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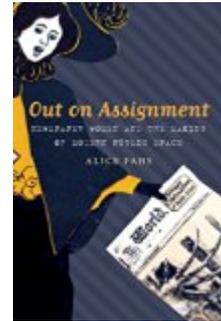
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alice Fahs. *Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011. 400 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3496-1.

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Out on Assignment: Newspaper Women and the Making of Modern Public Space

At first glance, turn-of-the-century newspaper women may not appear to be the most pioneering women of their day. As garment workers organized strikes for equal pay, as Margaret Sanger advocated for birth control, and as free thinkers insisted upon equality in their romantic relationships, most newspaper women earned their living by writing up advice columns, fashion notes, and cleaning tips. Many of these articles, appearing on newspapers' women's pages, seemed simply to reinforce women's roles as wives, mothers, and housekeepers. In *Out on Assignment*, however, Alice Fahs asserts that newswomen, no less than suffragists and labor leaders, carved out space for women in public dialogue and public life between the 1880s and the 1910s.

Out on Assignment investigates the women writers who moved beyond women's page work, and profiles female journalists who covered international events, politics, labor issues, and the urban streets. The book also reveals the many ways that newswomen pushed boundaries even within the women's pages, both by airing women's concerns in newspapers' public forums and by paying close attention to working women's lives and dilemmas. Fahs never claims that these innovative journalists cleared a path to ever-expanding opportunities. Indeed, she points out that after particularly rich decades for women's newspaper writing in the 1900s and 1910s, women reporters made little professional headway for sixty years. Fahs instead contends that her subjects actually set the stage for women's suffrage by opening

up public conversations about women's professional and private concerns.

Fahs has mined the personal papers, biographies, and autobiographies of this era's women journalists in order to reconstruct their lives and careers. She uses trade journal columns to listen in on newspaper women's professional conversations. Of course, she has traced newswomen's careers through their published articles as well. By comparing varied sources, Fahs shows that women nearly always had to funnel their own interests and opinions into articles that they could pitch to skeptical and often biased editors.

In the mid 1880s, according to Fahs, women set themselves up in cities (New York City more than others) and proposed new columns to editors eager to expand their papers and attract wider audiences. These women often started out by creating features based on conventional female roles, such as advisor or confidante, and then gradually broadened the scope of their writing. Women reporters slipped articles advocating equal pay and women's suffrage onto women's pages, often without their editors ever noticing. Newswomen profiled "bachelor girls" like themselves—who supported themselves, enjoyed their urban surroundings, and felt no rush to marry—effectively planting the notion in the minds of women readers that independent lives were possible. A few female reporters used their physical courage to launch their careers, visiting the tops of bridges or

speeding around the world in record time and then writing about their feats. While these women played upon stereotypes to interest their readers, “daring” to do things that many readers believed a respectable woman would never do, their stunts helped to accustom the public to seeing women in varied jobs and public spaces. Women found other reporting niches when they acted as genteel emissaries to worlds that would have been alien to their middle-class readers, from slum streets to sweatshop floors to foreign countries. In each case, women included some of what their editors expected—maudlin “starving seamstresses” stories or triumphal narratives of the United States’ expanding sphere of influence. Yet these women’s status as outsiders in their own professional world primed them to empathize with disfranchised subjects, from underpaid textile workers to Irish independence fighters, and to critique some aspects of American capitalists’ and politicians’ hubris.

Fahs is never content to simply narrate the story that newspaper articles themselves seem to tell. She is keenly aware that women’s published articles rarely offered their writers’ unvarnished opinions, so she does impressive detective work to find out where writers’ true preferences and sympathies lay. Eliza Putnam Heaton earned extra money as “Ellen Osborne,” fashion writer, but threw herself into women’s rights reporting. Isabel Mallon played to two different tropes as the flip-pant gossip columnist of “Bab’s Babble” and the maternal advisor “Ruth Ashmore.” By highlighting writers who poked fun at both gender and newspaper conventions, Fahs shows that turn-of-the-century readers and writers recognized how narrow newspapers’ representations of women could be. In addition, Fahs does a beautiful job investigating the experience of African American women writers. Rather than merely noting that mainstream metropolitan papers almost uniformly refused to hire black women, Fahs maintains that black women journalists wrote and lived “in dialogue” with these papers as they sent letters to the editor, starred in newspaper profiles, and used their positions at African American weeklies to respond to the mainstream press.

Out on Assignment usefully integrates recent scholarship on women’s work in an urbanizing and imperial age. Like Kristin Hoganson in *Consumer’s Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865–1920* (2007), Fahs sees women participating in U.S. political and economic expansion by educating themselves and others about foreign societies and cultures. Fahs

also traces out the ways that turn-of-the-century urban women’s individual experiments in work and personal life could add up to subtle but real cultural change, following such works as Christine Stansell’s *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (2001) and Nan Enstad’s *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (1999). Fahs sometimes seems to focus her energies on the newspaper writing that proves these points, though, and sets aside the many newspaper articles that tell a more conventional story. Women’s bread-and-butter newspaper work—society news, club notes, relationship advice, cooking columns, and European correspondence—gets scant attention here. Because she is interested in women’s changing public roles, and because she takes suffrage as the endpoint of her story, Fahs’ choices make sense. Yet they can conceal newspaper material’s role in reinforcing, rather than tearing down, hierarchies of gender, class, and culture.

Newspaper women were not the only “bachelor girls” making their way in turn-of-the-century cities, and women novelists and magazine writers often reached wider audiences than newspaper journalists. The reader may be left wondering what made newspaper women different from other women workers or women writers. Did the high level of public exposure involved in newspaper work render employers and the public more resistant to newswomen than to other female professionals? Did audiences find women’s newspaper writing bolder or more shocking than writing for the more “cultured” and mixed-gender fields of magazines and fiction? Why did muckraking, a genre forged partly by women writers, come to fullest fruition in magazines rather than newspapers? Even though these questions linger, *Out on Assignment* recovers crucial portions of newspapers that have fallen out of our narrative of journalism history. Women’s articles—often slighted for being “yellow” journalism, “human interest,” or “soft” news—captured millions of readers’ attention and earned readers’ affection. Fahs argues that over decades of newswriting, female journalists moved the nation towards acceptance of women’s right to vote. Yet *Out on Assignment* persuades us that whether or not newspaper women catalyzed the suffrage movement, they changed the trajectory of women’s history by opening up new personal and professional routes both for themselves and for their turn-of-the-century readers.

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