

# AN INTERVIEW WITH MARIA DICENZO, LONDON APRIL 2011

Kristin Skoog

**Dr Maria DiCenzo is Associate Professor of English and Film Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University (Canada).**<sup>1</sup> Her research focuses on feminist media history, particularly late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women's print media and social movements, as well as twentieth-century British political theatre. DiCenzo has published widely on the late Victorian and Edwardian feminist periodical press, and she has also provided thoughtful and provocative commentary on the development of feminist media history and its relations to the broader field of media history. Her latest book, *Feminist Media History: Suffrage, Periodicals and the Public Sphere* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), co-authored with Dr Lucy Delap (St Catharine's College, Cambridge, UK) and Dr Leila Ryan (McMaster University, Canada), further considers the methodological and disciplinary debates currently shaping feminist media history. Through several case studies the book also highlights and builds on the complexity of early feminist media: its representation and debate of a range of feminist discourses and tactics for the emancipation of women; and, further, how these publications engaged with wider public issues and consequently the general press, therefore adding to our broader understanding of press history. As such, the book is a valuable attempt to address new directions and ways of breaking away from the marginalization or 'separation' of feminist (and women's) media history. Hence, the book works as a good starting point for further engagement and discussion about the field.

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**Kristin Skoog:** How do you define the term 'feminist media history'? In the article published in *Media History* you wrote, for example, 'Feminist media history has attempted to trace developments in women's media in the context of media and social/political history more generally' (2004, 45). Not all 'women's media' might have had an intended or clear 'feminist' approach at the time, but still might have challenged representations of women (or offered an important space for women's voices), is it about tracing women's *own* use of media, or women's media in more general terms? Or is it also in the approach of the researcher/historian? Is it about 'recovering'?

**Maria DiCenzo:** Feminist media history can include all of the elements you suggest. First (and perhaps foremost) it involves the critical approach of the researcher or historian, no matter what the immediate object of study is. In the most basic sense, 'feminist' here denotes a perspective on or by media that highlights and engages with gender-based forms of inequality and exclusion at social, political and economic levels. Feminist critique need not be focused on women's media exclusively or representations of gender, just as documenting women's media does not necessarily imply a feminist approach. This is another misconception – namely that, as long as something examines media forms produced by women, that that constitutes feminist analysis.

When it comes to objects of study (in the case of historical media), it is important to distinguish between women's media in general terms and feminist media more specifically. It is not anachronistic to use the term; in fact it was used widely by the first decades of the twentieth century. As we demonstrate in the book, a wide range of editors, journalists and activists either produced dedicated publications or articulated their positions in overtly politicized terms, providing feminist analysis of social and political issues at the time. Part of my concern in the 2004 piece was to expose the persistent oversight of early forms of *feminist media* – to stress that *feminist media history* involved more than looking at women's domestic magazines and women's supplements in the daily press. The latter are fascinating documents, fraught with interesting tensions, and significant feminist research has been and continues to be done on them. But they were not the only media being produced or demanded at the time (I am referring mainly to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century here). My priority was to locate and highlight the competing and critical voices. That is why, if you start with a distorted history of the period, you will never see these alternative and oppositional discourses. So 'recovering', as you say, is always part of the feminist project. This seems a very interesting time for your special issue to take up these questions, in light of recent attempts to evaluate the contributions and future directions of feminist scholarship. Cynthia Carter and Lisa McLaughlin have edited a tenth anniversary issue of *Feminist Media Studies* (2011)

and the Women's History Network is devoting its twentieth annual conference to 'Looking Back, Looking Forward' in September 2011.

**KS:** I am interested in how the book came about. The book is in two parts: the first exploring issues relating to methodology and conceptual frameworks, the other concentrating on key case studies. I know you have written about the field previously and of course your research areas have focused much on the British suffrage press but what made you (and Delap and Ryan) particularly explore the side of methodology and the approach or location of feminist media history?

**MD:** The structure of the book and the interest in methodological issues are, in many ways, interconnected. Before I began work on the suffrage press, my research focused on alternative theatre – socialist and feminist theatre in Britain in the twentieth century. The areas overlap insofar as they constitute different forms of alternative media and as soon as you start to look at these kinds of developments, one of the first questions that comes up is why are they not available or as visible in the historical scholarship as they should be? Where do we look for the analysis and reception of these forms? Methodological issues invariably become part of the study in order to situate these phenomena in relation to more traditional or dominant narratives and critical vocabularies in a given field. It is important to acknowledge and address the very challenges of documenting and analysing these kinds of media forms – to expose the systems of value at work. In other words, we need to do in the scholarly sphere what these media were trying to do in the larger public sphere. I actually came to the suffrage press by accident, as a way of trying to gain a perspective on suffrage theatre in the Edwardian period. I became so fascinated with the wide range of publications that I decided to pursue work on the press instead, especially since little had been done at that stage. In the mid to late 1990s, there were major studies of Victorian women's magazines and periodicals and, of course, second wave feminist publications, but the feminist press in the first decades of the twentieth century had not been examined in detail. I worked with Leila Ryan from the outset and our collaboration with Lucy Delap began after the Feminist Forerunners Conference in 2000 – a very important event for many.<sup>2</sup>

Getting back to the structure of the book, it is designed to allow for different levels and types of analysis. As you note, the first part deals with methodological and conceptual frameworks, with *meta-analysis* if you will. A book-length study affords the space to provide a wider context of developments relevant to understanding these media and potential approaches to them. If we think in terms of the critical 'tool kit', it seemed that all the obvious frameworks had gaps, pieces missing. For instance, press history just didn't account for women's work (particularly the feminist press) adequately, while women's/suffrage history drew on the press without

foregrounding the role of newspapers and periodicals in more general terms. Contemporary media studies offered valuable insights into alternative and feminist media, but without an adequate historical dimension. So the goal was to draw on the different areas and create points of intersection, using public sphere and social movement theory to capture the processes these media were implicated in at the time. Social movements (and by implication their media) are dynamic – they emerge, react, adapt and evolve. Historical and literary approaches have tended to try to document and assess these phenomena. I was less interested in praise or blame and more concerned with the conflicts and dynamics. Even the concept of a feminist public sphere or counterpublic sphere which I had used previously came to be too limiting and problematic. Social movement theory offered a more effective way to identify and reveal processes and relationships.

The case studies in the second part of the book were our way of demonstrating the richness and complexity of the feminist press in these years. They also represent a practical solution to the problem of working with an enormous archive of material (methodological challenges again!). In addition to covering different genres of periodicals, we identified some key themes/issues around which to organize the particular case studies. As a result, the case studies are highly selective, but they gave each of us a chance to work in some detail with the primary material. They represent different voices, priorities and resources at work – different models of research. For example, Lucy was able to draw from the rich archival material available for the *Freewoman*, while the *Englishwoman* was terribly difficult to pin down. There is no one way to approach these periodicals; they offer a variety of challenges and opportunities.

The book is likely to appeal to different audiences. There may be some readers who come to it primarily for the case studies, to learn more about these publications and feminist discourses in the period. But there may be some who are interested in the methodological and disciplinary debates in the first part of the book and who may not share our fascination with the actual historical data. Ideally, I hope readers consider the whole book and that by attracting different kinds of readers the book could contribute to more cross-disciplinary debates.

**KS:** I am also interested in your argument about situating historical research in contemporary debate. As you suggest (and James Curran as well) media history has been ignored or neglected, seen as the ‘grandparent’ within media studies. This is then interesting in terms of *Feminist Media History* because there is also the argument in the book about how little of feminist media history has actually been integrated into ‘mainstream media history’, and that the book is not only of interest to gender or feminist historians, so is this perhaps a way of avoiding the ‘narrow’ field that often media history or feminist media history is confined too?

**MD:** It is very important to work against the tendencies to ghettoize or marginalize feminist media history. That's why the introduction to the book stresses that these publications and activities are relevant to *anyone* interested in the culture, politics, history, media, etc. of the period – not just feminist historians. As we try to demonstrate in the case studies, through the emphasis on the *publicist orientation* of these periodicals, the individuals and organizations producing these media at the time were deliberately speaking to diverse audiences and were implicated in all the major issues of the day. So whether you are interested in parliamentary elections or pacifism or labour legislation or sexuality or art exhibits, these publications were engaged in those debates. They are also obviously relevant to the history of the production and circulation of print media. The sometimes too narrow focus on gender in the analysis of the women's press has made it easy for others to dismiss or bracket that work as not being central to the field. I am not sure if Curran would still be willing to argue, as he did in the *Media History* article, that 'Feminist history focuses on women, and largely excludes one half of the population (as does most media history, the other way around)' (2002: 149).<sup>3</sup> The reality is that there continues to be a widespread misconception that feminist critical approaches or feminist media as objects of study only focus on and concern women. That is why 'mainstream' media history – whatever that actually is – carries on untroubled by the findings and impact of feminist research, with the exception of the occasional footnote or obligatory chapter or section on 'women'. But it's a bit like saying that Marxist history is only about the working classes. The emancipation of women affected society on all levels – social, political, economic and cultural. Men and male institutions (including the 'Press') were implicated at every level – whether as participants/supporters in the struggle or as opponents and targets. We need to frame our analyses in ways that make it more difficult to overlook or dismiss feminist media and critique. Issues related to integrated research and gender as an interpretive framework are taken up in greater detail in the sections on 'Research to Date' and 'New Directions' in part one of the book. But it is worth stressing here that it would be good to see more integration, more attempts to situate feminist media in the context of wider developments in the history of the press – to make them more standard points of reference in the field.

As I suggested earlier, overlap and integration between the areas will come as the sources become more familiar and more accessible – as they become part of the shared language so to speak. I would like to think that it would not be possible now to write books like *Poor Men's Guardians* or *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* without accounting for feminist media.

**KS:** Is there a danger though that there is less focus on the 'feminist' subject or say 'women' ... that you lose focus?

**MD:** That it's too diluted?

**KS:** Yes, yeah ...

**MD:** Yes, that is an interesting problem. But one of the things that always strikes me is how self-conscious so many early feminist periodicals are about their status and functions. Editors often articulated their mandates and situated their publications in very clear terms – they knew what they were up against at the time! I tried to make a case for this in a paper dealing with press debates at the end of the nineteenth century (DiCenzo, 2010). There are many examples of women's publications intervening in debates about the influence of the press. Because they offered overt critiques of the 'press' and elucidated what they saw as their relationship to it, the feminist analysis is implicit. So if we acknowledge and foreground those kinds of elements even in more generalist studies, and let the periodicals speak for themselves, there may be fewer risks than we imagine. The gradual accumulation of historical data, aided through ongoing recovery work, will make this material more accessible and visible over time.

But I would like to come back to the first part of your question on the relationship between historical research and contemporary debate and the answer is, in part, related to my earlier comments about developing an appropriate tool kit for the analysis of these media. On the one hand it was important to historicize contemporary media and feminist studies, in order to expand our longitudinal understanding of these issues. But it was equally important to use contemporary theoretical/conceptual frameworks to examine women's movements and their media in the past, in order to understand that past better or differently. The book was an attempt to offer a different lens on suffrage media and activism, to encourage a new look at something we think we know. For example, political theorists Cohen and Arato (1992) make a very compelling argument about the impact of contemporary women's movements on civil as well as political society (how these movements target both public and private spheres in proactive and reactive ways). It was striking to consider how relevant the analysis of these dualistic strategies was to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminist activism as well. Invoking their work became not just a shorthand way of drawing a parallel between past and present, but also a way to suggest a more complex consideration of the discourses and strategies at work in the earlier context. What we see in the case of the suffrage movement is far more than a single-issue campaign aimed at political change; the debates were extremely wide-ranging (everything from marital rape to protective labour laws) and the efforts to achieve electoral and legislative reform necessarily involved changing attitudes, opinions and values. Expanding our critical or conceptual vocabularies is as important as (and inextricable from) expanding our empirical knowledge.

**KS:** The book is interdisciplinary, or, rather builds and refers to a range of disciplines, and the type of case studies you discuss, the feminist periodicals, have received attention from various disciplines such as Victorian studies, women's history, literary studies, etc., and this, as you say, 'accounts for the often dispersed nature of this work' (p. 58). Is this dispersed nature of the work an issue do you think?

**MD:** I highlight the dispersed nature of the research for different reasons. The first relates to disciplinary issues, namely the problem of interaction or communication between disciplines. I am often quite surprised at how separate they remain, in spite of the lip service paid to interdisciplinarity. If we use the example of press history, there are researchers working in literary and cultural studies, history, media and communications studies, journalism history and rhetoric studies who are dealing with similar sources and questions, but they derive their critical vocabularies from different critical paradigms and disseminate their work in different kinds of journals or book lists. The situation is even more complicated in the case of feminist scholars who publish on media in journals such as *Gender & History* or *Women's History Review*. This work may not be so visible to someone searching media history sources. The internet and scholarly databases have obviously made it much easier to find things, but it is amazing how much slips through the cracks. You need to know what you are looking for or you will miss a great deal.

**KS:** On the other hand the various approaches or methodologies can actually be quite fruitful? So it's kind of a challenge but also something positive?

**MD:** Yes, they are very positive insofar as the attempt to negotiate the range of relevant fields forces us into new territory. It is very productive to think outside our own critical vocabularies. So if a search for a particular items takes you into journals you don't usually go to, I would assume anyone curious begins to look further and absorb, so that broadens our horizons ('shelf browsing' in the library and online is hugely satisfying!). I think it is a mistake to assume we can trawl a regular handful of journal titles to find particular developments in a given field any more. Interdisciplinarity is extremely rewarding but it is also very labour intensive.

But my other reason for raising this issue is that this dispersal or the proliferation of publishing venues also has professional implications. In a climate of academic assessment exercises and competition for diminishing resources, not only are researchers under more pressure than ever to publish their work, but *where* they place their work can be enormously important. Mary Spongberg (2010) recently offered an interesting and disturbing analysis of the impact of structural changes on feminist publishing in Australia.

**KS:** In discussing the case studies you also make a point about the use of language (pp. 74–5), how important it is for the sources to ‘speak out’. Is this something we should be more aware of in our writing as media historians?

**MD:** I probably seem a bit repetitive on this issue, but I can’t stress enough the need to let the sources speak for themselves. In the case of the early feminist periodicals I work with, their own language is always more compelling and powerful than anything I can say about them. I usually refer to Ragnild Nessheim (1997) who observes that books about the press often quote very sparingly from the letterpress of newspapers. Recently Martin Conboy made a similar criticism of newspaper histories which do not pay sufficient attention to the language of the press, arguing that ‘the language of newspapers is the most vital and dynamic aspect of their history’ (2010: 3). It really is true that the closer you look, the harder it is to generalize.

**KS:** There is a strong sense from the book that the feminist press is not just about a specialist audience or cause, it actually engaged very much with other external sources and critiqued the press etc., therefore it can tell us something more about social movements and society in general (the dynamics, connections and interchange, the sort of dialogue that was going on). And you clearly argue that it is the ‘specific’ and ‘narrow’ approach, often used within media history, which has added greatly to the field and developed it in the first instance. How does this then relate to the need to contextualize, or to understand these publications as is suggested as, a ‘part of a complex web of media and interests’ (p. 200) which is emphasized in the book’s conclusion?

**MD:** It is really about trying to strike a balance between general accounts and detailed analysis of the empirical data, between theoretical and empirical modes. There remains a strong tendency towards descriptive accounts in work on historical media (women’s media as well as other genres). As I suggested earlier, trying to negotiate large archives of material is a major challenge and it is easy to get too caught up in detail. But there is always a way of drilling down or parcelling (a number of metaphors come to mind) that allows the researcher to deal in specificities. That is why I think the case study is such a useful exercise and can be more revealing, more satisfying than dealing in generalizations. What is important is how we contextualize or situate those specificities. What kinds of conclusions do we draw from them and how do we explore the implications more broadly? Why do they matter? A commitment to the critical exercise will ensure that even a very specific kind of analysis can be of value for a wide range of readers.

**KS:** In the article published in *Media History* (2004) you highlighted the growth of research in the field, how do you view the field now?

**MD:** Yes, I wanted to highlight the range of work and to make the point about the dispersed nature of the research that we discussed earlier. And the work since 2004 has been considerable. Most striking has been the expansion of our sense of politicized women's media reaching further back into the early nineteenth century and forward into the inter-war period and 1950s. The contributions of people like Kathryn Gleadle and Helen Rogers on early nineteenth century British women radicals, or Teresa Zackodnik's work on early African American feminisms force us to acknowledge that, even as feminists, we create our own oversights and become stuck in our own narratives about where things start or what deserves attention. This is especially true of work that highlights marginalized and racialized groups and regions. So the growth of research has been very effective in disrupting assumptions about periodization and genre in relation to early women's media.

**KS:** The question of periodization is important. Has there been too much emphasis on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and 'second wave' feminism, and has this left other periods, for example the 1940s and 1950s very unexplored?

**MD:** Yes, that is true, but let's think about why. We are still fighting persistent historical narratives about the demise of a feminist movement or tendencies to characterize the inter-war years and the 1950s as periods of retreat and retrenchment for feminist politics, compared with the insurgency of the pre-war suffrage campaign. Feminist media after the First World War continued to be instrumental in the mobilization of support for new and ongoing reform campaigns in national and international contexts, but they have received very limited attention so far. The prevailing narratives about women's retreat to the domestic sphere have been very influential. This is of particular interest to me at the moment because my research has moved into the inter-war years, picking up where *Feminist Media History* left off. There is a growing interest in exploring how media from these periods (fiction, journalism, theatre, art, etc.) disrupt and challenge those narratives. In a British context, there has been important work on the 'middlebrow' women novelists and on representations of women in the daily press and women's magazines in the decades between the wars (I am thinking here of work by people like Adrian Bingham, Catherine Clay, Fiona Hackney, Alison Light, etc.). It comes back to why the questions we ask, and where we look for answers, matter so much. These decades are getting more attention.

**KS:** Another challenge of course, is the need for non-western perspectives; a need for more internationalization. This poses new sets of challenges in terms of methodology for example, but how do we overcome not falling in the same ‘trap’ as with periodization – that we are, as you just said, ‘fighting persistent historical narratives’?

**MD:** The challenges are even greater here; it is not just a case of sharing critical vocabularies, but language itself. It is not impossible to overcome, but language is certainly an obstacle. That is why we tend to see more comparative work on media from English-language countries. Examples that come to mind include Lucy [Delap]’s work on Anglo-American dialogue between feminist periodicals and Ann Ardis’s and Patrick Collier’s (2008) collection on transatlantic print culture.<sup>4</sup> Even in a single language the comparative work has been limited, if we consider the dearth of attention to countries like Canada, New Zealand and Australia. Working internationally is challenging on a variety of practical levels – linguistic, archival, etc. But I would stress again that more recovery and critical work will be key to making broader connections between historical periods and national/geographic spaces. As figures, organizations and media become part of a more familiar frame of reference (when we don’t have to explain who or what they are each time!) and sources become more accessible, then comparative transnational analysis will also be more feasible.

**KS:** What about future directions then? It seems to me that the field is still very ‘patchy’ in terms of some areas and a lot of ‘recovery’ work is still needed. In a sense I guess what a lot of women historians set out to do ... to write ‘women back’ ...

**MD:** Absolutely. More needs to be done and the recovery to date has been essential to getting this material on the scholarly radar. I can’t imagine where we would be without the people who have worked so hard to make these media more visible and accessible in bibliographic and critical studies. The kind of integration of feminist analysis into the larger field which we discussed earlier relies and builds on recovery and revisionist work. But we do have a critical mass of material now which is becoming increasingly accessible through digitization and print collections. What we tried to achieve in the case studies were models for reading the periodicals in relational terms, within the feminist press and beyond. It is interesting to try to gauge not just what papers had to say to their readers but also how they were perceived by or interacted with other media, particularly in a period where print was the primary medium for public debate. These considerations could easily be extended to other media as well.

There really are no shortcuts to doing this kind of work. As more primary sources become available in digitized collections, there is also a growing tendency to 'cherry pick' – to find things through keyword searches and put them together without establishing a clear sense of the sources/publications from which they derive. I am already seeing this in student work. So digitization has been a remarkable practical tool, but will generate its own set of problems in the research.

**KS:** I guess what helps is more contact and collaborations in terms of research, and to try to really encourage more comparisons or international work.

**MD:** Yes, collaboration is crucial, intellectually as well as in terms of resources. I have benefited enormously from my formal collaboration with co-authors Lucy Delap and Leila Ryan, but also from the more informal exchanges with colleagues in the field. There is no question that dedicated workshops/conferences and large-scale research projects have created valuable opportunities for collaboration across disciplines, institutions and national contexts. Future scholarly work depends on our ability to preserve and ensure democratic access to historical media. I hope we can continue to attract new generations of students, readers and researchers.

**1.**

The interview was conducted in person in London (April 2011) with the understanding that some revisions or clarification might be made before publication via email correspondence.

**2.**

'Feminist Forerunners: The New Woman in the National and International Periodical Press, 1880 to the 1920s' was organized by Ann Heilmann, Margaret Beetham and Janet Beer at Manchester Metropolitan University in July 2000 and led to a series of publications including *Feminist Forerunners: New Womanism and Feminism in the Early Twentieth Century* (Heilmann, 2003), two volumes of *Women's History Review* (11.4 in 2002 and 12.1 in 2003) and a special issue of *Media History* (7.1 in 2001).

**3.**

Curran offers a thoughtful and provocative critique of the developments and status of media history, identifying six competing narratives: the liberal narrative; the feminist narrative; the populist narrative; the libertarian narrative; the anthropological narrative; the radical narrative. Curran called for a more integrated use of these narratives and a move away from the tendency of writing medium- or media-centric histories.

**4.**

This collection grew out of a symposium at the University of Delaware in 2007 and a follow-up symposium was held in September 2011 ('Mediamorphosis: Print Culture and Transatlantic Public Sphere(s), 1880–1940') designed to explore the very problems of national divisions and historical boundaries further.

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