

# 'There's a lot more going on': The International Herald Tribune and the Portrayal of Women

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The *New York Herald, European Edition* was launched in Paris in October 1887 into a world in which men and women lived very different lives and were assumed to have very different capabilities. Women lacked the vote, had few professional opportunities, and had limited legal rights over property and capital. Journalism, in Europe and in the United States, was dominated by men at every level, and reported on a public sphere of politics, business, international diplomacy and high culture in which women were marginalised. James Gordon Bennett Jr., the wealthy owner of the *Herald*, enjoyed and exploited, like many major newspaper proprietors, the privileges of the masculine domains of commercial enterprise and urban entertainment, and saw little reason to change the gender status quo. As might be expected, then, women were barely visible in the *Herald's* first issue. The front page was dominated by news of negotiations between the Italian Premier, Signor Crispi, and Bismarck, the formidable German Chancellor; updates on the financial situation in Wall Street; discussions of political campaigns in New York; and a naval accident at Spithead. The inside pages were no more female-friendly: they analysed a constitutional plan for Ireland, detailed military escapades in Afghanistan, recounted the 'terrible assassination' of a vicar by his curate in Framlingham, Suffolk, and listed the details of horse-racing at Nottingham. Only as wives of American visitors to Paris, or brides in the column of marriage announcements, were named women likely to catch the readers' eye.<sup>1</sup>

By the turn of the twentieth century, the *Herald's* content was becoming more diverse, and women featured more prominently, albeit in heavily stereotyped ways. Newspapers in Britain, France and the United States were all becoming increasingly conscious of the female audience, not only because of their obvious circulation value, but also because the advertisers of fashions, household products and consumer goods were increasingly keen to reach them. Specifically designated 'women's columns' and 'women's pages' became common features, as did society gossip and 'human interest' stories, which were supposed to appeal particularly to female readers.<sup>2</sup> The front page of the *Herald's* issue of 8 January 1900, for example, was dominated by reports on the Boer War, but still found space to record that the famous British-American actress Lillie Langtry had arrived in New York and was 'looking very well'. Inside, the weather forecast ('Changeable') was illustrated by a fashionable young woman wielding an umbrella, while another feature included a sketch of a woman in a three-quarter length goatskin 'automobile jacket' – goatskin, the paper observed knowledgeably, 'is a most useful fur for automobiling'. Such content was deliberately elite-focused and aspirational, as befitted the *Herald's* cosmopolitan expatriate readership: car ownership was still decades away for most ordinary Parisians. A similarly elevated tone was conveyed by the column of 'Fashionable Intelligence' from London, and the advertising from Tiffany & Co., the jewellers; rather more down-to-earth was the report of the 'ghastly discovery' of 'Two Women Found Cut Up At Lyons'.<sup>3</sup> This combination of fashion, gossip, crime reporting and

<sup>1</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 4 October 1887, 1-4

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: 2004); Jane Chapman, *Gender, Citizenship and Newspapers: Historical and Transnational Perspectives* (Basingstoke, 2013)

<sup>3</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 8 January 1900, 1-6

advertising provided the basic template for appealing to female readers for decades to come.

A more ambitious effort to appeal to women were the fashion supplements that came to be a regular feature on Sundays. The *Herald* was a pioneer in the field of illustrations, and its Sunday papers combined lavish line-drawn images with substantial articles and high-end advertising. The supplement on 10 June 1900, for example, contained a 'Letter to a Young Australian, Mainly about Parisiennes', alongside a sketch of a 'Charming Dress of Pastel Blue Veiling Embroidered With Fancy Patterns'; an illustrated history of 'Women's Costumes from the Period of the Phoenicians Down to the Middle Ages'; and notices for various fashion establishments, including 'The Corset Royal', described as enjoying 'the highest reputation among ladies who are anxious about their beauty and the suppleness of their waist'.<sup>4</sup> In the early years of the twentieth century, these supplements – and, indeed, the rest of the paper – were transformed by the new ability of newspapers to reproduce photographs cheaply and effectively. Features such as 'Hats Are Made in Many New Shapes', in May 1910, could now be illustrated not by a sketch, but by a photograph of a model wearing a 'large hat trimmed with Pink Ostrich Feathers'.<sup>5</sup>

But many women were increasingly dissatisfied by the restrictions placed on their political and social activities, and throughout Europe and the United States a feminist movement emerged to campaign for legal equality and the right to vote. The *Herald* was opposed

to the more militant activities of the suffragettes, and an editorial reprinted from the New York edition accused women engaged in violent protests of letting 'their feelings overcome their reason', and allowing 'hysteria' to 'usurp their judgment'. If this was a sign of 'that world-old tendency of most women (not all) to go to extremes whenever they are deeply interested, because at moments of stress emotion rules them, then the wisdom of the ages in keeping them out of politics is completely vindicated.'<sup>6</sup> The *Herald's* acceptance of a fundamental difference in male and female natures – the former being more rational and controlled than the latter – was conventional for the period and helps to explain why progress towards equality was so slow. Nevertheless, the *Tribune* was by no means closed to more moderate and peaceful feminist arguments before 1914, publicising Parisian organisations such as the 'Salon International', which attracted American and English women in its efforts to improve the position of women, and interviewing the Swedish author Ellen Kay on her trip to Paris to deliver a lecture on 'Women's Role in the Society of the Future'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, reports on feminist activities could bring welcome controversy to the letters pages. An 'American' responded to the interview with a missive denouncing Kay's comments as 'dangerous advice to the younger generation' which would 'lower us to the plan of animals': 'Her idea is evidently free love with the backing of the Government. No, that cannot be!'<sup>8</sup>

The hiring of talented female journalists helped to change attitudes. May Birkhead was a seamstress from Missouri who happened to be aboard one of the ships

<sup>4</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 10 June 1900, Supplement

<sup>5</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 1 May 1910, Supplement

<sup>6</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 20 April 1913, 7

<sup>7</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 2 March 1908, 3; 12 June 1909, 2

<sup>8</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 14 June 1909, 3

called to rescue the sinking Titanic in April 1912. Despite her lack of any journalistic experience, she managed to provide the *Herald* with dramatic interviews and sketches from the scene and enabled the paper to outdo its rivals in its coverage. Birkhead was immediately hired, and became a highly successful society editor and war correspondent, staying with the paper until 1926.<sup>9</sup> The professionalism and resilience of women like Birkhead helped to erode the belief that women were not suited to public life.

Women finally obtained the vote in the United States and much of Europe at the end of the First World War – although not in France until 1945 – and as they gradually moved into politics and professional roles a more diverse selection entered the pages of the *Tribune*. Change was slow, however, and attractive society hostesses and glamorous film stars were still more likely to receive attention than female politicians and public servants. In the 1950s and early 1960s, for example, few women had more column inches devoted to them than the Hollywood celebrity Marilyn Monroe. Monroe's marriage to the former baseball player Joe Di Maggio received front page coverage in January 1954, with the report characteristically labelling her as 'The blonde'.<sup>10</sup> Ten months later she was back on the front page as she started divorce proceedings, and, as usual, her appearance received close scrutiny, with the *Herald* noting that 'In contrast with her distraught appearance yesterday, when she appeared in tears outside her home, Marilyn was her usual beautiful self today, but wore a sober mien.'<sup>11</sup> When she had a miscarriage three

years later, the front-page report on the condition of 'the blonde film beauty' was above news of a Subway blast in Philadelphia which injured 66. (In another example of the conventional approach to content for women, the same front page also contained the headline 'Short Dresses Skim Fashionable Knees', reporting on the new European fashion for sleeveless chemises).<sup>12</sup> By 1962, the *Herald* could barely contain its excitement at news of Monroe posing nude for a scene in her latest film, 'Something's Got to Give'. Underneath a photograph of the scene in question, with Monroe's body tastefully disguised by rippled water, the report gave a blow-by-blow account of the mechanics of the filming. The paper recorded breathlessly that 'The actress went to her dressing room and returned sans shorts, but covered with a terry robe. She went back into the pool, climbed out, reaching at the same time for the robe. For a blurred moment her nude body was completely visible'.<sup>13</sup> The *Herald* was not the sort of paper that provided pin-ups of the sort that characterised the British tabloids in this period, but it was still prone to sexualise and objectify the female body.<sup>14</sup>

Only with the revival of feminism in the 1960s did a more critical strain of writing about women's position start to become more prominent. In 1964, for example, Gloria Steinem, already famous for her exposure of working conditions at the New York Playboy Club, was invited to review new books on women by the magazine editor Helen Gurley-Brown and the socialite Irene Silverman. Steinem eviscerated Gurley-Brown's work,

<sup>9</sup> Charles L. Robertson, *The International Herald Tribune: The First Hundred Years* (New York, 1987), 66

<sup>10</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 15 January 1954, 1

<sup>11</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 8 October 1954, 1

<sup>12</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 3-4 August 1957, 1

<sup>13</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 28 May 1962, 3

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life and the British Popular Press 1918-78* (Oxford, 2009)

lambasting a 'writing style that is an ingenious combination of woman's-magazine-bad and advertising-agency-bad'; it was, she concluded, worth studying 'as an unusual example of a standard American mashed-potato mind at work – unusual, because it is not the sort of mind that frequently produces books.'<sup>15</sup> Steinem would become an occasional contributor to the paper in subsequent decades, but, more significantly, her feminist activities, and those of her fellow Women's Liberation campaigners, gained considerable coverage in the 1970s. A typical article from January 1972 recorded how she 'stormed' the National Press Club lunch in Washington, and 'in splendid disregard for the niceties of the occasion, took well aimed swipes at her hosts, at men in general and at Richard M. Nixon in particular, leaving 'em all gasping'. The *Herald* dutifully published her attack on wider press culture:

"We're trying to bring about a real revolution in our human culture so that we can think of each other as humans and not define people by sex or race." Criticizing the press, she said: "All the papers ever print about women is news about canning pickles and quilting rugs. There's a lot more going on."<sup>16</sup>

Although, as in this instance, the coverage of feminism could be flippant or delivered with a rather mocking tone, and there was often a focus on splits – 'Dissension Shakes U.S. Feminist Movement' ran the headline of a typical article from 1975, focusing on tensions between Steinem and Betty Friedan<sup>17</sup> – the *Herald* still helped to disseminate some of the language and ideas of feminism to its audience, and contributed

to a broader shift in the lives of women in the 1970s and 1980s. As more women moved into positions of power in journalism and in public life more broadly, news cultures slowly shifted, the stereotypes of the past were eroded, and newspapers found that there was, indeed, 'a lot more going on'.

By the end of the 1980s, indeed, the advances had been such that some observers claimed that feminist campaigns were no longer required in the United States and Western Europe, and that a new 'post-feminist' age had dawned. The *Herald* provided a platform for these debates, with one report from August 1989 claiming that 'Despite much talk about the decline of feminism, American women very much want a movement working on their behalf as they try to win equal treatment in the workplace and to balance the demands of work and family'.<sup>18</sup> Three years later, author and columnist Sally Quinn disagreed, arguing that 'the movement in its present form has outlasted its usefulness' and that feminist leaders 'were never completely honest with women', failing 'to separate the workplace from the bedroom' and trying to do too much to 'regulate people's behaviour in their personal lives'. Although feminism had achieved a great deal by opening up opportunities for women to compete professionally and in public life, Quinn suggested that its legacy was that 'So many women, and men too, are confused about what their roles are'.<sup>19</sup>

These debates about feminism and the role of women rumbled on until the closure of the *International Herald*

<sup>15</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 11 November 1964, 6

<sup>16</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 26 January 1972, 14

<sup>17</sup> *New York Herald, European Edition*, 2 September 1975, 12

<sup>18</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 23 August 1989, 3

<sup>19</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 22 January 1992, 9

*Tribune*, and the end of the archive, in 2013. Gender equality had still not been achieved, and women remained underrepresented in the *Herald's* pages, just as they were in most media outlets, and in many branches of public life. A new generation of feminists continued to press the need for action in new and inventive ways – and, indeed, the activities of the older generation, including Steinem, continued to be reported.<sup>20</sup>

New issues rose to the top of the agenda – one of the last papers in the archive reported on the struggles of the transgender athlete Fallon Fox.<sup>21</sup> Yet if there was disagreement about how far was left on the road to parity, and which route was to be taken, the pages of the *Herald* are an excellent guide to the long journey that women have taken since the late nineteenth century.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, *International Herald Tribune*, 16 August 2011, 11

<sup>21</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, 14 May 2013, 14

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