

National Women's History Museum  
Educator's Workshop: Media History & Literacy  
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Workshop Statement of Purpose:

In this workshop, participants will learn the basic concepts of media literacy and learn how a historical approach to print and reading culture can help students place media in its social and cultural context, going beyond questions of bias or perspective. I will provide an overview of how historians approach print and reading culture and then walk through how these concepts can be applied to specific primary source documents, focusing on these documents as media objects rather than simply on their content. We will walk through—and practice part of—an activity based on one of two historical publications and discuss briefly how to adapt this for other sources.

- **Media literacy** is the ability to critically analyze stories presented in media and determine their accuracy or credibility.
- **Media history** is the study of the interaction between media (communication and information technology writ large) and society in its historical context. **Print and Reading Culture** are ways to analyze how social and cultural factors informed the production of print material over time and how people consumed, interacted with, and were influenced by the print material in their lives.
  - o Resources on Print and Reading Culture
    - Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (Basic Books, 1984)
    - Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of man* (McGraw Hill, 1964)
    - Michele Moylan, ed. *Reading Books: Essays on the Material Text and Literature in America* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996)

**Workshop Resources:**

For February 23:

[\*Voice of Industry\*](#), April 2, 1847

For March 2:

[\*Ain't I a Woman?\*](#), June 26, 1970

**Where to find Other Digitized Media:**

[Chronicling America](#) (Library of Congress, Historical Newspapers from 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries)

[American Revolutionary Newspapers](#) (American Revolution Institute)

JSTOR [Independent Voices Collection](#) (post-WWII underground and independent publications)

[Media History Digital Library](#) (multi-media resource for film, broadcasting, and recorded sound)

[Global Journals Portal](#) (Multi-lingual international publications, 20<sup>th</sup> century)

[Revolutionary Papers](#) (global radical and anticolonial publications, includes [teacher resources](#))

## Classroom Activity Guide

### Part I: Print as Object

- Begin by doing some basic observations
  - What does the object look like?
  - What do you notice about the quality of the print, spelling consistency, font & formatting?
  - Are there pictures? Is it primarily text or text + images and graphics?
- Specific print media questions:
  - Is there advertising?
    - What is being advertised? To whom?
  - What 'sections' are present?
    - Letters to editors, community information, literary content
    - Local news vs. international news
    - Where are they in relation to one another?

### Part II: Readers & Context

- What basic historical information do you have about this text?
  - Editor, place & time of production
  - Specific or broad purpose
  - What might be the intent of the producers of this publication? How can you tell?
- What do we know about readers in the time/place it was produced?
  - Literacy rates - were they actually reading it? How does this impact our understanding?
  - Gender & class of readers - is this a specific audience or meant to serve a specific sub-group of people?
  - Do you think readers had the same intent in purchasing or reading the newspaper as the editors did? How might this shape our understanding of the impact of the document?
- What conclusions can we draw about readers based on the publications?
  - How did people relate to text - was it rare, sacred, special? Was it ubiquitous? Was it informative or entertainment?
  - Can you tell anything about how the readers interacted with the editors? Did they influence the content of the journal or its coverage?

### Part III: Historical & Critical Analysis

- What does the media you've analyzed tell us about time/place?
  - Can you determine how people felt about a specific political process, movement, or event based on the content?
  - What other factors or issues were important to their everyday life? How does this fit into or challenge our assumptions about the importance of "big politics" or ideas?
  - Note: Remember, we're trying to think about the periodical as a historical object rather than simply a container of information.

- Why was reading important to the people or place you've looked at?
  - How did this media shape their vision of the world?
    - Did it introduce them to new ideas or topics?
    - What narrative of the world is being told here (i.e., what's important, what's secondary, how do issues or topics relate to one another)? How might this narrative shape how people understood events or ideas?
  - How might their personal interests (based on your own knowledge of this place or time) have informed the contents of or their reactions to the media in question?
- What did the editors think was relevant, the issues people might have paid attention to, etc.?
- What (or who) might these documents leave out? What isn't said?

#### Part IV: Drawing Conclusions

- What do you notice about how you or the people around you consume media? How do they look or act when they do this?
  - Do they read? Watch TV? Listen to the radio?
    - Does their behavior change when they do these different kinds of activities?
    - How does it change if it's news media vs. entertainment media?
  - Do different people in your environment consume media differently?
- Potential Homework:
  - Spend some time consuming media of whatever kind you'd like:
    - What do you notice about how the information and content is structured or presented?
      - Think about speed, repetition, complexity, etc.
  - What does this tell you about how the people making this media think about their readers/listeners?
  - Do people seem to consume it the way the way the editors/producers intended (i.e., do you listen to your podcast on double speed? Read carefully or skim?)
    - Do the readers or consumers of this media seem to influence its contents? When? How?
  - How does the medium through which the information is provided facilitate or challenge how you want to consume it?