

Women's Pages and Public Health

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Introduction

It has been written that if a Martian decided to research American culture by looking at a typical newspaper in the 1970s, it would "conclude that every female earthling spent at least several days per month getting married" [1]. Those stories dominated newspapers in the women's pages. Yet, there were also many stories about social issues—including public health. When it comes to journalism history, women were often overlooked in academic scholarship for decades. In 1977, journalism professor Marion Marzolf wrote the significant book *Up from the Footnote* [2]. As the title indicated, when so few women were included in the stories of newspapers, they were typically found in the footnotes. Marzolf documented the stories of those journalists. More recent scholarship has included women but it is usually when they take on beat traditionally covered by men, such as commentary, sports or politics [3].

As social history grows, more research has been conducted about how topics have shaped society. The documentation is often conducted by looking at the media coverage of the time as the keeper of the communities' and the nation's health record. This, however, can be too simple. For example, the 1950s has been promoted as the creation suburbs, with women at home who were raising children and not addressing women's health. Yet, in the post-World War II years, women were going into the workforce by increasing numbers and that made an impact on society. Between the 1940s and 1960s, the number of working wives in America grew significantly [4]. Women's page journalists recognized the changing role and created a new kind of content for women working both inside and outside the home. The

growing American consumer culture meant more newspaper advertising which increased the size of the women's section. It was a significant money maker for the publications and gave the women's page editors clout at their publications.

Many newspapers included stories in these sections that were part of the women's health: stories about birth control, menopause and pregnancy-related issues [5]. Food and nutrition news was also covered. These stories reached large audiences and impacted the work of other editors [6]. The circulations of the papers were significant so the work of the women editors reached large segments of their own communities and sometimes beyond them [7].

Covering Health

Much of the health coverage sources in the women's pages was focused on women's health, often based on male doctors. There were also moments when female firsts in the medical field were addressed. In her first interview since leaving the White House, Dr. Janet Travell sat down with wire reporter Vera Glaser. Travell was the first female White House physician. She was hired by President John F. Kennedy and she remained during the Johnson administration. The 1965 profile, which ran in several newspapers including the *St. Petersburg Times*, did not focus on her gender but rather her career in the medical field. Glaser noted that Travell was hired because she was the only doctor who was able to ease Kennedy's agonizing back pain. Glaser did not shy away from tough questions—asking the doctor about the President's assassination. She wrote of the doctor's response: "Let's skip that" [8].

Miami Herald women's page reporter (and later executive editor) Janet Chusmir covered some traditional women's page content although often with a health focus while she was at the *Miami Herald*. For example, she wrote a 1968 two-part series about menopause—a topic not openly discussed at the time. She focused on the physical changes a woman faces and on how these changes might impact a marriage. She concluded the series on a positive note: "This is the time to expand horizons—to take that trip, take that course, join that club, or even, for the woman, start that career she always wanted" [9]. She quoted experts who noted that men went through a kind of psychological menopause themselves.

Covering Nutrition

Food is often a way of connecting people—whether it is sharing recipes or sharing a meal. In many ways, food sections of newspapers (found in the women's pages) are about sharing a conversation with readers. For example, the *Akron Beacon Journal* food editor Polly Paffilas wrote of her role: "Mrs. Jones calls us when she can't understand a recipe in a national magazine or when Graham Kerr talks about clarified butter. Mrs. Jones doesn't call the magazine or the TV station. She calls me" [10]. The women's pages of American newspapers had a diverse culinary tradition. They have included fancy dishes with glossy, styled pictures as well as everyday recipes with short cuts for convenience aimed at home cooks. An examination of these newspaper food sections reflected changing research on nutrition and evolving kitchen technology.

The golden era of the newspaper food sections was in the 1950s and the 1960s when increasing advertising led to thick newspaper food sections. Many of these newspaper food editors were journalists who covered food as their beats. For example, a columnist described Denver, Colorado food editor Helen Dollaghan as "a newspaperwoman through and through." In St. Paul, Minnesota, food editor Eleanor Ostman approached her work as any reporter would. She wrote that she often appreciated when a recipe did not work out as expected because it meant a better newspaper story. She wrote: "I am a journalist not a home economist. Therein lies all the difference" [11]. When Ann Criswell retired, the *Houston Chronicle* food editor said of her career: "I am not so much a food editor or cook as I am a journalist. My job has never been to prepare outstanding meals, but to report on cooking and the fascinating world of food" [12].

These women's page journalists covered serious food-related issues like poverty and nutrition, but they also believed in the importance of recipes in the lives of home cooks. Recipes were indicators of a changing American palate following World War II, as well as the impact of mothers working outside of the home. Food sections in newspapers from World War II through the 1970s illustrated the intersections of gender, food and nutrition. They often interacted with the famous Pillsbury Bake-Off. For example, in 1968, there were 150 newspaper food editors who attended

the competition. Another ten food editors would actually judge the finalists, including Jane Benet of the *San Francisco Chronicle* and Veronica Volpe of the *Pittsburgh Press*. As was done during previous gatherings, there were advertising elements, as well as news. The women learned about new General Electric products and new Pillsbury campaign to develop protein-rich drink for the El Salvador market as a way to combat malnutrition [13].

Covering Reproductive Issues

If there was a topic of interest to women that wasn't being covered in the news sections of the newspapers around the country in the post-World War II years, it was women's reproductive rights. Rarely were these topics part of the news. It was part of the culture to avoid these issues. Sex was rarely addressed. After all, this was at a time when actors Lucy and Dezi Arnez slept in separate beds on television and the use of the words "pregnant" on the broadcast airwaves was prohibited, so Lucy was described as "expecting." Women's page journalists were some of the first to begin the honest dialogue.

Miami Herald women's page editor Dorothy Journey was encouraging women's page editors all over the country to cover sex in their sections beginning in the 1950s. The concept of birth control was one that many women like Journey had addressed in her own life. Journey married in 1940 when she was 31 years old. Right before they married, her husband informed his future wife that he did not want her to work. She responded that she did not want any children and work was a higher priority to her than getting married [14]. She must have used some form of birth control and it likely impacted her news coverage about women's reproductive health.

Journey encouraged reporters to use good taste in writing about the topic, she said her female readers were less "squeamish" than male readers. At the *Miami Herald*, she published stories in the early 1950s on the Kinsey Report about sexuality and women, the largest study about human sexual behavior. It was likely significant to her readers as it cleared up myths about female frigidity. As *Time* magazine noted about U.S. women, "They are by no means as frigid as they have been made out, and their sex lives often become more satisfactory with age." Until the research, many doctors had estimated that between one-third and two-thirds of the American women were frigid [15]. There was little mediated conversation about women and sexuality. The *Miami Herald's* women's section also covered issues of childbirth, which allowed Journey to encourage other women's page editors to follow suit with similar stories. She was recognized for her coverage of Caesarean birth in 1958 [16]. In 1963, women's page reporter Roberta Applegate also would be recognized for her article "How Sage Are Caesarian Births?" at the same newspaper. These important public health issues

Syndicated advice columnist Ann Landers's writing regularly addressed sexual questions. By 1963 she had enough material for

a book. She wrote that she got hundreds of letters each week from teens who had sexual questions. The book *Ann Landers Talks to Teen-Agers About Sex* offered frank, progressive advice for young people. For example,

“For too many years the subject of sex among teenagers was soft-pedaled. There

was a widely held theory that frank discussion might excite undue curiosity.

‘Don’t give the kids ideas’ is the way it was put. Well, the kids already have

ideas, and many of them have put the ideas into practice. ... I am a strong

advocate of open discussion—and the more open the better [17].”

Women’s page editor Marie Anderson also assigned stories about reproductive rights. A 1969 *Miami Herald* article detailed how the introduction of the birth control pill changed the way young people looked at contraception. The expert quoted described the University of Florida as being progressive because it no longer expelled pregnant students. An expert in the story was quoted further as saying that if the female students who were not engaged and wanted birth control pills through the student health center, they had to get permission from their parents [18]. It also noted that pregnant students would no longer get kicked out of the dorms in order to be cautionary tale. A doctor from the student health center said, “If anything, it causes a strengthening of other girls’ moral stand and gives them pause to think” [19].

By 1970, Katharine Stokes, a women’s page journalist at the *Ft. Lauderdale News*, suggested several women’s health story topics that her newspaper had used. One was a three-part series on rape. The first article featured the stories of rape victims, followed by interviews of convicted rapists in the second story. The final story in the series featured interviews with judges, doctors, and psychologists regarding rape laws. Another story was about the availability of birth control pills to single women. In the story, two women reporters went to different doctors to investigate the availability and found it was easy to get. A third suggestion was a different take on reproductive health options. Stokes compared a male having a vasectomy to a female having a sterilization operation. She interviewed a man who had a vasectomy and also spoke with doctors and medical associations [20]. This kind of reporting had rarely appeared in the newspaper before.

A 1971 *Palm Beach Times* article took on the importance of the need and ability of nurses to distribute information about family planning and birth control to women in lower socioeconomic communities [21]. Also in 1971, Anderson was profiled by the national industry publication *Publishers’ Auxiliary* in which she mentioned her support of “population control.” The use of the

term allowed the concept of birth control to be a patriotic issue rather than a women’s issue [22]. Again, this was a new topic in the media that was being explored from different perspectives.

Some women’s sections also addressed the abortion debate. It was at a time when the country was debating legislation about the topic. In 1967, “unjustified abortion” was a felony in 17 states. At this time, Cuban refugee doctors had often been providing abortions in Havana were conducting the same procedure in Miami. According to a *Time* magazine article, approximately 30 abortion mills paid off officials and took in about \$20 million [23]. Anderson encouraged women’s page journalists to cover the topic in her 1970 talk at the national Penney-Missouri Awards workshop. “If we are producing unwanted babies, what about abortion?” she asked. “Legally women can dye their hair, bulge their busts or slice off their bosoms, but you can’t tamper with the reproductive apparatus” [24].

Infertility

At the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, reporter Bobbi McCallum wrote a series in the 1960s about infertility. It was at a time when the topic was not typically covered. McCallum wrote about medical procedures for couples trying to conceive a child featuring the opinions of several doctors. At the time, it was a controversial procedure and the Federal Drug Administration had not yet approved the hormones involved in the treatment [25]. For another article, McCallum interviewed a marriage counselor who addressed emotional problems for couples that were related to infertility.

In addition, McCallum wrote about the changing definition of family for women with fertility problems. She wrote a series on adoption that was widely read. The first article featured the story of Beth, a young woman who was giving up a baby for adoption. The 17-year-old was from Wyoming but was staying at a home for pregnant, unwed woman in Seattle. The lead was a direct quote referencing the adoption paperwork the young mother would have to sign: “All parental rights and interests. Interests? How can I relinquish all interest in the first baby I’ve given birth to?” The story went on to describe the decision-making that she had to go through after first ignoring that she was pregnant. The father offered to marry her, she said as a high school student she knew she was too young to start a family. Following the baby’s birth, Beth was looking at her future differently. She said, “I’ve changed a lot—grown up. I’m going to plan my future, finish school, get a job, save some money” [26]. Another story was about a couple unable to conceive children and who had decided to adopt. It described the long process that couples must go through in order to adopt. It also featured the stigma that the family faced because their children were adopted. The mother described the reaction of some people: “They always bring up the adopted kids who have gone wrong. They make you defend your decision to adopt” [27] It was a topic that was just beginning to be covered.

Conclusion

The women's page journalists addressed numerous public health issues. They were often the first to cover health issues aimed at women readers—especially reproductive issues. This was especially true in the 1950s and 1960s. These journalists also covered serious food-related issues like nutrition and they also addressed reproductive issues at a time when rarely addressed in other media. Much of what the population learned about women's public health were through the women's pages of newspapers. The sections created a foundation for later news coverage in other media, including magazines and television. Examining the content of the women's sections leads to a better understanding of mediated public health.

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