

**Michelle Elizabeth Tusan.** *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. 306 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03015-4.



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On May 2, 1913, London police raided the headquarters of the *Suffragette* newspaper, smashed the type for its upcoming issue, and arrested six female staffers. The raid marked the first time in seventy years that the British government had shut down a newspaper. The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) nonetheless churned out a brief version that spoke volumes about suffragists' role as political activists, summed up in its oversized, outraged, one-word banner headline: "RAIDED!" (p. 180).

The failed attempt to silence England's most militant suffrage newspaper—its staff faced charges of inciting such violence as arson and cutting telegraph wires—is the most dramatic example of the central role the women's advocacy press played in positioning women as political actors, according to author Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, an assistant professor of British history at the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Tusan's *Women Making News: Gender and Journalism in Modern Britain* offers a richly researched analysis that advances women's journalism history beyond fragmentary accounts of individual experience to

place the women's advocacy press at center of the cultural and political emergence of the British woman citizen between 1856 and 1930.

Backed up with evidence from a wide array of archival sources, Tusan's central thesis is that the journals "played a key role in creating and sustaining a modern female political culture starting as early as the 1850s" (p. 5). To that end, Tusan defines the women's advocacy press as periodicals "for and by women" that treated women as members of the public sphere who had a role to play in politics (p. 6). That portrayal contrasted with the apolitical role as consumers to which domestic magazines consigned it female readers. The first women's advocacy newspaper, the *English Woman's Journal* founded in 1858, soon was followed by the formation of the Society for Promoting the Employment of Women (SPEW) in January 1860. (Tusan says her most significant archival find was the discovery of tea chests full of documents about the *Journal's* founding.) Together, they addressed the burning question of how to relieve the precarious economic position of unmarried women, beginning the press's pattern of marrying

print culture with female activism. While the *Journal* advocated jobs for women in its pages, SPEW trained female apprentice printers and then hired them for its all-women *Victoria Press*, an early experiment in vertical integration. Besides the practical service of providing jobs for women, the *Victoria Press*, founded in March 1860, challenged cultural presumptions against working women. Subsequent newspapers through the nineteenth century broadened their agenda to advocate for improving women's education and legal status, most notably votes for women.

One of the key functions of these publications was to build and sustain an "imagined community" (Tusan refers to Benedict Anderson's phrase) of far-flung women who harbored an inchoate desire to participate in the nation's public, political life. Ample evidence gleaned from the author's extensive review of the women's advocacy newspapers supports her claim that the press provided a safe, semi-public space where women could discuss political issues and test their wings as public women. Readers were frequent contributors to "Letters to the Editor" pages; and they were encouraged to think of themselves as part of the enterprise by patronizing advertisers or sending in pertinent news clippings. The title alone of *Woman's Opinion*, founded in 1874, asserted women's right to speak out on political issues. Interviews with famous women that first appeared in the *Women's Penny Paper* (founded in 1888) at about the same time promoted women's presence in the public sphere. As Tusan quotes Penny Paper editor Henrietta Muller, "Every account published of a woman who has talent, or pluck or industry, gives the lie in the most effectual way to those who deny her powers only because they fear them" (p. 114). Through such strategies, Tusan contends, the newspapers created a new consciousness among women as political actors.

Tusan makes a persuasive case for how business practices of the women's advocacy press also

empowered women. The Women's (Cooperative) Printing Society founded in 1876, for example, challenged capitalism by dividing ownership among employees, and prioritizing high wages and decent working conditions. It printed hundreds of titles and branched out to training women compositors. Tusan argues its very existence was a political act: "patronizing a women's printer made a strong statement about women's abilities while legitimating their role as workers, readers, and authors" (p. 79). The newspapers opened up journalism careers for women and worked to improve female journalists' status, as when the *Women's Penny Paper* applied for a press gallery seat in Parliament. Although apparently unsuccessful, it stirred much discussion on women's place.

Tusan supplies insights into how publishers financed their risky ventures. While the first advocacy journals were almost totally dependent upon a patron, twentieth-century newspapers strived to be self-sustaining. Publishers created new business models, as when the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies sold company shares at a pound apiece in 1909 to finance *Common Cause*. The WSPU's *Votes for Women* (1907-18) took another tack, becoming an unabashed champion of consumerism in the early 1910s. It dispatched members to solicit ads from London department stores and published editorials exhorting the stores to buy items in the official suffragette colors of purple, green, and white. Recruiting members to help produce and distribute papers not only saved money, but "created a sense of community and common purpose," exemplified by the Woman's Freedom League's "Vote Brigade," sales rallies, and poster parades (p. 172).

The advocacy press's call to activism reached its apotheosis with the suffrage papers that dominated the 1910s. *Votes for Women*, for instance, coordinated transportation for women to the June 1908 "Votes for Women" protest that drew a half-million people to Hyde Park. The publication's

clean, modern layout, sporting clever political cartoons, photographs of suffrage protests, propagandistic rhetoric, and sensational chronicles of injustice against women, pushed *Votes for Women's* circulation up to fifty thousand. Its influence was even broader because members of Parliament and mainstream press editors received free copies.

When *Votes for Women* began advocating vandalism under the direction of WSPU leader Emmeline Pankhurst, police raided its headquarters, forcing Christabel Pankhurst, Emmeline's daughter and a key WSPU figure, to flee to Paris, where she launched the even more radical *Suffragette*. Regardless of whether militance helped or hindered the fight for the vote, Tusan argues, these radical journals helped shape the nascent woman citizen by providing "a highly visible arena for women to see other women acting in very public ways as a special interest group for the first time" (p. 160).

The Great War finally silenced *Suffragette* when, in a burst of pragmatic patriotism, the Pankhursts aborted their suffrage campaign and changed the newspaper's name to *Brittania*, re-fashioning it as a vehicle for proving women's worthiness of the vote. In the postwar years, the influence of the women's advocacy press dissipated as the mainstream press began to report on women's issues, new media such as radio vied for readers' attention, and suffrage editors lost their focus after women won full suffrage in 1928. Tusan shows that the press's traditions, however, continued in the 1970s as Second Wave feminists turned again to print media as their lifeline.

Tusan claims to break new ground by framing these papers as a cultural institution that was a major force in shaping the suffrage movement, rather than simply using them as sources of information about suffrage. However, scholars—such as Antonia Raeburn (*The Militant Suffragettes*, 1973), Laura E. Nym Mayhall (*The Militant Suffragette Movement*, 2003), and, more recently,

John Mercer (in *Women's History Review*, 2005)—have described the integral role the suffrage press played in the movement. Moreover, Tusan exaggerates slightly when she suggests that political historians have failed to consider how women used the press to "legitimate a public role for themselves within the liberal tradition" (p. 185). Some also may question Tusan's assertion that newspapers so strongly shaped, rather than merely reflected, women's shifting self-image and political role.

No one will accuse Tusan of being cryptic about her central thesis that the women's advocacy press was crucial in advancing women's political culture. She reiterates that claim for what seems like a hundred times, and less central arguments are equally repetitious. But such redundancy is the only criticism I have of *Women Making News*. The book is the most intellectually ambitious and creative book on women's journalism history that I can remember reading in the past decade. It suggests exciting new avenues for reinvigorating American women's journalism history.

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