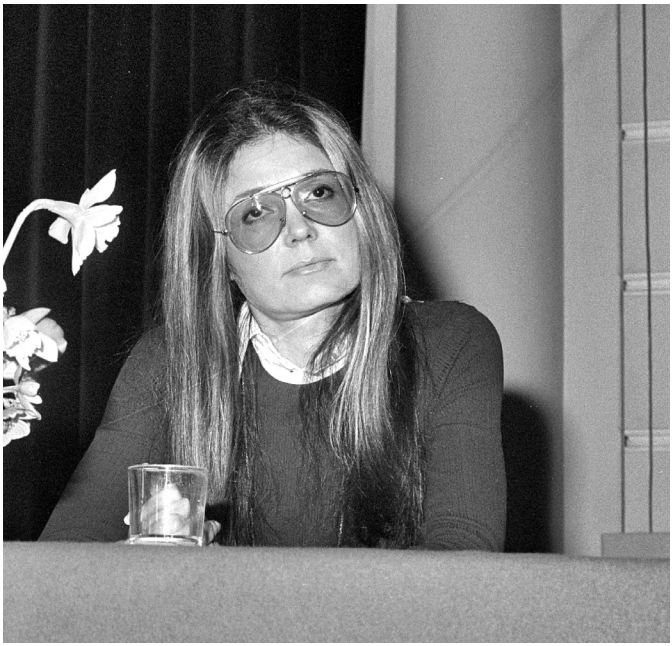

Top: Gloria Steinem, Concert Building, Amsterdam, January 24, 1973, Wikimedia Commons.

Right: Image of Gail Sheehy by Bernard Gotfryd, October 16, 1981, New York City. Wikimedia Commons.

"Every Year There's a Pretty Girl Who Comes to New York and Pretends to Be a Writer": Gender, the New Journalism, and the Early Careers of Gloria Steinem and Gail Sheehy

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Abstract: The core works that critics, scholars, and readers associate with the New Journalism are largely written by men, with subject matter that often privileges male sources and perspectives. Yet several women writers consciously embraced the reporting methods, style, subjectivity, narrative structure, and subject matter of the New Journalism, achieving levels of commercial success comparable to their male colleagues'. Despite these accomplishments, the legacy of female New Journalists remains tenuous, with Joan Didion being the only woman consistently seen as part of the core canon of New Journalism writers. Several others occupy a far less certain position. This analysis will address this question by looking at the process by which the accomplishments, writing style, and reportorial methods of two women journalists, Gloria Steinem and Gail Sheehy, connect them to the New Journalism, and the social and cultural forces that shaped their professional reputations and legacies. Both women were enormously successful writers who embraced the aesthetic liberties and goals of the New Journalism and found opportunity within the movement. Yet accounts of their early careers suggest that as women they were not free of gendered influences, which would affect not only the journalism they produced, but also how they and their work were perceived by audiences, the media world, and history. These hindrances have had a substantial impact on scholarly and popular understanding of the New Journalism and its legacy.

Keywords: New Journalism – women – gendered influences – Gloria Steinem – Gail Sheehy

The New Journalism has a woman problem. The core works that critics, scholars, and readers associate with the phenomenon are largely written by men, with subject matter—cars, wars, politics, motorcycle gangs—that often privileges male sources and perspectives. The cultural upheaval in the United States in the 1960s was slow to benefit female journalists, who were often limited to jobs writing for women's sections in newspapers and women's magazines or told they could not be hired for gender-related reasons, such as the possibility that they would have a baby. Some scholars have surmised that women were excluded from the "freedom and sense of literary experimentation"[1] of the New Journalism as the literary movement took hold in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s—combining the techniques of fiction writing with immersive reporting to push the boundaries of traditional journalism. Others call for scrutiny of the extent to which publications associated with the New Journalism gave women writers lesser assignments.[2] In fact, a number of female writers consciously embraced the reporting methods, style, subjectivity, narrative structure, and subject matter of the New Journalism, with several achieving levels of commercial success comparable to their male colleagues'. Despite these accomplishments, the legacy of female New Journalists remains tenuous. Joan Didion is the only woman who is consistently seen as part of the core canon of New Journalism writers. Several others occupy a far less certain position, at times allowed into the boys' club of an anthology or discussed in New Journalism criticism and historical accounts, yet not definitively part of the core squad. Given the New Journalism's powerful influence on literary journalism and place in U.S. and international cultural history, it is crucial to examine why female writers have largely remained on the margins.

What accounts for women's tenuous foothold in the New Journalism? This analysis will address this question by examining the work and lives of two female journalists: Gloria Steinem (b. 1934)[3] and Gail Sheehy (1936–2020).[4] Their early career accomplishments, writing styles, and reportorial methods brought them into the New Journalism movement, yet gendered social and cultural forces kept them out of its core. Steinem produced groundbreaking journalism on the working conditions of servers at New York's Playboy Club. The reporting made her famous, yet also confined her to a misogynistic pigeonhole that for years stymied her journalism career. Sheehy built a high-visibility career as a New Journalist, yet her reputation was shadowed by a widely misunderstood fabrication scandal that made her, in the eyes of critics, the ruinous Eve in the era's idyllic garden of innovative immersion reporting. The place of Steinem and Sheehy in the history of the New Journalism is important to examine because both women were enormously successful writers who

embraced the movement's aesthetic liberties and goals and found opportunity within it. Yet as women they were not free of gendered influences, which would affect not only the journalism they produced, but also how they and their work were perceived by audiences, the media world, and history. These hindrances have a substantial impact on contemporary understanding of the New Journalism, its legacy, and its capacity to depict the social tumult of the 1960s and '70s. Moreover, the impact of those impediments is far reaching, affecting the teaching and study of literary journalism today.

Women and the New Journalism Canon

In 1964, Gloria Steinem shared a cab with novelist Saul Bellow and New Journalist Gay Talese on the way to a campaign appearance by Robert F. Kennedy, who was running for the U.S. Senate. Talese leaned across Steinem and said to Bellow, "*You know how every year there's a pretty girl who comes to New York and pretends to be a writer? Well, Gloria is this year's pretty girl*."[5] The moment, described in Steinem's *My Life on the Road* and depicted in Julie Taymor's 2020 biopic, *The Glorias*, gives a glimpse of the ironies of being a woman in the New Journalism era. A woman could share the same cramped space as male writers to cover the same material. But in doing so, she might end up sexualized and undermined by the assumption of lesser, ephemeral talent. Astonishingly, nearly fifty years later, Gay Talese would, at a writers' conference in Boston, stammer in response to the question of which women writers of his day inspired him the most, only to reply: "of my generation . . . um, none."[6]

Though Talese might be exceptional in his obliviousness, the role of women in the New Journalism has been dimmed from the outset. Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson's seminal *The New Journalism*, includes only two women, Joan Didion and Barbara Goldsmith, out of twenty-three writers.[7] Jan Whitt argues this has led to a lasting impression of literary journalism as a largely male phenomenon.[8] John Pauly asserts that scholars have settled on a core group of eleven authors who published work between 1960 and 1980: Norman Mailer, Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, John Gregory Dunne, Joan Didion, George Goodman, Michael Herr, and John Sack.[9] Norman Sims credits a smaller group of seven: Mailer, Talese, Wolfe, Capote, Thompson, Didion, and Herr.[10] Both allow for additional women writers who were "associated with" the New Journalism because they wrote for publications considered central to it, including Steinem, Sheehy, Nora Ephron, Jane O'Reilly, Barbara Goldsmith, and Sara Davidson.[11] Whitt and John Hartsock have paid substantial critical attention to Davidson's contributions to the New Journalism.[12] In *The Gang That Wouldn't*

Write Straight, a popular history of New Journalism, Weingarten identifies Wolfe, Breslin, Talese, Thompson, Didion, Herr, and Sack as central,[13] while also discussing Sheehy and Steinem's more peripheral, yet still important, roles in the rise of *New York* magazine, one of the seminal magazines of the movement.[14] Didion is often the only female writer who is both associated with the New Journalism and included in anthologies, collections, and scholarly overviews of literary journalism.[15] Though an investigation of the reasons lies beyond the scope of this analysis, Didion's work is without question quite different from both Steinem and Sheehy's, its power residing more in Didion's singular voice than in immersive reporting.[16] These distinctions, though, exist comfortably among the male writers of the New Journalism: Thompson, for example, was more voice than reporter, Talese more reporter than voice. For this reason, the question of why certain female writers associated with the New Journalism era were not canonized is more urgent than distilling the exceptionalism of the one who was.

Crucial to this analysis is the understanding that the New Journalism is not only a literary genre[17]; it was in its time also a business move and, as Pauly puts it, "a form of cultural politics."[18] Wolfe detailed the main criteria for a journalism that, as a literary genre, reads "like a novel" because it uses novelistic techniques: structuring the story scene by scene; making extensive use of dialogue; reconstructing the interior points of view of sources (which he calls "characters"); uses in-depth interviewing; and everyday "status details" to portray subjects' social reality.[19] Other scholars and writers point out immersion reporting, the use of a distinctive voice, the potential use of a first-person point of view, and even a personal involvement with the subject matter as aspects of the genre.[20] As a business move, New Journalism's big, bold articles, portraying cultural and political upheavals that elicited a combination of intrigue and outrage, for a time boosted the magazine industry as it faced competition for advertisers from the rising medium of television.[21] Writers benefited as groundbreaking articles often led to book deals, making freelancing financially sustainable and sometimes lucrative. As a form of cultural politics, the New Journalism sparked several controversies: Is it really "new"? How valid are its truth claims, particularly in an era when journalism placed a lot of stake in the idea of the unbiased fact? How could it establish credibility as writers overtly, and sometimes not so overtly, toyed with satire, fictionalization, interiority, composite characters, and other literary games along the border of fact and fiction? These questions prompted discussion of "what it means to be a writer and to be written about, what writers owe their subjects and readers, and by what habits society organizes its practices of public imagination."[22]

Women writers participated in the aesthetic and commercial aims of the New Journalism and found themselves involved in the genre's cultural politics. They consciously embraced the art, craft, and stylistic expectations of the New Journalism. While the canon—a retrospective term—may precipitously tilt male, by the era's heyday it was not unusual for editors to actively recruit female writers, seeing them as key to audience building in a time of heightened interest in shifting gender roles and the so-called battle of the sexes.[23] Their work became central to the phenomenon's cultural politics, including the debates over objectivity and truth claims. Yet a close look at the work and lives of Steinem and Sheehy reveals that, in the hierarchy of influences, gender remained a hindrance that determined what they wrote about, their professional opportunities, critical reception of their work, and their legacy in the history of the New Journalism.

Gloria Steinem: "This Year's Pretty Girl"

By the time Gay Talese called Gloria Steinem "this year's pretty girl," in 1964, six years had passed since 1958, the year she first arrived in New York seeking to become a writer. She spent the first year searching for a job. Despite her elite Smith College degree and the prestige and experience of a two-year fellowship in India, she could not find a position. After a stint at a nonprofit educational foundation in Cambridge, Massachusetts, she returned to New York City in 1962 to try again. Having in Cambridge met Harold Hayes, who was soon to become *Esquire*'s editor-in-chief, and Clay Felker, another *Esquire* editor, Steinem got an assignment to cover the contraception revolution for the magazine.[24] Steinem's story, "The Moral Disarmament of Betty Coed," focused on young women grappling with the impact of contraception on sex, dating, and marriage, and was published in September 1962.[25] Steinem called it her "first serious assignment." Felker quipped that Steinem caught his attention as a writer in part because she had "great legs,"[26] one of countless times in Steinem's career when reaction to her physical appearance would either catalyze or hinder her professional advancement.

The assignment was her first brush with the New Journalism movement then incubating at *Esquire*, the *New York Herald-Tribune*, and other publications. Henry Wolfe, an *Esquire* editor who had mentored Steinem, took a new job at *Show*, an arts and culture magazine, and Steinem started writing for it. At an editorial meeting, staff members discussed the opening of the New York Playboy Club. Steinem suggested the magazine send Lillian Ross, a writer Steinem greatly admired, to become a Playboy "Bunny"—a cocktail waitress in a revealing costume with a bunny tail and long ears—and write about it,

though Ross was too old for the idea to be practical. Male staffers suggested Steinem do it.[27] The result was "A Bunny's Tale: *Show*'s First Expose for Intelligent People," a two-part series on Steinem's stint as an undercover Bunny, a job she landed using her grandmother's name and social security number. Steinem had a keen eye for the ironies of Hugh Hefner's rising empire. *Playboy* magazine had a million readers a month and an expanding franchise of Playboy clubs. The brand was enmeshed in Hefner's philosophy, which was touted in monthly essays for his magazine, that the Playboy life fulfilled the liberating promise of the sexual revolution.[28] Steinem revealed that nothing could be further from the truth for a Playboy Bunny. The job entailed getting tested for venereal disease, pledging to follow restrictions on whom she could date and with whom she could be seen, wearing crippling high heels and a costume so binding it was difficult to breathe, enduring routine sexual harassment, and seeing her weekly salary chiseled away by myriad expenses, such as costume dry cleaning and false eyelashes, while the club took a mandatory percentage of the Bunnies' tips.[29]

"A Bunny's Tale" might be more readily associated with the tradition of undercover muckraking journalism than New Journalism. Yet key hallmarks of the latter genre are there. The article is structured as a scene-by-scene narrative, written in first-person, diary-like entries, using an ironic, personal voice that gives the series immediacy and authenticity. Steinem notes, for instance, that one of the duties of the "Willmark men," Playboy employees who pose as customers to catch violations of company policy, is to make sure that the Playboy theme song—"Just one more ornery critter/Who goes for the glitter"—is played "at the beginning and end of each musical show every evening. Like 'God Save the Queen.' "[30] The scenes of her time on the job include deftly rendered portrayals of supervisors, co-workers, and clientele, and immersive descriptions of the hiring process, trainings, and grueling work shifts. The dialogue and status details reveal the routine degradation of the job, contrasting pointedly with the aspirational propaganda touting the glamour of the Playboy Bunny life:

> A girl with jet black hair, chalky makeup and a green costume stopped at the door. "My tail droops," she said, pushing it into position with one finger, "those damn customers always yank it." The wardrobe mistress handed her a safety pin. "You better get a cleaner tail too, baby. You get demerits running around with a scruffy old tail like that."[31]

"A Bunny's Tale" clearly demonstrates what Hartsock calls the "antimyth" intent of New Journalists, who "so often challenged nothing less than the shibboleth of the 'American Dream.' "[32] Nicolaus Mills points out that "Steinem was doing what many new journalists did in the 1960s when they

made their personal experiences central to the events they reported on. Tom Wolfe took this path in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*, and Hunter Thompson in *Hell's Angels*."[33] Like these works, "A Bunny's Tale" caused a "What the hell?"–level stir in media circles and the public. The series led to a libel suit against Steinem, but it also created change. The Playboy Club eliminated the pre-employment physical and venereal disease testing requirement, and New York state launched an investigation of the business's liquor license.[34] Steinem, as her biographer Carolyn Heilbrun describes, "leapt into instant fame" with the media attention generated by the article.[35]

Steinem's Post–"Bunny's Tale" Drought

Yet unlike Wolfe, Mailer, and others in the New Journalism canon, the unconventional style, boldness, outré subject matter, and high visibility of Steinem's "A Bunny's Tale" did not advance her journalism career. For years, she couldn't land serious journalism assignments, only offers to go undercover again as a sex object.[36] The constraints were so distressing that she returned a publisher's advance to turn "A Bunny's Tale" into a book, not wanting the venture to define her forever.[37] Most of the articles she wrote between 1963 and 1968 are lightweight and cater to the gender norms of the time, with regular bylines in *Glamour*, such as: "Funny Ways to Find a Man on the Beach," and "Who Has the Higher Morals I.Q., You or Your Mother?" Her most substantial pieces were celebrity profiles of James Baldwin, Saul Bellow, Truman Capote, and Jacqueline Kennedy.[38] The infamous cab ride to the Robert Kennedy appearance led to a roundup article in *Glamour* on young male politicians, the closest she could get to her ambition to cover politics and social justice.[39] "I wasn't allowed to write about politics or economics because that was for men—no matter how many ideas I submitted," Steinem said in a 1971 interview. "I had had more experience than men my age who were doing political work for papers. It's very rough. It's much rougher than I would have admitted at the time—and much more humiliating than I would have admitted at the time."[40]

At this juncture, what happened to Steinem in her role as what Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese call a "media worker" is useful to examine. Their approach to mass communication research asks: "*What factors inside and outside media organizations affect media content?*"[41] Shoemaker and Reese have asserted there are five levels of influence: the individual media worker; media routines; the media organization; factors extrinsic to the media organization, also known as extramedia influences; and ideology. These forces interact with each other to shape how stories are told, how they are framed,

and who gets to tell them. They also influence what kinds of content are not produced: the subjects, ideas, events, and people that never reach the public eye, as "*not everything 'eligible' to be mass media content actually gets into the media*."[42]

As Shoemaker and Reese point out, media workers—their backgrounds, genders, belief systems, and views of their professional roles—are the first level of influence on media content.[43] As a media worker, Steinem had spent years trying to break into journalism, her gender excluding her from opportunities for staff jobs with media outlets whose hiring practices favored men. Eventually, freelance opportunities and mentoring from male editors who were open to fostering female talent led to opportunities at *Esquire* and then *Show.* Though Steinem did not yet publicly associate herself with feminism, as a woman she used her perspective to see the rise of the Playboy clubs—superficially a trend story about a novelty business—in a new way: with a keen eye for the financial and sexual exploitation of female workers initially drawn to the perceived glamour of the job. Her vision for the story aligned with other content influences. Steinem and her editors were essentially in alignment as media "gatekeepers," those who decide what content and story structures should be in the public eye, with media routines[44] that supported her unconventional approach and controversial subject matter, albeit with male editors who likely tacitly recognized the salacious potential of having an attractive woman pull the stunt.

After the publication of "A Bunny's Tale," though, Steinem's opportunities to produce serious journalism were stymied. Influences extrinsic to *Show* magazine, including press coverage from competing news outlets,[45] focused on the titillation of Steinem's masquerade; *Playboy* itself frequently republished photographs of Steinem in her Bunny uniform, as if to mock her.[46] Steinem's exposé put her future ambitions as a media worker at odds with the highest level of content influence: ideology, the "symbolic mechanism that serves as a cohesive and integrating force in society."[47] The mass media embraced the story of Playboy Bunny Steinem, an attractive female reporter covering a sexy industry, as what Shoemaker and Reese call "deviant," media content that is popular because it helps "maintain the boundaries of social order by showing what is approved and not approved."[48] Essentially, Steinem faced a female journalist's version of the Madonna/whore complex: She could either be stereotyped by continuing to pull versions of the same deviant stunt or submit to the longtime practice of gendered professional tracking that routed women toward lifestyle, " 'human interest' or 'soft' stories," while "political and analytical stories were assigned to men."[49]

The *New York* Magazine Oasis

The situation persisted until 1968, when Steinem became part of a group of writers, led by Felker, who started *New York* magazine, which would quickly become, as Steinem described, "the home of the New Journalism as practiced by Tom Wolfe, and . . . Jimmy Breslin.[50] Though Felker was not a feminist, he was known for hiring female contributors to write on a wide variety of subjects. Out of twenty contributing editors on the masthead of the first issue, eight were women.[51] Weingarten attributes Felker's motivation to his mother, who left journalism to raise a family and regretted it. "Women . . . tend to have a more personal point of view about things than men, and I'm looking for an individual viewpoint first," Felker said.[52]

The emergence of *New York* magazine cracked the gendered constraints on what Steinem could write about, realigning her political reporting ambitions as an individual media worker with the agenda of her editors. Furthermore, as a journalistic enterprise, the editorial vision of *New York* saw the New Journalism's aesthetics and methods as compatible with the perspectives of women writers, suitable to a wide range of subject matter. Within the first four months of the magazine's publication, Steinem published three longform articles on politicians, with the New Journalism markers of scene structuring, dialogue, "status life" details, and a distinct voice: "Special Report: The City on the Eve of Destruction," cowritten with African-American journalist Lloyd Weaver, on New York City major John Lindsay's response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.[53]; "Trying to Love Eugene," about the ambivalence of activists working on the presidential campaign of Eugene McCarthy[54]; and "In Your Heart You Know He's Nixon,"[55] on the final days of the 1968 Nixon presidential campaign.

Out of the three articles, "In Your Heart" stands out for its blend of Steinem's forthright voice as a female reporter in the Nixon press entourage, disillusioned in the wake of the contentious Democratic primary, and her status detail–rich descriptions of Nixon fans, who chillingly remind her of her "high school mates—football playing, Negro-hating Hungarians and Poles . . . Could they have been flash-frozen since 1952?"[56] A pivotal point in the narrative (which, like "A Bunny's Tale," is crafted in the style of a diary) of the ten-day campaign is a scene of her interview with Pat Nixon on a flight from Denver to St. Louis. Pat Nixon parries Steinem's questions with blandly evasive answers: "I'm always interested in the rallies, they're so different. Some are outside; some are inside." When Steinem questions Pat Nixon's assertion that Mamie Eisenhower "meant so much to young people," Pat Nixon finally breaks. As Steinem describes it, "the dam broke" in a lengthy, "not out of control" response, in which Pat Nixon insists that she never had "time to

dream" because her parents died when she was young, leaving her to scramble to support herself, then to support Nixon as he built his career. "I haven't just sat back and thought of myself or my ideas or what I wanted to do. . . . I've never had it easy. I'm not like all you . . . all those people who had it easy." After the plane landed, "Mrs. Nixon fingered her old-fashioned diamond ring for a moment, then, public smile re-fixed firmly, she patted my arm. 'Now I hope we see you again soon; I really do; bye now; take care . . . I've really enjoyed our talk.' "[57]

The interaction leads Steinem to acknowledge that as progressives embraced the promise of the Kennedys, the Nixons, as a couple, were in "a very special hell," where the people who "had it easy" could "somehow pull gracefully ahead of them in spite of all their work."[58] In this way, Steinem's use of the "personal point of view" that Felker and the New Journalism era fostered shone a spotlight on a divide that would come to define the Nixonian politics of resentment. Steinem's career would soon shift again, though: By the end of 1968, she started writing "The City Politic," a weekly column more aptly categorized as opinion writing, not New Journalism. The column ran until she became a founding editor of *Ms.* magazine, which started as an insert in *New York* in 1971 and immediately gained a wide following as a stand-alone magazine.[59]

Gail Sheehy: "A Little Girl Like You"

In 1963, the same year "A Bunny's Tale" was published, Gail Sheehy landed her first New York City journalism job on the women's page of the *World Telegram and Sun.* As an aspiring female media worker, she had to push back against organizational influences that were biased against women, convincing a skeptical male editor who, in her job interview, asked, "What makes you think a little girl like you from the boonies of Rochester can write for a big city daily?"[60] She got her start at the *Rochester* (New York) *Democrat & Chronicle*, working as a reporter to put her husband through medical school. Sheehy moved on to the Women's Department of the *Herald Tribune*, where she filed articles that "violated the Chinese wall between news and fluff,"[61] about antiwar protests, rent strikes, and underground abortion rings. There, Sheehy found professional support from editor-in-chief Jim Bellow, who encouraged the "gritty" stories Sheehy wrote. She trusted him enough to confess that she was pregnant, followed by a story pitch to use her condition to report on the shoddy state of the city's maternity clinics.[62] She found in Bellow the beginning of an escape from media routines and organizational biases that confined female reporters to fluff stories and pressured pregnant women to stop working. Sheehy's subject matter still focused mainly on women, but she

could cover the more substantial issues in their lives. Sheehy also sought out Felker, then the editor of the *Herald Tribune* Sunday supplement, the precursor to *New York* magazine and widely credited for incubating New Journalism talent and style. Wolfe and Breslin, already admired for their portrayals of the "true textures of the city,"[63] were the stars of Felker's staff. Felker also recruited and mentored women writers, including Barbara Goldsmith and Patricia Bosworth, and he would continue to do so at *New York*. Felker encouraged Sheehy to structure her articles as scenes. "Writing scenes was something I had done since I was seven or eight years old," Sheehy wrote in her memoir, *Daring*. "But writing scenes as journalism? Clay had pushed me over the edge. . . . I liked it there."[64]

Sheehy joined Steinem, Wolfe, and Breslin on the roster of contributing editors when Felker launched *New York* magazine in 1968. When Robert Kennedy was assassinated that year, Sheehy had been working on a profile of his wife, Ethel; she'd spent time with the couple just hours before his death. She quickly recast the article as a scene-by-scene account of a campaign wife in the days running-up to her husband's murder, contrasting Ethel's sunny personality with the dark foreboding of life as a woman who "brought life into the world ten times and has watched it go out violently seven times from close range. Now it is eight."[65] As was true for Steinem, so, too, for Sheehy: when she began working at *New York*, she found her personal professional ambitions aligned with the media routines and organizational influences. *New York* was a publication that embraced who she was and allowed for media routines—long deadlines, high word counts, immersive reporting practices, and narrative structures—that also aligned with the aesthetic values and commercial strategies of the New Journalism.

Redpants and the Missing Explanation

Sheehy's output at *New York* was prodigious. She covered topics that ranged widely—from the Woodstock festival to commuting culture. She made her mark, though, by continuing to pursue gender-related topics, once relegated to soft-focused women's magazines and newspaper sections. She treated them in a hard-hitting way, writing edgy pieces on the changing nature of family life and relationships in the cultural ferment of the times, with topics and titles such as "The Men of Women's Liberation Have Learned Not to Laugh" and "Fractured Family," a series about "bachelor mothers" and women who were childless by choice. She and Felker became, albeit at first in secret, New Journalism's original power couple, conducting an on-again-off-again love affair; the couple would marry in 1984.[66]

In 1971, Sheehy took on her boldest venture yet. Influenced by anthro-

pologist Margaret Mead, who mentored Sheehy while she was on a reporting fellowship at Columbia University, Sheehy became fascinated with the increasing visibility and violence of New York City's prostitutes. She saw them as fighters who boosted their profits by attacking and robbing patrons. For six weeks, Sheehy dressed the part in vinyl go-go boots and hot pants and immersed herself in her subject.[67] She pursued a comprehensive portrayal of the world of prostitutes, pimps, and johns, seeking the ethnographic realism that critic David Eason identified as an important mode of New Journalism and that characterized the expression of the genre in *New York*,[68] and for which the media routines provided the time and the support for writers to do immersive "saturation reporting." Sheehy's approach was also influenced by her media organization's expectations that she produce an attention-grabbing story with vivid scenes, a central character, and a clear narrative arc. Key to Sheehy's portrayal was a prostitute she shadowed, called "Redpants," who was aging, broke, and desperate. The woman's story, Sheehy believed, would give the account a plot arc with a beginning, middle, and end of a prostitute's life cycle. But before she could get Redpants' full story, the woman disappeared, fearful that other prostitutes would attack her for talking. Then, her pimp banished her to the Holland Tunnel. Sheehy turned Redpants into a composite character, using the accounts of other prostitutes to complete the story of Redpants's career. Sheehy explained her approach in a preface to the article, but, unbeknownst to her, the explanatory paragraph was cut before the magazine went to print.[69]

Nine thousand words long and divided into two parts, "Wide Open City" was the cover story of the July 26, 1971, issue of *New York*.[70] Part II features the story of Redpants, providing a narrative spine and a source of pathos to a portrayal of a New York under siege from increasingly aggressive prostitutes and their predatory pimps, who provide inescapable temptation not only to the hapless married businessmen whose lust leads them into their lair, but also to the cops who are supposed to keep the streets clean of sin. The article softens its wizened main character in the glow of the lovelorn gaze of Bobbie, the Waldorf guard who sighs that she was once "the prettiest brown-skinned girl I ever seen on the street"[71] and worries that she's "taken the wrong needle" when she disappears for too long.[72] Redpants trusts him enough to toss him her high-heeled Guccis when she has to run from the cops, a hasty act of faith featured in the piece's opening scene and recapitulated at its conclusion. Sheehy's ethnographic approach informs her reporting throughout, with status details that underscore Redpants's fall from being one of the favorites of her pimp, Sugarman, to a homeless streetwalker who lingers all night at Grand Central Station: "Winter is a bummer. Her ankles swell up like

watermelons . . . She hangs around the train platforms, pretending to wait for her husband. When the GE Housewares Service Center opens, she stands outside the windows and studies the wives with their utilitarian haircuts, frowning over their toasters."[73] The piece generated that much sought-after New Journalism buzz and got Sheehy a book deal. In a handwritten note to Sheehy, Tom Wolfe raved about her analysis of prostitutes as a "status group with six distinct social gradations."[74]

Then, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Redpants was a composite character: "So the story was true, sort of, but then again it wasn't. The reader, however, was not told any of this."[75] When Sheehy confronted editors to point out that she had been completely transparent about the fact that Redpants was a composite, she looked at the published article again and realized the explanation she had written had been edited out. Months later, Felker confessed to Sheehy that he'd been the one to cut it, reasoning that, "Hell, the *New Yorker* is famous for stories by writers who used composite characters. Joseph Mitchell's character sketches." Sheehy was floored by this "most intimate betrayal."[76]

Gendered Consequences of Felker's Deception

Sheehy continued to report on "the spread of a violent sexual subculture" in five more articles for *New York*. The series prompted social change in that the city cracked down on the landlords of prostitution hotels, leading the neighborhood's police commander to comment that Sheehy "showed what a little girl with a lot of drive can do."[77] *Hustling: Prostitution in Our Wide-Open Society*, the book based on the series, was turned into a television movie, *Hustling*, released in 1975, starring Jill Clayburgh.[78]

Controversies over truth claims have always shadowed the New Journalism and include challenges to the veracity of Truman Capote's reporting in *In Cold Blood* and attacks on Tom Wolfe's clearly satirical stories about the *New Yorker*.[79] Yet the Redpants dustup followed Sheehy in a particularly gendered way, affecting her legacy in the New Journalism movement.

First, there is the matter of Felker's deception. In his belated confession to Sheehy, he pointed to composite characters in the *New Yorker*—essentially, a literary journalism media routine that came to be considered unethical—to justify his sneak edit. Sheehy maintains that her chagrin over what happened dissolved as she continued to work on exposing the prostitution industry. Sheehy also allowed that, at the time, publications didn't "offer explanations of a journalist's methods or disclose much about sources."[80] Yet the fact remains that Felker, as a powerful male editor, occupied a higher rung in the hierarchy of influences and did not abdicate it, for too long maintaining his

silence about his editing decision as Sheehy took nearly all the public punches for it. In *Hustling*, she disappeared Felker's role by using the passive voice: "An author's note . . . was dropped during printing and the story appeared in *New York* magazine without explanation."[81]

Felker's micro-gatekeeping move of deleting a paragraph would have a lasting consequence on Sheehy's place among the New Journalism writers. In the year immediately following the Redpants controversy, Sheehy was considered a principal figure of the New Journalism. Tom Wolfe's 1972 seminal *Esquire* essay on the genre, "Why They Aren't Writing the Great American Novel Anymore" describes Sheehy as an early practitioner of New Journalism techniques when they were at the *Herald Tribune*. The Arnold Roth illustration that accompanies the article and is titled "The Pursuit of Social Realism on the Field of Fame, 1972," depicts the leading writers of the New Journalism in a horse race after a fox that is labeled "Social Realism." Sheehy, the only woman depicted, is racing ahead the pack of authors, yet she is in the background of the image, not quite part of the pack and distant from the prey, which fellow frontrunners Wolfe and Talese seem on the verge of nabbing.[82]

Perhaps the image was a kind of foreshadowing. Wolfe and Johnson did not include Sheehy on the roster of writers in their New Journalism anthology, published the following year. In later years, the Redpants controversy continued to come up in press and historical accounts, typically as a background cautionary tale for stories of subsequent journalistic deceptions. Sheehy writes that after Felker confessed to her, he contacted the editors of several publications that had covered the controversy to explain what he'd done, but his efforts were too late to gain much traction.[83] A number of accounts sustain the myth that the lack of transparency about the composite character was Sheehy's doing. Among these was a *New York Times* article written two years later that describes the incident as a concealed fabrication that Sheehy and Felker only later admitted to, as if they were equally responsible for the concealment.[84] It wasn't until 1981 that the *New York Times* reported Felker's last-minute edit.[85] Critical discussion of the controversy often fails to mention Felker's role.[86] In *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, published more than thirty years after the Redpants controversy and the most comprehensive recounting of the New Journalism era to date, Weingarten mentions neither Felker's responsibility nor Sheehy's explanatory paragraph, stating only that "editors had neglected to publish a disclaimer" regarding the composite character. He quotes Jack Nessel, who edited the piece, blaming the situation on Sheehy's ambition and Felker's adoration, essentially portraying Sheehy as an Eve-like figure offering forbidden fruit to her Adam: "I think Clay was in love with Gail from the start of their professional relationship,

and she was extremely willing to be molded by him . . . . They played into each other's needs. If ambition could be incarnated, it would look like Gail. I've never seen any man or woman as ambitious as her." Of the mainstream media's view, Weingarten wrote, "Sheehy's gaffe was the beginning of the end of New Journalism,"[87]—as if her ruination were not already enough.

Framing theory maintains that how messages are organized and structured—what information is emphasized and what is not—influences how audiences understand the messages.[88] The composite character of Redpants, certainly, is an example of framing to emphasize a narrative arc, providing audiences with both the drama of a tragedy—a prostitute's sad career—and, however contrived, a sense of closure about how that career ends. This same principle applies to the story of Sheehy's place in the New Journalism as Weingarten frames it. He portrays Sheehy as a kind of temptress-virago, her lover-editor too besotted to acknowledge her transgression and tame her, while colleagues grow wary, sensing that "Sheehy's vivid details were a red flag indicating that something was amiss."[89] This narrative erases not only the fact of Felker's misguided choice, but also what it might mean that he made it: the ways an editor—and, not incidentally, a romantic partner—can exert control over a woman perceived as exceptionally ambitious and how the result can disproportionately diminish her literary clout; no matter how far ahead, she still could not be fully part of the male pack racing toward a place in posterity.

Conclusion

Sheehy had a fabulous career, and Steinem is still enjoying hers. Sheehy wrote fifty stories over nine years for *New York*, making her the most prolific feature writer of the magazine's Felker era.[90] This was the first stage in a magazine writing career that would include high profile articles in *Vanity Fair* and other marquee publications. Sheehy published seventeen books,[91] several of them bestsellers. *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life*, published in 1974, was on the *Times* bestseller list for three years.[92] Though Steinem's stint as a New Journalist was fleeting, she would go on to author ten books,[93] her identity as a writer entwined with her work as the longtime editor of *Ms.* and her identity as perhaps the globe's most prominent feminist activist and speaker. Both Steinem and Sheehy found early career opportunities in the media routines of the New Journalism, where the genre's emphasis on narrative-based story structures, distinct voice, and immersive depictions of the era's cultural upheaval supported the fusion of substantial reporting with issues that had life-changing impacts on women's lives.

Both women reported groundbreaking, high-visibility, high-impact stories that focused on vulnerable women in professions related to the sex indus-

try. Both women also had to cope with a publication aftermath complicated by gender bias. Steinem was trapped by a media culture that for critical years of her career would not let her move past stereotyped assumptions of female journalists and the titillation of her Bunny costume stunt, until she then found a home for her talents at *New York* in its debut years and a path toward the founding of *Ms.* magazine. As a newspaper reporter, Sheehy honed her skills as an intrepid journalist who stretched the limits of the professional ghetto of "soft news" typically assigned to women[94] to include hard-hitting social issues. Writing for *New York* allowed her to escape these overtly gendered constraints, yet her success was tainted by the Redpants composite character controversy. The framing of the controversy, in its immediate aftermath and in historical accounts, suggests that, even when the organizational routines of media outlets that published the New Journalism allowed for a more inclusive vision of what women reporters could do, gender still mattered greatly in women's control over their stories, their professional images and, ultimately, their legacies.

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Notes

[1] Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming, *Women and Journalism*, 47.

[2] Pauly, "The New Journalism, 1960–80," 156n6.

[3] Gloria Steinem Papers, Collection, SSC-MS-00237, Smith College Library, Finding Aids, accessed February 7, 2021, https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/1006.

[4] Seelye, "Gaily Sheehy, Journalist, Author and Social Observer, Dies at 83."

[5] Steinem, *My Life on the Road*, 138–39 (italics in original).

[6] O'Connor, "Poet Verandah Porche Asked Famous Author about Female Writers," para. 8.

[7] Wolfe and Johnson, eds., *The New Journalism*, 53–394.

[8] Whitt, *Settling the Borderland*, 119.

[9] Pauly, "The New Journalism, 1960–80," 149–50.

[10] Sims, *True Stories*, 220.

[11] Sims, 220; Pauly, "The New Journalism, 1960–80," 150, 156n6.

[12] Whitt, *Settling the Borderland*, 133–42; Hartsock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*, 76–78.

[13] Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 6.

[14] Weingarten, 214–15.

[15] Kerrane and Yagoda's 1997 literary journalism anthology, *The Art of Fact*, includes seven women out of roughly sixty authors. Connery's *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism* has essays on thirty-five writers, including four women. In both volumes, Joan Didion is the sole woman included from the New Journalism era. See Kerrane and Yagoda, *The Art of Fact*, 9–11; Connery, *A Sourcebook of American Literary Journalism*, vii–ix.

[16] Louis Menand and others note Didion's skepticism of interviewing and purposeful evasion of standard reporting techniques. See Menand, "Out of Bethlehem: The Radicalization of Joan Didion," 66–68ff.

[17] Considerable critical discussion has focused on a much broader definition of the New Journalism of the 1960s and '70s. Nicolaus Mills referenced *Rolling Stone* editor Jann Wenner's description of journalism that is "on the line between underground versus above-ground press, between newspaper and magazine, between being a trade paper and a consumer paper, between dope and music." Mills, introduction to *The New Journalism: A Historical Anthology*, xvii.

[18] Pauly, "The Politics of the New Journalism," 111.

[19] Wolfe, *The New Journalism*, 23–36.

[20] Kramer, "Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists," 21–34.

[21] Polsgrove, *It Wasn't Pretty, Folks, But Didn't We Have Fun?*, 11.

[22] Pauly, "The Politics of the New Journalism," 125.

[23] See Polsgrove, *It Wasn't Pretty, Folks, But Didn't We Have Fun?*, 256; Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 214–15. In an interview on March 3, 2021, Sara Davidson described her experiences trying to get a newspaper job after she graduated from the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism: "People would tell me: 'We're not hiring women, because we can't send you to a riot. We can't send

you to a fire. You can't carry heavy equipment'—if I wanted a TV job. They were very outspoken about not hiring women. But when I began writing for magazines, I did not run into that. I can't say that there were any barriers to me writing for magazines, which was the primo expression of the New Journalism. It was in *Harper's.* It was in *Esquire.* It was in the *Atlantic.* It was in *New York* magazine. There were a lot of women who were doing it, so I didn't feel that there was any barrier there. I applied for a job at the *New York Times* as a reporter, and they wouldn't take me. They never said why. They just said, 'A decision has been made on your case, and it's not favorable.' Yet, I could write for the *New York Times Magazine* and for the book review. It was this funny thing where with the strict journalism jobs, there was outright discrimination against women." Davidson, interview by Lisa Phillips, March 3, 2021.

[24] Heilbrun, *The Education of a Woman*, 84–95.

[25] Steinem, "The Moral Disarmament of Betty Coed," 97f.

[26] Pogrebin, "How Do You Spell, Ms.?" para. 17, 18.

[27] Heilbrun, *The Education of a Woman*, 104–105.

[28] Mills, "Gloria Steinem's 'A Bunny's Tale'—50 Years Later," para. 3.

[29] Steinem, "A Bunny's Tale," 99f; Steinem, "A Bunny's Tale, Part II," 66f.

[30] Steinem, 110.

[31] Steinem, "A Bunny's Tale," 93.

[32] Hartsock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*, 61.

[33] Mills, "Gloria Steinem's 'A Bunny's Tale'—50 Years Later," para. 6 (italics added).

[34] White, "A Bunny's Tale: Gloria Steinem's Shocking Expose"; Steinem, *Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions*, 29–69.

[35] Heilbrun, *The Education of a Woman*, 106.

[36] Heilbrun, 106.

[37] Heilbrun, 108.

[38] Heilbrun, appendix, 416–23, provides a list of Steinem's more than 100 articles published from 1957 to 1972 that include: "Funny Ways to Find a Man on the Beach," *Glamour*, June 1963; "Who Has the Higher Morals I.Q., You or Your Mother?" *Glamour*, November 1965; "James Baldwin: An Original," *Vogue*, July 1964; "Gloria Steinem Spends a Day in Chicago with Saul Bellow," *Glamour*, July 1965; "A Visit with Truman Capote," *Glamour*, April 1966; "Mrs. Kennedy at the Moment," *Esquire*, October 1964.

[39] Marie Ochs, office of Gloria Steinem, email to author, April 1, 2021. Steinem, "It's a Young Man's Game," *Glamour*, August 1965.

[40] Weber, "Gloria Steinem: An Interview," 76n, 80–81.

[41] Shoemaker and Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences*, 1 (italics in the original).

[42] Shoemaker and Reese, 252 (italics in original). Somerstein, " 'Stay Back for Your Own Safety,' " 746–65.

[43] Shoemaker and Reese, *Mediating the Message*, 63–102.

[44] For an explanation of how media routines are carried out in specific organi-

zations, see Shoemaker and Reese, 105–38.

[45] For a detailed explanation of extrinsic influences, see Shoemaker and Reese, 175–220.

[46] Wang, "That Time Gloria Steinem Went Undercover as a Playboy Bunny."

[47] Shoemaker and Reese, *Mediating the Message*, 212.

[48] Shoemaker and Reese, 260.

[49] Schmidt, "Forgotten Athletes and Token Reporters," 66; Melki and Mallat, "Block Her Entry, Keep Her Down," 66; Somerstein, " 'Stay Back for Your Own Safety,' " 750.

[50] Steinem, *My Life on the Road*, 132.

[51] "Contributing Editors," Masthead, *New York*, vol. 1, no. 1, April 8, 1968, 4.

[52] Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 214–15.

[53] Steinem and Weaver, "Special Report: The City on the Eve of Destruction," 32A–32H.

[54] Steinem, "Trying to Love Eugene," August 5, 1968, 14–19f.

[55] Steinem, "In Your Heart You Know He's Nixon," *New York*, October 28, 1968.

[56] Steinem, 23.

[57] Steinem, 35.

[58] Steinem, 35–36.

[59] "About *Ms.*" *Ms.* Magazine, https://msmagazine.com/about/.

[60] Sheehy, *Daring: My Passages*, 5.

[61] Sheehy, 7.

[62] Sheehy, 7–8.

[63] Sheehy, 12.

[64] Sheehy, 14–15.

[65] Sheehy, "Ethel Kennedy and the Arithmetic of Life and Death," 34.

[66] Sheehy, *Daring*, 313–15.

[67] Sheehy, 139–46.

[68] See Eason, "The New Journalism and the Image-World," 51–65. Eason cites frequent *New York* contributors Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe, as well as Sheehy, as writers in the "*ethnographic realism*" mode, 52.

[69] Sheehy, *Daring*, 139–49.

[70] Sheehy, "Wide Open City, Part I," 22–26; Sheehy, "Wide Open City, Part II, 27–36.

[71] Sheehy, 28.

[72] Sheehy, 36.

[73] Sheehy, "Wide Open City, Part II," 36.

[74] Sheehy, *Daring*, 146.

[75] Pinkerton, "The 'New Journalism' Is Sometimes Less," 1.

[76] Sheehy, *Daring*, 146–48.

[77] Sheehy, 149.

[78] Sheehy, 148–49; Sheehy, *Hustling*; Sargent, *Hustling*.

[79] Dennis and Rivers, *Other Voices: The New Journalism in America*, 15–50.

[80] Sheehy, *Daring*, 148.

[81] Sheehy, *Hustling*, 22.

[82] Wolfe, "Why They Aren't Writing the Great American Novel Anymore," 152–58f.

[83] Sheehy, *Daring*, 148.

[84] Breasted, "Two Interviews and Their Aftermath," 38.

[85] Friendly, "Disclosure of Two Fabricated Articles Causes Papers to Re-Examine Their Rules," A7.

[86] See Dennis and Rivers, *Other Voices*, 18; Gregory and Dorman, "The Children of James Agee," 998.

[87] Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 275–76.

[88] Scheufele and Tewksbury, "Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming," 11–12.

[89] Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*, 276.

[90] Weingarten, 207.

[91] Seelye, "Gail Sheehy, Journalist, Author and Social Observer, Dies at 83."

[92] Sheehy, *Daring*, 234.

[93] "Gloria Steinem: Written Works," The Office of Gloria Steinem.

[94] Steiner, "Gender and Journalism," paras. 1, 3.

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