readable, well-edited and instructive" and the *Chicago Times* praised it as a "readable sheet, well printed and well written, bold and independent." In another favorable review the *Providence Press* said that "the editors of *The Revolution* 'have an irrepressible spirit, and if they do not produce a revolution it will be the first time that justice and freedom persistently set forth fail of accomplishing a grand result.'" But the *Daily Times* wrote that "*The Revolution's* ideas were impracticable" and the *New York Times* said that the paper "was a victim of illogical thinking and that its motto was 'meaningless and foolish.'"⁽⁸⁾ However, these negative reviews did not deter the editors.

The Revolution strove to not only "complain about suffrage" but to actively promote the vote. The publication was too revolutionary for some people and it experienced financial difficulties. Horace Greeley and Wendell Phillips ignored the paper because they felt that it was not conservative enough. The paper was never well off financially. The original subscription price of \$2, and later \$3, was not enough to sustain the publication. The final blow to *The Revolution* was the founding of a rival paper, the *Woman's Journal*. *The Revolution* was eventually sold for \$1 in 1870 and then sold again to the *New York Christian Enquirer*.⁽⁹⁾

The paper that helped to end *The Revolution* was conservative in nature. The *Woman's Journal* has been referred to as "'The Suffrage Bible'" and "'The Torchbearer of the Woman Suffrage Cause.'"⁽¹⁰⁾ The paper included regular columns, gossip, humor, poetry, letters, and a section about children. The less abrasive nature of this paper probably helped it to attract a larger readership than other papers that were radical in nature. The *Woman's Journal* "stood as a beacon of feminist respectability, charting a course of protest between an oppressive status quo and an abrasive radicalism."⁽¹¹⁾ This publication relied on raising consciousness in a way that was intimate and established a relationship between the reader and the paper. This relationship was also another factor in favor of this publication over other publications such as *The Una*. The editors wanted to prescribe, mobilize, and maintain courses of action while broadening intellectual horizons. In the end, the

Woman's Journal became a means by which the conservative branch of the women's suffrage struggle discharged important functions. [\(12\)](#)

The *Una*, *The Revolution*, and the *Woman's Journal* were not the only three equal rights newspapers. In Louisiana, Mrs. Ida Porter Boyer edited a suffrage paper called the *Southern Citizen*. Other newspapers that supported suffrage included the *Woman's Tribune*, *Woman's Column*, *Farmer's Wife*, and the *Woman's Exponent*. Sherilyn Cox Bennison found "at least 12 suffrage newspapers in the American West, all edited by women from 1869 until 1914." These newspapers featured reports on meetings, speech reprints, rebuttals, and arguments for rights. The suffrage papers and journals proved valuable in uniting women by bridging "the gaps of time and distance ...across the country" and helped them form the ties that created a social movement. According to scholar Linda Steiner, the suffrage press helped women to evolve "intellectually and emotionally" by "satisfying communal models for acting, thinking, judging and feeling." [\(13\)](#)

There were other ways that publications could support suffrage without becoming suffrage papers. Other newspapers dedicated portions of their publications to the suffrage cause. The *Atlanta Constitution* created a woman suffrage department in July of 1913. The *Atlanta Journal* and the *Columbus Ledger* each published a weekly suffrage column for several years and, in 1914, the *Atlanta Georgian* and the *Ledger* published special suffrage issues. [\(14\)](#) Some non-suffrage papers had staff members that were assigned to the suffrage cause. In this way the newspapers could support the suffrage cause while still providing their previous services. This combination of suffrage and non-suffrage issues probably assisted the cause. Readers drawn to the news might find themselves reading about suffrage and might become interested in the movement. Emma Bugbee covered the suffrage movement for the *New York Tribune*. [\(15\)](#) Bugbee went to suffrage groups to get news from the organization heads. [\(16\)](#) The Equal Suffrage Party reported in 1915 that "forty-five papers had signified their willingness to publish suffrage news." [\(17\)](#)

Not all papers were supportive. The *New York Herald* called participants in an 1853 National Woman's Rights Convention "unsexed in mind" and the convention itself, the "Woman's Wrong Convention." [\(18\)](#) Supportive papers attempted to counteract the negative press and to allow women a chance to consider ideas and arguments for themselves. [\(19\)](#) These negative papers did not deter the suffrage papers from their cause.

In addition to newspapers and journals, supporters of women's suffrage disseminated their ideas in other ways. Leaflets and pro-suffrage pamphlets were common. Mabel Craft Deering, suffrage press chairman for California, wrote a report on the important role that press work played in the suffrage movement. She felt that her most important contribution to the suffrage movement was her

presswork. Her report became a "readable guide for suffrage campaigners" in other states. [\(20\)](#)

The press helped the suffrage movement immensely. Through various newspapers and journals, as well as leaflets and pamphlets, the message of suffrage was disseminated. Cady Stanton wrote that "once enfranchised, women could vote in legislation that would protect the home and family." [\(21\)](#) Her words served to inspire women and to "inform" them that it was their duty to work for suffrage. Finally, "by presenting public issues to their readers, these newspapers subtly but effectively encouraged women to think of themselves as competent, sensible, potentially important persons and to perceive themselves as members of a group with common problems and concerns." [\(22\)](#)

The pro-suffrage publications served to unite supporters of the cause. The newspapers and journals helped to create organizations such as the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) and the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA). [\(23\)](#) The suffrage publications served as a means of attracting members and supporters. Despite the fact that these publications began early in the movement, the struggle for rights would have been even more difficult without them. They helped to initiate the movement and to spread its message.

1. Mari Boor Tonn, "The *Una*, 1853-1855: The Premiere of the Woman's Rights Press," in *A Voice of Their Own: The Woman's Suffrage Press, 1840-1910*, ed. Martha M. Solomon (Tuscaloosa, 1991), 48.

2. *Ibid.*, 50.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 58.

5. *Ibid.*, 52, 62.

6. Lynne Masel-Walters, "Their Rights and Nothing More: A History of *The Revolution*, 1868-70," *Journalism Quarterly* 53 (1976): 242.

7. Maurine H. Beasley and Sheila J. Gibbons, *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism*, ed. Sanford J. Ungar (Washington, D.C., 1993), 84.

8. Masel-Walters, "Their Rights and Nothing More," 244.

9. *Ibid.*, 246, 244, 249-51.

10. Susan Schultz Huxman, "*The Woman's Journal*, 1870-1890: The Torchbearer for Suffrage," in *A Voice of Their Own*, 87, 90.

11. *Ibid.*, 109.

12. *Ibid.*, 97, 99, 107, 109.

13. A. Elizabeth Taylor, "Revival and Development of the Woman Suffrage Movement in Georgia," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 42 (1958): 350; Martha M. Solomon, "The Role of the Suffrage Press in the Woman's Rights Movement," in *A Voice of Their Own*, 15; Beasley and Gibbons, *Taking Their Place*, 82; Solomon, "The Role of the Suffrage Press."

14. A. Elizabeth Taylor, "The Last Phase of the Women Suffrage Movement in Georgia," *Georgia Historical*

Quarterly 43 (1959): 11.

15. Jean E. Collins, *She Was There: Stories of Pioneering Women Journalists* (New York, 1980), 21.

16. *Ibid.*, 23.

17. Taylor, "The Last Phase," 11.

18. Solomon, "The Role of the Suffrage Press," 13.

19. *Ibid.*, 13-4.

20. Taylor, "The Last Phase," 13; Rudolph M. Lapp, "Mable Craft Deering: A Young Woman of Advanced Ideas," *California History* 66 (1987): 168.

21. Masel-Walters, "Their Rights and Nothing More," 247.

22. Solomon, "The Role of the Suffrage Press," 14.

23. Masel-Waters, "Their Rights and Nothing More," 245.