
In Beyond Bylines: Media Workers and Women’s Rights in Canada, communications historian Barbara M. Freeman takes a wide-reaching view of journalism to include all forms of media, including print, broadcast, public relations, film, as well as alternative press and even public relations. The book is a collection of essays that examine the role of women journalist activists over 130 years. Seven snapshots are presented in chronological order, tracing how female journalists have been able to use their position as media workers to advance the women’s movement. Freeman challenges readers to adopt a wide definition of “journalist” as well as byline “to include women who were not news reporters or who worked outside the mainstream media” (p. 1).

The book is positioned as “bio-critical” and interdisciplinary. Freeman examines the conditions and times in which the women worked and, examining their texts “so that their intentions can be understood,” she also “investigates the gendered media language and images of their social milieu” (p. 2). To examine these varied time periods and historical records, Freeman relies on archival material, as well as oral history interviews.

Perhaps because of her training as an historian and journalist, Freeman tends to emphasize the biography and chain of events rather than provide a deep reading of the texts of the media workers she highlights. This could, in part, be due to the lack of material to work with, most notably in Chapter 4 regarding the first female executive at CBC, Elizabeth Long, where texts and archival material are sparse. Instead of offering an analysis of the content that was presented on CBC’s women’s programming at the time, Freeman focuses on Long’s management skills and interpersonal relationships. While interesting, it is somewhat unsatisfying, and it would have been more germane to see examples of what Freeman describes as Long’s ability to “subversively introduced ‘equal rights’ talks along with the household hints offered to the female listeners of CBC national radio from 1938 to 1956” (p. 10). Later chapters focus more on interviews with the subjects and offer the context for their work and political aspirations. The chapter on aboriginal filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin provides perhaps the best discourse analysis.

The main strength of the work is Freeman’s ability to tell the story of these very different women. Well written with lively prose, the book brings to life the time and circumstance of each of the women featured. Where it falls short is to answer broader questions of how women journalists have made a difference in Canada or in media work itself. As much of the book focuses on women in alternative media or public relations, it does not inform the reader much about the broader successes that women have achieved and how these came to pass. Due to the historical nature of the first half of the book, it is unclear what influence the publications had in the popular mind. Certainly the first two chapters that focus on early commercial newspapers give some sense that these women’s voices could have been important in the struggle for equality;
however, the evidence is mixed. For example, Agnes Maule Machar, a magazine writer, novelist, poet, and advocate for woman’s suffrage, was not by any standard considered a radical. Thus, her contribution to the women’s movement was limited. This limited effect was also evidenced in the second chapter, which examines four Toronto journalists who covered fashion and health in the daily news. Freeman demonstrates that the women’s pages constrained media workers’ ability to go beyond writing about fashion and therefore failed to promote women’s rights in their pages. Instead, they maintained the conceptions of femininity and helped to promote the commercial interests of the newspapers for which they worked. While it is undisputed that women’s pages have marginalized women, this chapter provides little insight or new information.

Francis Marion Beynon, the women’s page editor of the Grain Growers’ Guide, provided the first sense that a woman could go beyond writing about fashion, homemaking, and cooking. Freeman argues convincingly that Beynon was able to articulate her own point of view in the weekly publication, and that it was both pacifist and socialist in its leanings. Beynon was the first of the suffrage journalists who identified themselves as a radical, stating “I don’t want my disinclination to break off the work I am engaged in at present to hinder me from rendering any possible service to the radicals of my own country” (p. 87).

While Freeman presents the case that we need to look beyond traditional roles and media, it is never made clear in the book how and why were these cases chosen. It is laudable that she looks at various types of media workers—print, broadcast, and documentary film—as well as different issues—suffrage, abortion, aboriginal issues. It appears, however, that, in doing case studies, Freeman either found the most convenient examples or the ones that best suited her purpose. Given that many of the examples illustrate media workers in fringe media, or not even in media itself, the difficulty for Freeman is to show how these women were able to effect change. For example, Chapter 5, which features Anne Roberts and Kathryn Keate’s work on the Abortion Caravan Publicity Campaign of 1970, spends a great deal of time recounting the events of the campaign and their efforts but admits in the conclusion that those efforts had no effect on the policy of the day, nor were they instrumental in the 1988 Morgentaler decision. This certainly gives Freeman much liberty in defining female journalists, but it makes the work disjointed and lacking in coherence. This is the main shortcoming of the work in that, while there is a chronological order to the biographies, there is no consistency in the type of media that are examined. It would be preferable to have a manuscript that examines mainstream media, a separate manuscript on alternative media, and perhaps even a third on the field of public relations. Given that Freeman never discloses why she selects the media workers she does, it would be helpful to understand the choices for the selection of cases that is provided.

The greatest contribution of the book is in documenting the various points in time at which women journalists were able to make a contribution on the major issues of the day. The early journalists were at the forefront of advocating for suffrage. It also traces the role that women had in the pacifist movement in the First World War, and the post-war inclusion of women in advocating for equal pay was instructive. The book best demonstrates that women media workers are products of their time and educa-
tion. At the same time, most of the book focuses on middle class women who often balanced the constraints of their time with their personal desire towards social change.

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