

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“The Melancholy of Women’s Pages”: Readers, Features, and the Rise of Ad-Sponsored Media

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Abstract

Around the turn of the twentieth century, U.S. newspapers began to address women specifically in separate sections, hoping to gather a female audience for advertisers. Scholarship on early twentieth-century women consumers tends to emphasize possibility and self-expression. Women’s reactions to the first women’s pages, by contrast, indicate that they could feel constrained and condescended to when welcomed into the public sphere on the basis of being consumers. Readers and journalists aired their grievances about the women’s page in its first decades, and sometimes found ways to use the page to their own ends. But publishers carried on designing women’s features with advertisers in mind. By the 1920s, the women’s page had become visually seductive, didactic, domestic, and relentlessly consumerist. This article uses the women’s page to investigate the rise of ad-subsidized media in the twentieth century and to weigh up the opportunities and costs of this media system.

On a February Sunday in 1894, Boston newsreaders encountered the *Woman’s Post* on newsstands, in place of their usual *Boston Post*. The *Post*’s publisher had recruited some of the paper’s regular contributors, alongside other women journalists and writers in the city, to report, write, and edit the entire paper for one day. These women covered all the paper’s “beats,” from sports to crime, and they also wrote a men’s page. Here they offered fashion notes, hair styling tips, marriage advice, local news about men (“What Men Are Doing”), short profiles (“About Well-Known Men”), and a summary of the flaws that male readers ought to work on correcting (“Men’s Worst Faults.”) The page included ads—for beer, whiskey, and cigars—that specifically targeted men.¹

The spoof worked, because readers would have recognized all these conventions from the women’s page—still new in 1894, but fast becoming a feature. In the 1890s, many American newspapers had begun to print columns or whole pages targeted at women, with titles like “Women’s Interests” or “The Household.” They did so in pursuit of advertising revenue. Much of this content was already and immediately generic and focused above all on beauty, fashion, and shopping. But not all of it was. In these early days some journalists and readers used women’s sections creatively. Readers, as they exchanged letters, created spaces of sociability and

This article has benefitted from generous feedback from too many readers and audiences to list here, but I would like to thank by name Charlotte Moberly and Danielle Salt, who each provided ace research assistance.

¹*Boston Post*, Feb. 11, 1894, 19. Six other newspapers produced women’s editions in the mid-1890s; see Will C. Conrad, Kathleen F. Wilson, and Dale Wilson, *The Milwaukee Journal: The First Eighty Years* (Madison, 1964), 50.

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mutual aid. Suffragist writers expressed solidarity and common cause. Some women's columns trumpeted women's achievements, integrating them into the definition of "women's interests." Right on the women's page readers and writers debated the terms of their inclusion within the newspaper. In the *Woman's Post*, they laughed at the idea of bundling the interests of half the population onto a single, separate page.

In the 1890s, it was still possible to criticize the generic women's page and experiment in making it more answerable to women's varied needs. But as publishers pursued economies of scale and advertising revenue across the 1900s and 1910s, they edited out experimental features and dissident voices. By the 1910s and 1920s, readers could expect to find beautiful illustrations, specialized advice, and alluring visions of domesticity in multi-page women's sections. Notably, these sections avoided politics, streamlined reader participation, and addressed themselves to a reader imagined as a housewife and consumer.²

This article tells the story of this transformation, interrogating the ways that advertising drove the content of the women's page.³ In doing so, it joins a conversation about women launching into public life through their roles as consumers around the turn of the twentieth century. Most scholarship on this period shows women embracing the public possibilities of consumerism. Middle- and upper-class women organized a consumer movement to demand safer working conditions and, by extension, safer goods.⁴ Women of means used their purchasing power to demand public space—sidewalks, restaurants, theaters, and public transit—that accommodated them.⁵ Working-class women used consumer goods to fashion new kinds of selves that they carried into the workplace, the dancehall, and the picket line.⁶

²This article is based on systematic readings of twenty-five metropolitan daily newspapers and eight Black weekly newspapers from the beginning of their women's material (as early as the late 1870s, but usually beginning in the 1890s) and up to 1930. The regional breakdown for metropolitan dailies is: seven in the Northeast, five in the mid-Atlantic, six in the Midwest, four in the South, and three in the West. The regional breakdown for Black weeklies is: two in the Northeast, two in the mid-Atlantic, and four in the Midwest. I sampled Southern Black papers but found no women's material to include. I have supplemented systematic readings with keyword searches in digitized papers, particularly when tracking down syndicated features. The women's pages in mass-circulation papers and the Black press followed similar trends and can be analyzed together, but the foreign language press is too varied to treat as a single genre, and I do not include it here. Works on the foreign-language press that discuss women's pages include Ayelet Brinn, "Beyond the Women's Section: Rosa Lebensboym, Female Journalists, and the American Yiddish Press," *American Jewish History* 104, no. 2 (2020): 347–69, and Peter Conolly-Smith, *Translating America: An Immigrant Press Visualizes American Popular Culture, 1895–1918* (Washington D.C., 2004).

³Scholarship on the early women's page and the women who wrote for it includes Alice Fahs, *Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space* (Chapel Hill, 2012), ch 2; Julie Golia, "Courting Women, Courting Advertisers," *Journal of American History* 103, no. 3 (Dec. 2016): 606–21; Kay Mills, *From the Women's Pages to the Front Page* (New York, 1988); and Ishbel Ross, *Ladies of the Press: The Story of Women in Journalism by an Insider* (New York, 1936). On the postwar women's pages, see Kimberley Wilmot Voss, *Re-evaluating Women's Page Journalism in the Post-War Era: Celebrating Soft News* (London, 2018); Mei-Ling Yang, "Women's Pages or People's Pages: The Production of News for Women in the Washington Post in the 1950s," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 364–78; and Marion Marzolf, *Up From the Footnote: A History of Women Journalists* (New York, 1977).

⁴Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Consumers' White Label Campaign of the National Consumers' League, 1898–1918," in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Mattias Judd (New York, 1998), and Lawrence Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago, 2009), ch 5.

⁵Emily Remus, *A Shopper's Paradise: How the Ladies of Chicago Claimed Power and Pleasure in the New Downtown* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), and Alison Isenberg, *Downtown America: A History of the Place and the People Who Made It* (Chicago, 2004), chs 1 and 3.

⁶Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia, 1986) and Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1999).

Black and immigrant women entrepreneurs built beauty-product empires that offered new models of womanhood and new political platforms.⁷ In these narratives, we almost never see anyone express discontent with the consumer-based terms on which they have entered public life.

Yet on the women's page—and in writing about the women's page—women expressed irritation, indignation, and outright rage at being addressed within the public sphere as only a marketing category. Readers and writers alike complained about their conscription to and constriction within a gendered form of media that did not really serve them. Whereas the emotional landscape of early twentieth-century consumer culture and of a commercialized public sphere is often described as one of longing, desire, and fantasy, this article heeds the negative feelings that this same culture could produce. In an essay for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1906, an anonymous woman reader explained how the newspaper section urged her toward a domestic and fashionable model of womanhood that she neither asked for nor approved of. She called her essay “The Melancholy of Woman's Pages.”⁸

The women's page previews the way women would be both catered to and marginalized in twentieth-century media. Within a broader information package, newspaper editors created identifiable women's content that advertisers would want to affiliate with. This strategy proved so lucrative that “soft” content for women subsidized the “hard” news across at least the first half of the twentieth century. The imagined female consumer then fuelled the development of new genres, and the advertisers seeking her attention underwrote entire mediums. By accommodating a sex-specific selling agenda, the media drove what Mei-Ling Yang has called “the vast economic investment in gender stereotype.”⁹

The women's page also previews the experience of all media audiences as new mediums came to rely on ad sponsorship. The women's page pioneered the model of the newspaper “feature” that gathered a specific reading audience for the purpose of advertising to them. These features then multiplied; early twentieth-century newspapers came to offer sections on real estate, automobiles, theater, bicycles, gardening, and books, to name only a few.¹⁰ Subsequent mediums—radio, television, cable, digital news, and social media—carried forward this model in which content gathered particular audiences that advertisers wanted to reach. As more and more Americans became target demographics, they too experienced the mix of emotions first prompted by the women's pages. Readers, listeners, and viewers all learned how it felt to be recognized but also reduced; showcased but also stereotyped; catered to but also commodified.

This article studies the window of time between the discovery of women as a newspaper audience and the perfecting of a system that profitably sold women readers' attention to advertisers. For a few decades, in a few dozen newspapers, publishers allotted space for women's material without dictating exactly what could be discussed there. These early women's pages therefore hosted a relatively open female print public sphere. They also made space for women to object to the very premise of a women's page. These conversations were subsumed by the slickly commercial page of the twentieth century. The transformation of the women's page helps us to see more clearly the opportunities and costs of a media system that once valued women, and now values all of us, primarily as consumers.

⁷Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill, 2009), ch 2, and Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York, 1998).

⁸Unnamed author, “The Melancholy of Women's Pages,” *Atlantic Monthly* 97, no. 5 (April 1906): 574–575. Within the large body of work on early twentieth-century consumer culture, William Leach's *Land of Desire* stands out for its attention to criticism of and resistance to consumerism. Leach's work does not argue, though, that women paid any different price in this process than did men. William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York, 1993).

⁹Yang, “Women's Pages or People's Pages,” 364–78.

¹⁰On the rise of newspaper features, see Julia Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis: City Papers and the Making of Modern Americans* (Chicago, 2016).

The Rise of the Women's Pages

For most of the nineteenth century, newspaper publishers thought of their readers as voters, citizens, and customers—in that order—and therefore offered very little material for women. The political parties that subsidized many newspapers certainly did not push editors to speak to women. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, many publishers realized they could reap greater profits if they sold subscriptions to a wide, non-partisan audience and then used that audience as a lure to attract advertisers.¹¹

This shift incentivized publishers to pursue women as paying subscribers and, especially, as potential buyers of advertised goods. As early as the 1880s, magazines were proving how profitable it could be to gather a female audience that merchants would pay to reach. Newspaper publishers attempted to do the same.¹² In 1900, the managing editor of the *New York Evening Post* hired Rheta Childe Dorr as the paper's first women's page editor. "The *Evening Post*," recounted Dorr, "was the best paper in New York, but the business office complained that it was not read by women." Dorr was quickly made to understand her mission: "attract department-store advertising."¹³ Mass-circulation newspapers plastered cities with posters depicting newspaper reading as a female habit (Figure 1). These posters made it look easy to read and carry a broadsheet newspaper elegantly, in part by downplaying their massive size. They also took care to show young, white, relatively prosperous women readers—the types of women that publishers and advertisers most wanted to attract.

By the 1890s many papers ran daily women's columns under illustrated headings and devoted an entire page to women on Saturday or Sunday (Figure 2). Some publishers purchased their women's material from news syndicates. The United Press, the Bok Syndicate Press, and Tillotson & Son offered women's columns from the late 1880s onward, which they would either wire or ship to all customer newspapers for simultaneous printing.¹⁴ As they were developing their women's pages, publishers were also fashioning theater, music, book review, magazine, and society pages with women in mind.¹⁵ Publishers could buy many of these features from syndicates too.

Publishers recognized the commercial utility of a women's page, but they did not automatically know what to do with the space. They often sought the easiest and cheapest way to piece a page together. Some asked a current employee to edit a women's column on top of their other work, rather than hiring someone specifically for the job.¹⁶ Without the time or salary to

¹¹On the movement from a partisan to a commercial press, see Richard L. Kaplan, "From Partisanship to Professionalism: The Transformation of the Daily Press," in *A History of the Book in America, Volume Four. Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880–1940*, ed. Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway (Chapel Hill, 2009), and Gerald Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, 1992).

¹²On the business model of women's magazines, see Helen Damon-Moore, *Magazines for the Millions: Gender and Commerce in the Ladies' Home Journal and the Saturday Evening Post* (Albany, 1994), ch 1. On the new interest in women as newspaper readers and targets of newspaper advertisements, see Golia, "Courting Women, Courting Advertisers"; Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis*, 24–6; Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News*, 64–5 and 116–7; and George Juergens, *Joseph Pulitzer and the New York World* (Princeton, 1966), 132–7.

¹³Rheta Childe Dorr, *A Woman of Fifty* (New York, 1924), 92, 95.

¹⁴Willard G. Bleyer, *Main Currents in the History of American Journalism* (Boston, 1927), 400–1. On the early history of syndicated features, see Charles Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace: The Role of Newspaper Syndicates, 1860–1900* (New York, 1997).

¹⁵This is deducible from the tone, the content, and the ads surrounding these sections. Women were also more likely to write or edit these sections than others in the paper. On the *New York World's* varied attempts to cater to women, see Juergens, *Joseph Pulitzer and the New York World*, ch 5.

¹⁶*Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Apr. 24, 1893, 15, and Elizabeth G. Jordan, "The Newspaper Woman's Story," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 51, no. 3 (Mar. 1893): 341.



Figure 1. *Boston Sunday Herald* poster, 1893–1897, New York Public Library Art and Architecture Collection. New York Public Library Digital Collections, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-8f2b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> (accessed Nov. 16, 2024). *New York Sunday Journal* poster, undated. Art Poster File, PR 055-001-04517, New-York Historical Society. Source: © New-York Historical Society. *New York Sunday Journal* poster, January 26th [18–]. Art Poster File, PR 055-001-0492, New-York Historical Society. Photograph: © New-York Historical Society.

do substantial research or reporting, early women's column editors sometimes recycled material from other publications rather than write their own.¹⁷ Column editors tried to make their budgets go farther by paying freelancers by the line or by the piece; the low pay may have also lowered the quality of the writing.¹⁸ Perhaps ambivalent about welcoming women into their reading public, most publishers also restricted women's columns to small corners of the paper. "This column has its limits as well as its purposes," explained Margaret Black in her women's column in the 1896 *Baltimore Afro American*. "The editor allows us only a short space and being women of course we must bow to the inevitable."¹⁹

Male editors' ideas about women, and the appropriate material for women, could also limit women's pages. Women journalists recounted their articles being turned down because, in the words of one male editor, "women are not interested in that sort of thing."²⁰ In her attempts to write women's page articles that would make it into print, one journalist explained, "I realize . . . that I'm not expected to be thoughtful. So I compromise between the best that I could do and that which I am expected to do."²¹

Writers and Readers Make the Most of the Women's Pages

Despite the low standards of many women's pages, enterprising writers and readers managed to do extraordinary things within these spaces. Some women treated the women's page as women's news, describing achievements or breakthroughs in public and professional life. Some extended the civic function of a newspaper onto the women's page; others penned suffragist columns, using the paper to organize and persuade readers. Still others turned the page into a space of exchange, where readers could chat and share expertise. Readers and writers found opportunities within a genre still coming into being.

¹⁷For examples of this kind of reprinting, see the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan. 13, 1884, 6; *Rocky Mountain News*, July 13, 1893, 5; *Wisconsin Weekly Advocate*, May 7, 1898, 6.

¹⁸On "space work" for the woman's page, see Dorr, *A Woman of Fifty*, 91.

¹⁹Margaret Black, "Women's Column," *Baltimore Afro American* Feb. 15, 1896, 2.

²⁰"Now Here's a Question for Women to Answer," *New York Herald*, June 14, 1891, 9.

²¹*Ibid.*

religious weeklies, and trade journals. They then printed lists of women's accomplishments in public life under titles like "Woman's Work in the World" and "What Women Are Doing."²³ Around the turn of the century, these lists appeared in newspapers across the political spectrum, from pro- to anti-suffrage, Democratic to Republican. They appeared in Black weeklies as well as mainstream dailies. In the 1890s, a syndicated column by Eliza Archard Conner carried these lists far beyond the nation's biggest cities and their newspapers, to places like Honolulu, Phoenix, and Wichita.

The women journalists in Boston had made fun of this type of column in their 1894 *Woman's Post* by printing equivalent columns on their men's page. The short list of "What Men Are Doing" highlighted the absurdity of devoting such a small space to the activities of all men (or all women) around the world. Yet these columns did have a real purpose: in them, women succeeded not just as individuals, but as representatives of their sex. The first woman fellow of the New York Academy of Sciences, a woman chief medical officer, a woman District Court clerk; the reader could glory in all of their successes.²⁴ One column made clear that articles on women's achievements were meant to inspire readers: "If you know of any woman whose example has helped you, or might be an incentive to others, send in a brief account of her and what she has done."²⁵

When column editors profiled women at work, they broadened readers' ideas of the work women could do and normalized the lives of working women. Editors reported with special interest on women who did physically challenging work and women who managed men. The *Grand Rapids Herald* celebrated a young mail stage coach driver: "She can manage a four horse team with as much skill as any man in the county."²⁶ When columns emphasized the growing ranks of working women, they suggested power in numbers. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* noted that 15,000 women typists worked in lower Manhattan; the *Baltimore Afro American* reported that 8,000 women worked in government offices in Washington.²⁷ Columns even celebrated women's labor activism. "Chorus girls are organizing a union," announced the *Chicago Daily News*, "and already 200 of the 1,500 in New York city have joined."²⁸

Lists of women's doings did not technically contradict the editorial line of any paper, even an anti-suffrage one. Journalist Ida Husted Harper spelled out the strategy: "if the vital question of Suffrage is prohibited, there still are many chances to show the advancement they are making in the professions, the industries, the clubs, and the various associations; if these are vetoed as too strong-minded, then to encourage the great work they are doing in education, religion, philanthropy and the home."²⁹ Beneath managing editors' radar, women journalists paraded women's abilities to do paid work, to participate in politics, and to shape their own futures.

A handful of newspapers printed civic-minded women's columns designed to update and involve women in local reforms and campaigns, sending the message that women had roles to play in public life. In 1895, the *New York Herald* started a daily column called "For the End of the Century Woman." While it gestured toward standard women's material with a menu and

²³Titles taken from the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*. The impetus for these columns seemed to come from readers and writers rather than managing editors; see Dorr, *A Woman of Fifty*, 96, and Fahs, *Out on Assignment*, 85–6.

²⁴"Timely Topics," *Atlanta Constitution*, Aug. 31, 1902, D6; "What Women Are Doing," *Minneapolis Journal*, Jan. 9, 1904, magazine section, 5; "Feminine Fancies," *Baltimore Afro American*, Feb. 11, 1905, 3.

²⁵"Women of Mark," *Philadelphia North American*, Oct. 26, 1913, Sunday magazine, 7.

²⁶Eliza Archard Conner, "Woman's World in Paragraphs," *Grand Rapids Herald*, Nov. 9, 1892, 6. For an example of women managing men, see "Concerning Women," *Chicago Daily News*, Nov. 7, 1911, 10.

²⁷"Women's Interests," *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Dec. 22, 1892, 6; "Feminine Fancies," *Baltimore Afro American*, Feb. 11, 1905, 3.

²⁸"Concerning Women," *Chicago Daily News*, July 16, 1914, 10.

²⁹Ida Husted Harper, "The Training of Women Journalists," *The International Congress of Women of 1899, Volume 4: Women in the Professions*, 60.

some recipes, the bulk of the column discussed civic issues and women's causes. It reported on local meetings of the Woman's Republican Association, on fundraising efforts for hospitals and the YWCA, and on school reform bills' progress through Albany.³⁰ Simultaneously, Margaret Black at the *Baltimore Afro American* encouraged women to write in about their charitable works and reported on local lectures by fellow Black women activists.³¹ Nearly twenty years later, the *Philadelphia North American* printed an in-depth Sunday feature, "A Page for Women in Politics, Philanthropy, Social Betterment and Kindred Affairs." From 1913 through 1916, editor Rose Weston filled this weekly page with reports on women's local campaigns for everything from prison reform to playgrounds, from cooperative grocery stores to fair industrial wages.³² The page invited readers' participation by listing future events and explaining what would happen at each one.

As Ida Harper had pointed out, many publishers did not allow their women's page to discuss suffrage. But a handful of mainstream daily newspapers did print columns explicitly devoted to women's rights, each at the initiative of a single committed suffragist. While most papers printed some news of suffragists' activities, these columns actively argued for the cause. And while many women's pages devoted space to fashion, beauty, and entertaining, suffragists' columns insisted that women had better things to think about. "Is it absolutely necessary to have the largest part of a magazine intended for women given up to clothes?" asked Eliza Conner.³³ Alice Ives congratulated Boston women who had taken to wearing trousers in public: "Success to them! Why should a woman be compelled to drag around yards of superfluous dry goods if she doesn't want to?"³⁴ Many women's pages offered elaborate luncheon menus and described novel table decorations; instead the *Chicago Inter-Ocean* invited readers: "Shall we not begin a reform, and invite our friends often, and have less ceremony and less variety to our tea-tables? Shall we not have a less number of dishes, and more variety to our conversation?"³⁵ Where most women's page material treated housework as a woman's natural duty, the *Chicago Tribune's* suffragist columnist Belle Squire defended the idea of a Housekeeper's Union, insisting that housework was labor like any other and ought to be regulated.³⁶

The dynamics in Black women's columns were slightly different, but these columns also argued for women's rights. In her first women's column for the *New York Freeman*, Gertrude Mossell explained that "all success, progress or needs of our women will be given prompt mention," and she went on to recommend a range of pamphlets arguing for women's suffrage.³⁷ The *Baltimore Afro-American* women's column advocated for women's equal access to higher education in all fields, under the title "Give the Women a Fair Chance."³⁸ Both Gertrude Mossell at the *Freeman* and Margaret Black at the *Afro American* discussed discrimination against and harassment of Black women in their columns, and Margaret Black celebrated an instance in which a Black woman had won justice in the courts.³⁹ The civil rights mission of the Black press made it possible for women's columns to discuss some topics that mainstream dailies would not

³⁰Examples from "For the End of Century Woman" in the *New York Herald*, Jan. 11, 1895, 9; Jan. 12, 1895, 8; Jan. 17, 1895, 10.

³¹Margaret Black, "Women's Column," *Baltimore Afro American*, Feb. 22, 1896, 2, and May 30, 1896, 2.

³²*Philadelphia North American*, Apr. 6, 1913, news section, 7, and Dec. 7, 1913, news section, 9.

³³Conner, "Woman's World in Paragraphs," *Grand Rapids Herald*, June 23, 1892, 7.

³⁴Alice Ives, "Woman's World in Paragraphs," *The Times* (Owosso, MI), June 9, 1893, 6.

³⁵C. A. Soule in "Woman's Kingdom," *Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean*, June 8, 1878, 6.

³⁶Belle Squire, "Will Ten-Hour Labor Law Invade the Home?" *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 6, 1911, B5.

³⁷Mrs. N. F. Mossell, "Our Woman's Department: Woman Suffrage," *New York Freeman*, Dec. 26, 1885, 2. On Gertrude Mossell (Mrs. N. F. Mossell), see Rodger Streitmatter, *Raising Her Voice: African American Women Journalists Who Changed History* (Lexington, MA, 1994), ch 3.

³⁸"Women's Column," *Baltimore Afro American*, May 9, 1896, 2.

³⁹Mossell, "Our Woman's Department," *New York Freeman*, Mar. 27, 1886, 2; Black, "Women's Column," *Baltimore Afro American*, May 9, 1896, 2.

touch, such as sexual assault, but it also limited women columnists' ability or willingness to criticize the beliefs or behavior of Black men. Where white suffragist columns frequently ridiculed male politicians, academics, and the clergy, Black women's columns only criticized Black men for not doing enough to defend Black women.⁴⁰

Through the turn of the twentieth century, the most wide-ranging women's columns of all were those that printed readers' letters. Some of the nation's major papers, from the late 1870s onward, printed columns or entire pages of women's letters, with little or no commentary from the column's editor. These columns departed from newspaper conventions and instead imitated nineteenth-century religious, scientific, and literary journals which printed readers' correspondence with one another. Women newspaper readers forged communities and aired new ideas within this older format.

Every correspondent chose a pen name, so it is impossible to know exactly who read and contributed, but the substance and style of the letters indicate a relatively educated readership that spanned the working, middle, and upper-middle class. The casual racist comments in these columns and their silence on many issues relevant to women of color made clear that editors expected white readers only. Correspondents' letters sometimes spoke of hardship but not desperation; letters did not discuss activities outside "respectable" boundaries. Given the intimate tone and open feel of the columns, it seems very likely that editors received some of those letters but chose not to print them.⁴¹

Most of the letters in these sections discussed domestic topics. Yet rather than instructing readers on the single right way to run a home, the sections created spaces where women could share their favorite things and claim their expertise. "I would like to have you try my recipe for oatmeal bread," wrote Grace in the *Boston Globe*. "If I find this helps anyone I would like to send in some more of my good old standbys."⁴² Older women writing in under names like "Aunt Jerusha" and "Grandma Oldways" shared their wisdom with younger ones just learning to run a household or raise a child.⁴³

While creating a space to share expertise, these columns called "The Home" and "The Household" did not necessarily enshrine domesticity, nor did they confine correspondents to domestic topics. "Agnes" reported that she had been reading the *Chicago Tribune's* "Home" column and felt baffled by how many recipes women shared there. "It is just as absurd for an intelligent woman to spend her time concocting elaborate dishes," she wrote, "as for her husband to carve up the fire-wood into images of Cupid, Minerva, or Apollo."⁴⁴ A *Chicago Inter-Ocean* reader wrote in exasperation about how she, as a farmer's wife, had no time for all the useless crafts that fellow readers contributed.⁴⁵ Other readers questioned why women should be stuck in the house at all, no matter how practical or impractical their housekeeping.⁴⁶ Editors of letter columns seemed willing to host discussions across a relatively wide range of subjects. They reprinted letters that asked professional questions (how did one train to become a nurse?) or weighed in on politics (had the Democrats chosen the right vice presidential candidate?) They printed readers' book reviews and their requests for reading lists. *Chicago Inter-Ocean*

⁴⁰Black, "Women's Column," *Baltimore Afro American*, Feb. 15, 1896, 2.

⁴¹In later decades, advice columnists received a wide range of letters but only printed those they thought were acceptable for a public audience. See Mary Virginia Terhune, *Marion Harland's Autobiography: The Story of a Long Life* (New York, 1910), 483; Fanny Butcher, *Many Lives—One Love* (New York, 1972), 110; Genevieve Jackson Boughner, *Women in Journalism: A Guide to the Opportunities and a Manual of the Technique of Women's Work for Newspapers and Magazines* (New York, 1926), 183.

⁴²*Boston Globe*, Feb. 12, 1905, 30.

⁴³"The Home," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 24, 1877, 11.

⁴⁴*Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 24, 1877, 11.

⁴⁵"Farm and Home," *Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean*, Jan. 12, 1878, 11.

⁴⁶*Chicago Daily Tribune*, Feb. 24, 1877, 11.

contributor Mrs. Galpin kept readers of the “Household” page updated on suffragists’ victories and setbacks.

Women treated these columns as communities: they grew attached to certain members, forged friendships, and defined themselves in the context of the group. A reader of the *Atlanta Constitution*’s “Household” column requested that the column print photos of fellow contributors: “There are some faces I would like very much to see.”⁴⁷ Readers made visits to one another, sent each other gifts, and compiled scrapbooks of their favorite letters. They closely tracked each other’s comings and goings, welcoming new voices and calling out for favorite contributors who went missing. “We wish that Mrs. G., of Kansas, would visit the cheery Home oftener,” wrote an *Inter-Ocean* contributor. “I love to read her spicy letters.”⁴⁸ When the *Atlanta Constitution* cut the “Household” column of readers’ letters from its weekly, only to revive it again, readers wrote in to say how glad they were to see it return. “It brought readers and editors in personal touch with each other,” wrote subscriber Julia Finch, “and made the paper seem like a personal friend, dropping in each week and sure to bring entertainment.”⁴⁹

In a handful of papers with concentrated circulations in urban areas, women’s letter columns discussed local urban quandaries. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* printed one of the earliest women’s sections starting in 1880 and included readers’ letters from the start. The *New York World* hosted a short-lived but remarkable letter column for working women when a reader suggested the idea in 1896 (Figure 3).⁵⁰ Because both papers’ readers mostly lived in or near the city, their women’s columns could offer specific guidance, often to women wage earners navigating new terrain. The columns directed women to local schools for stenography or nursing; to YWCAs and other organizations that offered vacations for working women; and to legal help when their employers withheld their pay.⁵¹ The *New York World* included a broader spectrum of issues in its working women’s column than any other letter column of the era. The editor received and printed multiple letters about morphine addiction and alcoholism. Some readers asked for advice after severe illness (can I still be hired as a shopgirl now that my hair is short due to typhoid?) and some wrote for advice on treating illness itself.⁵² The editor’s sense of decorum—or the Comstock laws—excluded other common dilemmas that women must have had questions about, such as domestic violence, sexual assault, or unwanted pregnancies.

The columns in the *World* and the *Ledger* offered themselves as rare public forums for women’s protest, whether structural or specific. “A woman in whatever craft or profession can feel that by writing to the Sunday World,” announced the first column, “her statement of what seems to her an evil, her complaint of what, to her, seems an injustice, her suggestion of what seems a helpful remedy, she is addressing just the class of women who will understand her position and from whom she is sure of a response.”⁵³ Women had occasionally stated their cases and aired their grievances in letters to the editor in prior decades.⁵⁴ But when printed together in a column for other women readers, these grievances turned into calls for female solidarity more than male recognition. A teacher explained how the parents of her pupils routinely humiliated her and then finished: “I should like to enter a protest against all snobbish parents and to ask other New York teachers if they have been similarly treated.” A reader’s letter the following week

⁴⁷*Atlanta Constitution*, Apr. 12, 1903, 46.

⁴⁸*Chicago Daily Inter-Ocean*, Jan. 24, 1880, 6.

⁴⁹“The Household,” *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 8, 1901, 43.

⁵⁰*New York World*, June 28, 1896.

⁵¹Listed examples come from *New York World*, July 12, 1896, 29, and July 19, 1896, 29; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Feb. 14, 1880, Saturday supplement, 1, and Dec. 14, 1889, 5.

⁵²*New York World*, Sept. 6, 1896, 34.

⁵³*New York World*, June 28, 1896, 31.

⁵⁴For early examples of women making their cases in newspapers, see Mary Beth Stevens, “Female Consumerism and Household Authority in Early National New England,” *Early American Studies* 4, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 353–71.

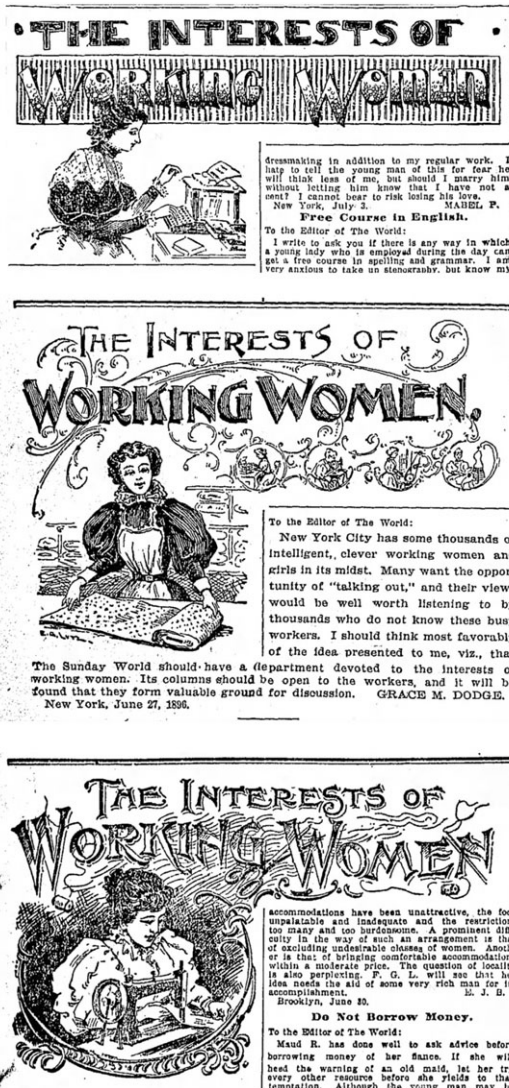


Figure 3. The illustrated headings for "The Interests of Working Women" pictured some of the most common working-class women's occupations: stenographer, shopgirl, and seamstress. *New York World*, July 5, 1896, 29; June 28, 1896, 31; July 12, 1896, 29.

assured the teacher that she was not alone.⁵⁵ The columns could help women readers to recognize common problems and even hash out solutions. One letter to the *Ledger* complaining of a high February gas bill brought an avalanche of similar stories over the next few weeks. Eventually the column's editor weighed in, calling for oversight and documentation of a system that left the housekeeper no way of knowing if she was being overcharged.⁵⁶

Readers used the column in the *New York World* to defend their choices and celebrate their value as working, and working-class, women. They responded with energy to critics. When a Mrs. C.H.L. wrote to ask why working girls would not take domestic work in the countryside, where they would have good food and fresh air, she was put in her place: "Talk about food and

⁵⁵*New York World*, June 28, 1896, 31, and July 5, 1896, 29.

⁵⁶*Philadelphia Public Ledger*, Feb. 21, 1880, Saturday supplement, 1.

air—air in a hot kitchen all day and a hot attic room at night is very fine.”⁵⁷ One column reader responded to an article on the decline in the quality of servant girls, printed elsewhere in the paper, by discussing the decline in the quality of mistresses.⁵⁸ When a reader asked the column whether she had to accept the half-worn gowns her employer’s wife had offered her, fellow readers responded with a resounding “no.”⁵⁹ If the letter columns in other papers offered a rare female public sphere, the *World’s* column offered something rarer still: a public space where working-class women reigned. The column let them speak to employers, be they factory owners or heads of households, without fear of retribution. Contributors did not have to fall into line with any political agenda, as they would have in a union newsletter or a socialist paper. Some letters pitched the idea of collective ownership for working women’s lodging; others asked whether they ought to tell their supervisor that a union organizer was trying to initiate a strike.⁶⁰ It is hard to think of another print space where working-class women spoke this freely about their own lives and opinions.

Reacting to the Women’s Pages

When given a bit of latitude, women readers and writers used the space of the women’s page to their own ends. But no matter how participatory or political these women’s pages, some readers believed that “the sexing of the pages” did more harm than good.⁶¹ When a newspaper addressed women separately, it shunted those readers to a corner of the paper and specified what it meant to be a woman.

Plenty of readers welcomed women’s pages—even the most rote and limited—into their daily routines. Many accepted housekeeping and childrearing as women’s particular domain and it seemed right to them that these topics were discussed in a women’s section.⁶² Some valued the lightness and predictability of their newspaper’s women’s page.⁶³ Several readers compared the women’s page to the sports page—low-stakes, entertaining material that became part of a comforting daily routine.⁶⁴ When women’s columns offered truly useful information, such as tested recipes and household tips, readers religiously read and clipped them.⁶⁵ Some men seem to have enjoyed the women’s page too, either out of interest in the topics discussed there or for the pleasure of eavesdropping on supposedly female conversations.⁶⁶

In combining entertainment and useful information within a predictable format, women’s page editors were following the lead of women’s magazines. Newspaper editors sometimes directly imitated women’s magazine genres and even reprinted magazine material. Yet many readers viewed newspapers’ women’s pages as intrinsically different from women’s magazines because of newspapers’ more public and political role. Newspapers claimed a far larger readership than any other print medium.⁶⁷ The popular concept of the press as the “fourth estate” positioned newspapers as interpreters of local and national interests and educators of a

⁵⁷*New York World*, July 12, 1896, 29.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, and *New York World*, July 19, 1896, 29.

⁶⁰*New York World*, Aug. 9, 1896, 31.

⁶¹Hester Dorsey Richardson, *New York Herald*, June 21, 1891, 24.

⁶²Watterson, *New York Herald*, June 28, 1891, 24.

⁶³“Loota” in the *New York Herald*, June 28, 1891, 24.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, and *Boston Globe*, Jan. 22, 1888, 13.

⁶⁵See reader letters in *Boston Globe*, 3 May 1897, 6.

⁶⁶On men reading the women’s page, see letters from Emma Trupper, I. B. L., and Elizabeth Akers in the *New York Herald*, June 28, 1891, 24; and Crystal Eastman, “What Shall We Do with the Woman’s Page?” *Time and Tide* 8, no. 19 (May 20, 1927): 470. Men also routinely wrote in to women’s page letter columns and advice columns.

⁶⁷Carl F. Kaestle and Lawrence C. Stedman, “Literacy and Reading Performance in the United States from 1880 to the Present,” in *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading since 1880*, ed. Carl F. Kaestle (New Haven, 1991), 164.

citizenry. Their coverage of current affairs conjured an informed and enfranchised universal reader. Many women readers welcomed this image of themselves, especially at a time that felt full of political possibility.

Separate women's sections within newspapers suggested, at least to some readers, that women were not expected to read the rest of the paper and were therefore not welcome within a broader public. "When a woman buys a paper she pays for the entire number, not one sheet, and she should at least have the privilege (which she takes) of reading it all," argued a *New York Herald* reader.⁶⁸ Some wondered whether the creation of a women's page suggested that women were not capable of understanding the rest of the paper.⁶⁹ Readers pointed out that they turned to papers for news—and that reminders of their domestic duties did not belong there. "I would by no means object to the harmless necessary Recipe Book and Fashion Paper, which have their definite times and uses, nor to the Woman's Magazine, —for you may love it or leave it alone," explained the 1906 *Atlantic* essay by an anonymous reader.⁷⁰ But she did not want material on personal life to follow her into the public realm of the news.

Readers were keenly aware of how, in such a public medium, the women's page was defining women's supposed interests for all to see. So why did frivolous topics have to be pegged to women, specifically? "Wouldn't the men be angry," asked a woman journalist in the *New York Herald*, "if they were to open their papers some morning and find every column devoted to either the correct length for trouser legs, the length of cutaway coats, the height of standing collars, the shape of a hat brim, or how to make a mustache grow even on both sides?"⁷¹ Several referred to the section as the "so-called" women's page, pointing out the gap between representation and reality.⁷²

The way that women's columns catered to women while misrepresenting them—all for the sake of gaining women's attention for advertisers—provoked strong reactions. When the 1891 *New York Herald* asked its women readers what they thought of the material that newspapers printed for them, hundreds of women went to the trouble of sending in their criticisms. Many sent very long letters; some copied out examples of the kind of material they most hated. When they read the pages, they said, they felt indignant, sick, angry, and exasperated.⁷³ They described their shame at men's low impressions of women as communicated in the women's material; they also felt ashamed that an obviously silly section could get such a rise out of them.⁷⁴

The *New York Herald* editor, having solicited women readers' thoughts, immediately trivialized them. "The answers indicate what is already fairly well known," the editor wrote, "and that is, that many women have many opinions."⁷⁵ The paper asked why so many subscribers who insisted they did not read the women's page could offer such detailed criticisms of it.⁷⁶ Yet readers' letters had precisely described the magnetic pull of the section they hated. "So exasperating is the drivel generally printed under these headings that of late whenever my eye falls on them I hasten to turn the paper and so avoid even glancing at the disgusting trash below," explained Elizabeth Akers.⁷⁷

⁶⁸Richardson, *New York Herald*, June 21, 1891, 24.

⁶⁹Richardson and Florence Nightingale, *New York Herald*, June 21, 1891, 24.

⁷⁰"The Melancholy of Women's Pages," 575. Letters from Richardson, Nightingale, and M. W. Ravenhill, *New York Herald*, June 21, 1891, 24, all make similar points.

⁷¹"Now Here's a Question for Women to Answer," *New York Herald*, June 14, 1891, 9.

⁷²Letters from L. and from Richardson, *New York Herald*, June 21, 1891, 24; see also Harper, "The Training of Women Journalists," 58.

⁷³The question appeared in the *New York Herald*, June 14, 1891, page 9 of second section. Responses appeared on June 21, 1891, 24, and June 28, 1891, 24.

⁷⁴Letter from L., *New York Herald*, June 21, 1891, 24, and Akers, *New York Herald*, June 28, 1891, 24.

⁷⁵*New York Herald*, June 21, 1891, 24.

⁷⁶*New York Herald*, June 28, 1891, 24.

⁷⁷Akers, *New York Herald*, June 28, 1891, 24.

Women readers made clear that they felt condescended to by the women's page, and even by the editor's request for their opinions. "Thanks to the HERALD for its gallantry in asking the opinions of women regarding the articles published about them," began one sarcastic letter.⁷⁸ Another reader suspected that the *New York Herald's* editor did not particularly care about giving women readers what they wanted, despite having asked them for their opinions.⁷⁹ And she may have been right. The *Herald's* women's material did not seem to change at all in response to the hundreds of critical letters the paper received. The letters proved that women were reading the *Herald*, and reading the women's material specifically; that was probably all the editor needed to know.

Women's Pages become Vehicles for Selling

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the women's page grew in size and shrank in scope. Those papers that lacked a women's page started one, and those that already had women's sections expanded them. By the 1910s and 1920s, Sunday women's sections might run to ten lavishly illustrated pages. These larger women's pages focused almost entirely on a handful of topics: beauty, fashion, cooking, home décor, relationships, and child rearing. Black weekly newspapers only sporadically carried women's columns or women's pages, but these columns still followed the same pattern as the mainstream press, moving away from women's accomplishments and rights, toward cooking, beauty, fashion, and relationship advice. The remade pages gave women few ways to connect to other local readers or to steer the conversation.

The consolidation of the broader news industry helped to homogenize women's pages across the nation. Hundreds of newspapers closed or merged in the early twentieth century, outmaneuvered by larger papers or swallowed up by newspaper chains. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger's* independent-minded women's section did not survive the paper's purchase by the publisher of the *New York Times* in 1902. The *San Francisco Call* once based its women's page on local reader contributions; this ended when William Randolph Hearst bought the *Call* and ran it as part of his national chain. The *New York Herald*, which printed a local civic column for women in the mid-1890s, became the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1924, with a women's section focused on society, fashion, and cooking.

Meanwhile, an expanding syndication system sold one-size-fits-all women's features to newspapers across the United States. As individual authors and editors developed successful genres of women's page material, news syndicates picked them up for wider distribution. By the 1920s, dozens of syndicates offered long menus from which editors could assemble varied women's sections.⁸⁰ Syndication often left women's page editors with little ability to mold the section to their own interests, and sometimes took decisions out of women editors' hands entirely. Journalism teacher Genevieve Boughner explained how an editor-in-chief might choose syndicate material without asking the women's page editor, "so that the page represents his ideal of a woman's page and not hers. In fact the words 'woman's page' on many papers constitute a misnomer," wrote Boughner, "so little do women editors have to say about what goes on them."⁸¹

Syndicated material could elevate the standard of women's pages in particular papers. Yet the overall effect of syndicates was to make women's pages across the country more alike and more predictable. Features that did not work equally well across all regions and audiences—those that

⁷⁸I.B.L., *New York Herald*, June 28, 1891, 24.

⁷⁹L., *New York Herald*, June 21, 1891, 24.

⁸⁰See advertisements in *Editor & Publisher*, International Yearbook Number, Jan. 30, 1926. On the expansion of syndication, see Guarneri, *Newsprint Metropolis*, ch 5.

⁸¹Boughner, *Women in Journalism*, 281.

discussed civic issues, women's paid work, or suffrage, for example—tended not to be syndicated, and indeed the fact that these features could not make money through syndication may have disincentivized editors from commissioning them at all.

Locally-produced features that remained on the women's page of the 1910s and 1920s helped to sell the products of local merchants, or they gathered a loyal and quantifiable audience. Many features did both. Local shopping columns used illustrations and breezy text to interest readers in items for sale in town. The *Hartford Courant* printed a paid advertising column called "Feminine Topics" from the 1890s onward; its title epitomized the way that the women's page conflated femininity and shopping. At least ten major metropolitan newspapers ran paid, local shopping columns by the 1920s.⁸² "The average unobserving reader scans the chatty little items," explained Genevieve Boughner, "without realizing often that they are not the reporter's actual opinions, but space 'bought and paid for.'"⁸³

Paid shopping columns differed from other women's page material only by degree, since many writers and editors keyed their columns to what the shops were carrying and what manufacturers were producing (Figure 4). As early as the 1890s, editors had sent journalists to tour the shops and report back on the goods to be found there.⁸⁴ By the 1910s and 1920s, illustrated women's pages often paraded objects in front of readers rather than engaging them in conversation. Indeed, many illustrated fashion features contained almost no text (Figure 5). Boughner, in her manual for women journalists, urged aspiring writers to work backward from the potential advertised product to the women's page article. "So long as manufacturers continue to flood the market with new products and so long as women continue to be interested in them," she wrote about cosmetics, "there is opportunity for intelligent writing upon this side of the subject."⁸⁵

Advice columns and cooking columns, meanwhile, became mainstays of the women's page because of their ability to attract and keep readers. Many women's pages merely compiled recipes, including contributions from readers, but in the 1910s and 1920s it became more common to employ an expert to develop recipes and work out weekly grocery lists for the women's page.⁸⁶ A 1925 study of the *Wisconsin Daily Journal's* women readers found that many enjoyed and relied upon the paper's daily recipes.⁸⁷ Advice columns seemed to exert a similar pull on readers; the best of them gathered huge and loyal followings. Syndicated advice columnist Dorothy Dix received upward of 500 letters per day.⁸⁸ Business offices quantified the audiences for advice and cooking columns to prove that these features held readers' attention and turned their newspapers into trusted household authorities. The *Chicago Tribune*, for example, proudly announced to potential advertisers that its health column received 24,047 letters and its beauty column received 14,570 letters in 1926.⁸⁹ In 1931, the paper's cooking

⁸²Boughner lists ten paid shopping columns running in 1926. *Ibid.*, 234–5.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 233.

⁸⁴A journalist describes being given this mission in the *New York Herald*, Apr. 23, 1892, 14.

⁸⁵Boughner, *Women in Journalism*, 164.

⁸⁶The *Philadelphia North American*, for example, hired Anna B. Scott to write a local food column around 1913; Scott moved to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* when the *North American* folded in 1927. Marion Harland wrote an early syndicated housekeeper's page that included recipes; Christine Frederick wrote a syndicated cooking column in the 1910s and 1920s.

⁸⁷Ruby A. Black, "A Woman to Editors: Women are Just as Human as the Men," *National Printer Journalist* 43, no. 2 (Feb. 1925): 24.

⁸⁸Julie Golia, *Newspaper Confessions: A History of Advice Columns in a Pre-Internet Age* (New York, 2021), 79.

⁸⁹Chicago Tribune, *Book of Facts, 1927: Data on Markets, Merchandising, Advertising, with Special Reference to the Chicago Territory and Chicago Newspaper Advertising* (Chicago, 1927), 170. On the quantifying of reader responses see Alfred McClung Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America: The Evolution of a Social Instrument* (New York, 1937), 358, and Golia, "Courting Women, Courting Advertisers," 621–2.

Modes and Models

in San Francisco



Figure 4. In “Modes and Models in San Francisco,” each outfit or item was being sold by a local department store, as noted in the text beside the illustrations. Eight of the twelve department stores mentioned here placed advertisements in this same issue of the paper; all were regular advertisers in the *Chronicle*. *San Francisco Chronicle*, Oct. 21, 1923, S9.

school asked all attendees to fill out information cards about themselves, presumably to offer a better portrait of *Tribune* readers to advertisers.⁹⁰ The *Chicago Daily News* printed photographs

⁹⁰Lewis Copeland, "The Limits and Characteristics of Metropolitan Chicago" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1937), 166. The paper gathered this information from 47,500 attendees.



Figure 5. Full page from *Buffalo Sunday Morning News*, Oct. 19, 1913, first page of women's section.

of packed auditoriums for its free "Cookery and Homemaking Schools," with audiences ranging from 3,000 to 10,000.⁹¹

Editors reshaped their cooking and advice columns to harmonize, at least in part, with advertisers' needs. Some cooking columns' articles on novel foods essentially functioned as advertisements. "Always keep a box of marshmallows in the cupboard," advised the *Milwaukee*

⁹¹Chicago Daily News, Sept. 5, 1925, back page of photogravure section.

Sentinel, explaining marshmallows' various uses in drinks and desserts.⁹² Many newspapers offered cooking and home-making classes that plugged advertisers' products to readers.⁹³ Themed advice columns could focus women's attention on advertisers' domains, such as beauty, fashion, home décor, and children's health. Merchants and the advertising agencies they hired had begun negotiating ad placement as a standard part of their contracts around 1900; by the 1910s and 1920s, advertisements sometimes seemed to be placed quite strategically. The Philadelphia salon owner advertising the "Lanoil non-frizzy permanent wave," for example, must have been only too happy to place her ad next to a beauty advice column alerting readers that "No longer are frizzy masses of hair standing from the head without thought or shape or line considered beautiful. Hair must be glossy."⁹⁴

The useful information on women's pages, intended to cultivate a loyal readership, sometimes clashed with the material intended to interest readers in new purchases. Tips for thrifty living sat alongside, and were often overshadowed by, articles pushing novelty and luxury. *Chicago Daily News* columnist Marion Holmes ran a daily exchange of readers' offers and requests—magazines, carpets, baby clothes, a violin.⁹⁵ Yet right next to Holmes's 1930 column in the *Chicago Daily News*, beauty columnist Viola Paris advised readers to either get a salon manicure every ten days, or to purchase twelve different products to give themselves a manicure.⁹⁶ Instructions on mending were far outnumbered by fashion columns that announced the arrival of new styles with excitement and explained why the older garments would no longer do. "The shops are full of new early spring styles and how beautiful are displays of the new underwear," announced the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* in 1921, explaining that embroidery and lace were out, linen was in.⁹⁷

Women's page writers and editors fully recognized the commercial role of their sections in the 1920s. "One must face the 'brute' fact," explained Genevieve Boughner, "that the woman's page is a bid for the advertiser's patronage, both the local department store advertiser and the national advertiser of feminine products."⁹⁸ Boughner and other journalists tried to spin this as a win-win for readers and for advertisers. Ethel Brazelton, in a guide for women writers, explained that women's pages editors had two main objectives. "The first object has for its watchword 'Service!'" she explained. "The up-to-date woman's page or periodical tries hard to serve its public, and spends time, money, effort, lavishly to such purpose. The second object, of course, is to increase the advertising value of the given page or publication. And to do this in worthy manner means 'service,' too."⁹⁹ Brazelton seemed to accept the limitations of the women's page, which could help readers only if it also sold them products.

The women's page more than paid for itself in ad revenues. From an early date, advertisers were willing to pay higher rates for space on the women's page.¹⁰⁰ And given how frequently advertisers showcased their large female audiences and their women's content to advertisers, it seems clear that women's attention was disproportionately important to newspapers' bottom

⁹²*Milwaukee Sentinel*, Dec. 15, 1914, 6.

⁹³Newspapers could contract with a dozen independent firms who ran these cooking schools. *Editor & Publisher* 62, no. 36 (Jan. 25, 1930): 252.

⁹⁴"Your Beauty," by Maria Jeritza," *Philadelphia Daily News*, Sept. 7, 1925, 11. On ad placement in contracts between the 1880s and 1900, see Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News*, 65.

⁹⁵Examples all taken from Marion Holmes columns printed in November 1911.

⁹⁶*Chicago Daily News*, Sept. 2, 1930, 14. Viola Paris was a syndicated beauty columnist.

⁹⁷*Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Jan. 16, 1921, 13.

⁹⁸Boughner, *Women in Journalism*, 282.

⁹⁹Ethel M. Colson Brazelton, *Writing and Editing for Women: A Bird's-Eye View of the Widening Opportunities for Women in Newspaper, Magazine and Other Writing Work* (New York, 1927), 33.

¹⁰⁰"The Spectator," *The Outlook*, Aug. 17, 1901, 906.

line.¹⁰¹ Publishers continually blurred the line between ads and information in the profitable portions of the paper that targeted women. When advertisers received special treatment in the “hard” news—as when papers failed to report on elevator accidents in department stores or when business sections boosted certain companies’ stock—press critics noticed.¹⁰² But critics and ordinary readers alike eventually took pushy commercial content in the women’s pages as a given.

World-building on the Women’s Pages

Because the tone and content of the women’s page was meant to turn women into loyal readers and good consumers, editors gradually built an aesthetic and emotional world there that was strikingly different from the news sections of newspapers. Beautiful typefaces and elaborate illustrations drew readers in. The text set low barriers to entry; it never assumed that the reader held any particular opinion or political belief and never expected her to have read yesterday’s or last week’s paper. Editors eliminated controversy, surprise, or anything else that might drive a reader away; this meant that discussions of politics, work, class, and women’s accomplishments migrated off the page. In decades when American men and women were ever more likely to share public space, the women’s page implied that women inhabited a different physical, emotional, and informational world from that of men. In an era of political progress and radical change in many women’s lives, the page doubled down on gender stereotype and domestic fantasy.

Where some earlier women’s columns had framed women as ascendant in public and political life, twentieth-century women’s pages often conveyed a much vaguer sense of hope. “The very keynote . . . of the Woman’s Page is optimism,” observed the *Atlantic* essayist in 1906. “Its unvarying motto is, Everything is lovely—or may be.”¹⁰³ Writers communicated this “everything is lovely” message in so-called “Sunshine” columns that included pep talks, poems, or pieces of good news. First appearing in the 1880s, these columns and their frothy optimism became so familiar that the staff of the *Chicago Tribune* wrote a spoof for their annual dinner in 1905:

Your Corner.

By Fakette.

Whipped cream!

Cream blown from the milk of human kindness!

White as the tender down upon the breast of the pelican, soft as the everlasting snow upon the summit of Mont Blanc, sweet as a foamy kiss upon the ocean of forgetfulness!

“Creme de la creme,” says Alfred de Musset.

¹⁰¹Julie Golia, researching in the trade journal *Printer’s Ink*, finds that newspapers overwhelmingly emphasized their female readership in attempts to sell ad space. Golia, “Courting Women, Courting Advertisers,” 620. See also “Why Women Read the World’s Greatest Newspaper,” 1928, Tribune Company Archives, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

¹⁰²See Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism* (Pasadena, 1919), and Will Irwin, “The American Newspaper: A Study of Journalism and Its Relation to the Public. IX. – The Advertising Influence,” *Colliers* 47, no. 9 (May 20, 1911): 15–6, 23–5.

¹⁰³“The Melancholy of Women’s Pages,” 575.

How many of us bring whipped cream into our lives? How many of us scatter its succulent beams over the lives of those about us? Let us be altruists with the whipped cream of our love. I can scatter it, he can scatter it, she can scatter it, they can scatter it.

YOU can scatter it!¹⁰⁴

News syndicates picked up on the genre of the woman “sermonizer” who presented upbeat lessons and homilies. By the 1920s, at least eleven such columns were on offer.¹⁰⁵

In a slightly contradictory variation on the theme, women’s pages began to give the impression that “everything is lovely—or may be” by assuring readers that every problem had a solution. This was only possible because women’s pages presented a narrow range of problems. Women’s pages routinely positioned minor or fabricated questions as major ones. “Which coiffure for Christmas day?” asked the *Philadelphia North American*, in a full-page feature with photographs of women wearing holly in their hair.¹⁰⁶ The 1906 *Atlantic* essayist lampooned the simplistic solutions that the women’s page offered:

Are you unhappily married? Simply make yourself entrancing through the careful following of certain easy, infallible rules, and lo, a new honeymoon, and happiness ever after! Are you a maid forlorn, plain of face and awkward of manner? Grow beautiful and engaging by means of the formula obligingly furnished, and Prince Charming will come. Are the pitiless years leaving their marks upon you? Erase the wrinkles as they come by dexterous rubbings and smoothings, and unfading youth is yours.¹⁰⁷

The women’s page followed the lead of merchants and advertisers of this period in offering groundless reassurances that the reader could have what she wanted, coupled with the assumption that what she wanted was beauty, youth, love, and style.¹⁰⁸

Where some women’s pages had once addressed the reader as she actually was, by the 1910s and 1920s they nearly all came to address the reader as she might prefer to imagine herself and as the advertiser would like her to be. In 1896, *New York World* readers had advised one another on the clothes needed to work in an office six days a week; in 1925, the fashion comic “Modish Mitzi” told readers how many sweaters they needed to pack for a weekend getaway.¹⁰⁹ In a 1928 article on evening wraps, the *San Francisco Chronicle* spoke as if readers spent many evenings out dancing in formal gowns.¹¹⁰ Where 1890s “household” columns dealt with women’s practical tasks in the home, later women’s pages often treated the home as space of glamour and fantasy (Figure 6). Wisconsin readers requested material on “food and clothing problems of business and industrial women” in 1925, signaling that the fashion- and luxury-oriented women’s page was growing out of touch with readers’ lives.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁴“The *Chicago Tribune*, Sixteenth Family Dinner,” *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 1, 1905, 11. Tribune Company Archives, Northwestern University. The papers that ran original (not syndicated) “sunshine” columns on the women’s page include the *Milwaukee Sun* in the 1880s, the *New York Tribune* in 1897, the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* in 1910, the *New Orleans Picayune* in 1918, and the *Chicago Daily News* in the 1920s.

¹⁰⁵Boughner, *Women in Journalism*, 194. The only columnist appearing in Boughner’s list who does not fit the pattern is Dorothy Dix, who often urged readers to simply deal with life’s disappointments.

¹⁰⁶*Philadelphia North American*, Dec. 14, 1913, page 8 of the women’s section.

¹⁰⁷“The Melancholy of Women’s Pages,” 574.

¹⁰⁸On the creation of a consumer culture of desire and wish-fulfillment, see Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York, 1995); Leach, *Land of Desire*; and Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, 1985).

¹⁰⁹*New York World*, June 19, 1896, 29, and *Philadelphia North American*, May 14, 1925, 13.

¹¹⁰*San Francisco Chronicle*, Jan. 31, 1928, 15.

¹¹¹Black, “A Woman to Editors,” 24.



Figure 6. Illustrated headings for the women's page, seemingly indicating women's domain. Referring to and picturing women only within the home might have communicated luxury or constraint, depending on the reader. *Buffalo Sunday Morning News*, Mar. 23, 1913, 28; *Chicago Defender*, Apr. 23, 1921, 5.

Some readers asked for and appreciated the optimism, fantasy, and escape of the women's page. Answering the *New York Herald's* 1891 survey of what women wanted in their newspapers, one reader responded "write us long columns of happiness."¹¹² A 1901 reader praised the *Atlanta Constitution's* women's page for casting "sunbeams across the home keeper's dusty, every day road."¹¹³ In a 1904 etching, the artist John Sloan depicted the escapist pleasure to be had from the women's page (Figure 7). A woman in a tenement momentarily ignores or forgets her surroundings—the unfinished washing in the basin, the cat that is clawing the comforter. Instead she peruses the newspaper's "Page for Women."

But the women's page offered a complicated bargain; readers could enjoy the material only to the extent that they were also being made to feel inadequate. Because women's page editors sought to both speak to women and sell to women, they used normative, glamorized images that simultaneously flattered and taunted their audience. In 1891, journalist Elizabeth Akers described the women's column as "that column of an evening paper which is generally headed by the alleged figure of a 'lady,' with a thorax as long as her skirt, a neck slenderer than her arm, and a waist smaller than either."¹¹⁴ The illustrated figure on Sloan's women's page is a wisp compared to the much sturdier reader. All the women's page "hints" and "don'ts" could make a reader feel obligated to keep up with these labor-intensive regimens of womanhood. "I am spurred to the performance of imperative duties galore unmentioned in the Decalogue [the Ten Commandments]," explained the *Atlantic* contributor, "duties of physical culture and hygiene, of charmcrafft and economy." She described the futility of keeping up with fashions "destined to change ere I can make them mine."¹¹⁵

Rather than urge women to relax about the details, as suffragist columns had once done, later women's pages echoed advertisements as they told women how easily their best attempts could be marred. A column in the 1923 *Philadelphia Inquirer* marched the reader through all the aesthetic flaws that might drive new acquaintances away: a slouching walk, ill-fitting clothes, a wrinkled skirt.¹¹⁶ A 1930 home décor column warned women of all the ways they could ruin their interiors. "An electric lamp with a shade of wrong color would spoil the effect," it cautioned. "Shabby floors easily destroy what might otherwise be a very attractive interior."¹¹⁷ Syndicated feature "Making the Most of Your Looks" pointed out all the wrong choices that women could make for their particular figures and features (Figure 8).

With the rise of the advice column, women's pages increasingly sent the message that women readers needed expert counsel to succeed in everyday life. Certainly, some advice columns

¹¹²*New York Herald*, June 28, 1891, 24.

¹¹³"The Household," *Atlanta Constitution*, Dec. 8, 1901, 43.

¹¹⁴Akers, *New York Herald*, June 28, 1891, 24. For a similar critique, see "Up-to-Date Woman," *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 12, 1895, 16.

¹¹⁵"The Melancholy of Women's Pages," 575.

¹¹⁶Helen Baxter, "Chats with the Woman in the Home," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Jan. 7, 1923, 5.

¹¹⁷"Harmonizing the Home, by Betty Barclay," *Philadelphia Tribune*, June 12, 1930, 5.



Figure 7. John Sloan (American painter, etcher, and illustrator, 1871–1951), *The Women's Page*, 1905. Etching. Plate: 4 13/16 × 6 3/4 in. Sheet: 9 1/4 × 12 5/8 in. Gift of Helen Farr Sloan, 1963. Source: © 2024 Delaware Art Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

offered genuine service and counsel, and could feed very real needs.¹¹⁹ Yet by transitioning away from open letter columns and toward themed advice columns, newspapers eliminated the space in which women readers advised each other. They stopped reminding subscribers of the knowledge, generosity, and goodwill of the other women who were also reading and writing to the newspaper and instead trained them to look to experts for advice.

Some women's page editors continued to let women write in with commentary rather than questions, but gave them limited and scripted roles to play. Several women's page columns printed set discussion topics, mostly focusing on love, marriage, dress, and beauty. "Are girls of today properly dressed?" the 1920 *Boston Post* asked the readers of its women's page.¹²⁰ By the 1910s and 1920s many women's pages were running contests for best recipe, best household tip, or funniest children's saying, so spaces that had once offered conversation and collaboration switched to hosting competitions. The *San Francisco Call* printed a full page of readers' letters on set questions, under the title "California Women Who Think," and rewarded its readers' best

¹¹⁹Examples of expertise available in twentieth-century advice columns include cooking columns by home economists, health columns by trained physicians, and relationship advice columns that privately directed people to social services. On Beatrice Fairfax and the column's service to readers, see Golia, *Newspaper Confessions*, 81–3. Golia also discusses two twentieth-century columns in which readers were more likely to advise one another: "Experience" in the *Detroit News*, and "Confidential Chat" in the *Boston Globe*. I have not found any other columns like this in the 1910s and 1920s, so my research suggests that the number of open letter columns shrank from at least eight to two, while themed, one-way advice columns proliferated.

¹²⁰See the *Boston Post* women's page feature "The Sewing Circle" from June to Oct. 1920.



Figure 8. Dorothy Stote's "Making the Most of Your Looks" always pictured slim white women and spoke about their figures as needing to be fixed. Here the article refers to "a short, stoutish arm." *Mansfield News* (Ohio), Feb. 8, 1927, 11; the feature was syndicated by the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*.

responses with silverware. The *Call* sometimes aired readers' pointed or even radical critiques of the status quo, from a woman who recounted going on strike from housework to one who advocated adopting men's dress. Yet the *Call* belittled these responses when it printed above them "Awarded a silver cheese scoop," or "Awarded a silver jelly spoon," and it seemed to send the winners right back to domestic duties with their prizes.¹²¹ In a 1927 article titled "What Shall We Do With the Woman's Page?" Crystal Eastman called for a more open, collaborative space in the newspaper. "Modern women need a forum, a clearing-house for the exchange of ideas, a meeting-place where they can learn of each other's experiments and benefit by each others conclusions," she wrote.¹²² Eastman had no memory of the turn-of-the-century women's columns that had sometimes served these purposes.

While nineteenth-century feminist columns had spoken about labor and professional battles yet to be won, 1910s and 1920s columns often acted as though working women had all the options they needed. A 1911 *Chicago Daily News* series cycled through the professions of dressmaker, nurse, interior decorator, kindergarten teacher, and librarian, for example, framing each as a possible pursuit for the reader's daughter.¹²³ A few columns tried to assist women with the practicalities of wage work; the *Chicago Tribune* ran "Alice Mason's Talks for Business Women" between 1908 and 1913, and the *Chicago Herald's* "Miss Nelson" invited questions from working women in 1917.¹²⁴ Yet these columns and others on the working woman often treated women's work as a stage for other pursuits—beauty, fashion, romance—that harmonized with the broader emphases of women's pages. When surveyed in 1925,

¹²¹*San Francisco Call*, May 21, 1911, 39, and May 14, 1911, 11.

¹²²Eastman, "What Shall We Do with the Woman's Page?", 470.

¹²³Mary Marshall, "Your Daughter's Vocation. What Shall it Be?" *Chicago Daily News*, Nov. 4, 11, and 18, 1911, and Dec. 2 and 9, 1911. For a similar article elsewhere see Sidonie Matzner Gruenberg, "When Your Little Girl Grows Up, What Then?" *Minneapolis Journal*, Jan. 6, 1916, 13.

¹²⁴See *Chicago Herald*, Apr. 29, 1917, Part II, page 5.

Wisconsin readers asked for much more practical work advice than what the women's page provided, including profiles of women workers in a range of local industries and detailed information about opportunities for leadership and advancement.¹²⁵

Across the 1910s and 1920s, women's individual accomplishments (still often treated as exceptional) were more likely to appear in news sections, sports sections, or weekend feature stories than on women's pages. In 1926, Genevieve Boughner recommended that women reporters pitch stories on successful women to the City desk or to the "Clubs" page.¹²⁶ Women's achievements may have garnered a larger audience in these other sections, but they also no longer came across as collective victories. Women's politics also moved elsewhere in the paper. Editors increasingly put news of suffrage conferences and referendums on front pages. After 1920, they sent women to cover political conventions and put profiles of women politicians in their news or magazine sections.¹²⁷ On the 1920s women's page, meanwhile, politics and voting became nearly invisible. In a methodical sampling of dozens of 1920s women's pages across all regions of the U.S., I have found just one feature that discussed the vote. "The Woman Citizen" appeared as a series of nine columns in the 1928 *Philadelphia Evening Ledger*, and explained voter registration, the basic functions and structures of government, how to get involved in local issues, and why women ought to vote. These columns, exceptionally political for a 1920s women's page, were also conservative and bland. They urged women to "uphold the traditions of the founders of the Nation" by voting, and praised one woman for cleaning her local polling place so as to make it respectable and comfortable for other women.¹²⁸ "The Woman Citizen" took up one sixty-fourth of the *Evening Ledger's* two-page women's section on days when it appeared. Where "The Woman Citizen" ran for a matter of weeks, the same paper published women's page features like "Milady Beautiful" and "Adventures with a Purse" for years.

In a period when women were launching into public life, women's pages broadcast a retrograde message that centered shopping and domesticity. They created a separate emotional world from the other portions of the paper, offering soothing stability rather than rupture and drama. The pages subtly cut women down even as they built them up, framing readers as needy while also promising that all their needs could be met. The women's pages did not stop women from reading other portions of the paper, and did not stop editors and reporters from discussing women in other sections. But they carried a conservative and distinctly commercial image of women to American readers in the 1910s and 1920s and would continue doing so until the 1970s.

Conclusion

Even when the women's page had become a fact of life, women readers were never altogether convinced that they needed a separate section in the newspaper. Ruby Black, who researched women's reading habits in the *Wisconsin Daily Journal* in 1925, concluded that no topic was universally interesting to women, or universally uninteresting to men. She recommended doing away with women's pages.¹²⁹ Decades later, when the publishers at the *Washington Post* were choosing a title for the women's page, editor Marie Sauer proposed "For and About People." But it was not women readers, or women journalists, who determined whether women got their own newspaper section. Marie Sauer lost her battle at the *Post* in 1952; the publishers chose the title "For and About Women" for the sake of attracting advertisers.¹³⁰

¹²⁵Black, "A Woman to Editors," 24.

¹²⁶Boughner, *Women in Journalism*, 215–6.

¹²⁷Boughner, *Women in Journalism*, 253.

¹²⁸*Philadelphia Evening Ledger*, Apr. 11, 1928, 24, and Mar. 30, 1928, 28.

¹²⁹Black, "A Woman to Editors," 24.

¹³⁰Yang, "Women's Pages or People's Pages," 367.

Radio and television broadcasters learned to accommodate advertisers' interest in speaking to women, as newspaper publishers had done. New genres, such as the Procter & Gamble-sponsored "soap opera," captured women's attention for the purpose of advertising to them. These new genres set low barriers to entry, as when television "sitcoms" abandoned continuous plots for episodic formats. As in the newspaper, this "soft" material aimed at women did not draw a clear boundary between advertising and information, or between advertising and entertainment. And as in the newspaper, "soft" material underwrote the entire medium, funding the "hard" news.¹³¹ Scholars of media history have recognized that an ad-sponsored format leapt from newspapers to radio and from radio to TV.¹³² But they have not recognized the through-line in these ad-sponsored formats: each medium in the mid-twentieth century took the specific forms that it did in order to sell things to women. The history of commercial mass media is necessarily women's history.

The lifespan of the women's pages, from the 1890s to the 1970s, demarcates an eighty-year period in which ad-sponsored media spoke to women as a singular group. These eighty-years represent a discrete chapter in the history of advertising and the media it sponsored, which explains why critics of this gendered media system—though situated decades apart—articulated the same structure of feeling. The author of the 1906 *Atlantic* essay described how the women's page "pursues me, weighs me, and finds me wanting, without my invitation."¹³³ The page measured her against a model "woman" whom she did not like and who did not really exist. Betty Friedan, after studying advertising campaigns and magazine fiction, would call this model "the feminine mystique."¹³⁴ The 1906 essayist loved reading the front-page news but felt duty-bound to the designated newspaper section for women. "I yield because it deals with my concerns," she wrote, "and because it deals with my concerns, I yield sulkily."¹³⁵ This reader wanted to be an anonymous member of an audience and of the public. Instead, the newspaper constantly reminded her that she was a woman, and therefore had to fulfill a different and depressing set of expectations. In her chapter on magazines, Friedan criticized the "image which insists she is not a person but a 'woman,' by definition barred from the freedom of human existence and a voice in human destiny."¹³⁶ The 1906 reader identified the women's pages as stifling, even as she seemed to resign herself to them: "There is an element of resentment in the oppression of spirits which I have called the Melancholy of Woman's Pages, and with it all a haunting, inarticulate sense of the pathos of womanhood."¹³⁷ Friedan struck the same chord when she referred to "the problem that has no name."¹³⁸

As newspaper publishers learned to target individual demographics within a broader public sphere, they created a simultaneously commercialized and personalized media landscape that remains in place today. The 1906 *Atlantic* essayist described the process of trying to read the newspaper while being dogged by the material aimed at her. This reader resented the presence of targeted material in the newspaper, where she had not sought it out. In the twenty-first century,

¹³¹Cynthia B. Meyers, *A Word from Our Sponsor: Admen, Advertising, and the Golden Age of Radio* (New York, 2013); Kathleen Newman, *Radio Active: Advertising and Consumer Activism, 1935–1947* (Berkeley, 2004); and Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, "Learning to Live with Television: Technology, Gender, and America's Early TV Audiences," in *The Columbia History of Television*, ed. Gary Edgerton (New York, 2007).

¹³²Michael Stamm, *Sound Business: Newspapers, Radio, and the Politics of New Media* (Philadelphia, 2011); Robert McChesney, *Telecommunications, Mass Media, and Democracy: The Battle for the Control of U.S. Broadcasting* (New York, 1993); Gary Edgerton, *The Columbia History of Television*, chs 1 and 2; Tim Wu, *The Master Switch: The Rise and Fall of Information Empires* (New York, 2010).

¹³³"The Melancholy of Women's Pages," 575.

¹³⁴Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, 1963), chs 2 and 9.

¹³⁵"The Melancholy of Women's Pages," 575.

¹³⁶Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 68.

¹³⁷"The Melancholy of Women's Pages," 575.

¹³⁸Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, ch 1.

we are all familiar with this phenomenon. When we read a digital newspaper article that sits alongside flashing advertisements for products we have recently searched online, we are reading in the shadow of the women's page. Because our media system only works when readers are consumers, our identities—particularly our consumer profiles—follow us even into seemingly anonymous and anonymized spaces.

Women readers felt melancholic when confronted with a monolithic stereotype of “woman” in their media, designed to focus their minds on purchases. Media audiences today may not recognize this melancholic feeling, since media addresses them and markets to them in much more granular ways. But we still live in the world that the women's pages created, in which advertisers' needs determine the topics of many public conversations. This is why it is worth returning to the first decades of the women's pages. Some women seized on the new public space of the page to share expertise, debate domesticity, and defend their capabilities. Others insisted on their right to participate in news media not as stereotypes or advertising targets, but as individuals and members of the public.

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