Introduction: Lecturing Women in Victorian Periodicals (LWVP)

This database derives from an ongoing project on emerging patterns of female visibility and vocality within the late-Victorian and Edwardian mediascape in Britain (1860-1910), which focuses on the cross-traffic between the site of the metropolitan Literary and Scientific Institution and the medium of popular and feminist periodicals: “Lecturing Females: Oral Performances, Gender and Sensationalism in Metropolitan Lecturing Institutions and Mass Print Culture, 1860-1910” – “Frauen im Vortrag: Mündliche Performanz, Gender und Sensationalismus in metropolitanen Vortragseinrichtungen und Massenzeitschriftenkultur, 1860-1910” (ZW81/8-1), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). Researchers: Prof. Dr. Anne-Julia Zwierlein, Heide-Marie Weig, MA, and Sebastian Graef, MA. The entries for the database were compiled by Heide-Marie Weig and Sebastian Graef (via Citavi Team), and initial data retrieval was supported by the following research assistants: Oxana Curea, Gabriela Dafinger, Florian Heckel, Julian Hetz, Alexandra Lachner, and Kathrin Pollinger. We would like to thank Regensburg University Library for hosting the database and are especially grateful to Dr. Gernot Deinzer and Christian Winter for the online realisation of our data.

1. Historical and Media Contexts

Our historical timeframe of 1860-1910 was a period of profound social change and democratisation in Britain (and wider Europe); this included prominently the campaign for women’s suffrage. The second Reform Bill (1867) had doubled the British electorate by extending the vote to working-class males, and 1867 also saw the beginnings of the women’s rights movement, with the foundation of the liberal feminist Langham Place group and John Stuart Mill’s unsuccessful petition for female franchise. Our period ends with the early-twentieth-century beginnings of the militant suffragette movement and organised mass events staging public female visibility and vocality: the famous 1907 ‘Mud March’ for women’s rights from Hyde Park Corner to Exeter Hall and the 1910 mass demonstrations in Hyde Park. Very appropriately, our database went online in 2018, the centenary of women’s suffrage in Britain.

The project from which this database derives focuses on late-nineteenth-century incursions of women into the urban public sphere in Britain: on the new modes of visibility and vocality opened up to middle-class women through a new mass culture which comprised both print and orality – periodicals, newspapers and popular fiction as well as popular lectures, speeches, and recitations. The nineteenth century has been called “the performing century” (Davis / Holland 2010), and a political reading of media and institutional history can shed new light on how emerging female identities, social aspirations, and political positions were performed and articulated in speech and print between 1860 and 1910. At the centre of interest here is the cross-traffic between two specific oral and print formats: 1), the increasing female presence in late-Victorian and Edwardian Literary and Scientific Institutions. These recognised public sites staged educational and entertaining speech events – lectures, elocutionary competitions, and recitations – to aspiring audiences, prompted by but developing beyond a social reformist programme of ‘rational recreation’ (see Beaven 2005; Bailey 1978). 2), the gendered discourses about such performed (male and female) vocality in fictional and non-fictional feature material published in the late-Victorian and Edwardian
mass periodical press, which was increasingly informed by the sensational mode of the 'New Journalism' (on the 'Old' and 'New Journalism' see Brake 1994). This dual focus helps to reveal processes of interaction between late-Victorian and Edwardian popular lecturing and print cultures. Most importantly, the topic of the public oral performance crystallizes political and gender debates: the lecture situation necessarily involves negotiations between an 'authority' and an audience, and performed authority becomes both precarious and sensational when female voices and bodies are involved. The woman looking up to the platform, and the woman on the platform, become visible symbols of late-Victorian gender hierarchies and their subversion.

Throughout, the database documents the close nexus between nineteenth-century print and orality. While Andrew King and John Plunkett maintain that “during [the mid- to late nineteenth century], print came to dominate British society to such an extent that oral forms of culture lost much of their status” (2005, 1), the materials presented in our database serve as evidence that there was no clear-cut transition from an oral to a written culture, no “nineteenth-century mediamorphosis” (ibid.). The Victorian rise of mass print media competed against persisting cults of presence and orality: lectures, political speeches, sermons, penny readings and recitations, courtroom trials, oral storytelling, stage versions of books, or the reading aloud of newspapers (on some of these see Goetsch 2003) contributed to a heterogeneous and thriving oral culture which, in terms of the huge audiences these vocal performances commanded, can well be seen as a mass culture in its own right. Indeed, as Martin Hewitt warns us: "Systematic records of any forms of nineteenth-century platform activity are entirely lacking: it was an element of public life that defied quantification." (2002, 2) Yet popular periodicals provide us with a valuable vantage point: Victorian printed texts often originated in oral performances, and mass print also actively mediated and disseminated popular orality, for instance via lecture advertisements, reports, and fictionalized accounts that underlined the social and affective dimensions of the voice-event. Metropolitan popular lecturing culture was constituted to a large extent by its coverage and representation in the press.

Inquiring into the complex feedback loops between mass print and oral cultures, the project considers both print and lecture platforms as politicised rallying places for an upwardly mobile (increasingly female) lower-middle to middle-class segment of the urban population. Prompted by its guiding question about the dimensions and precariousness of female public agency between 1860 and 1910, the project readdresses nineteenth-century negotiations between elite and popular cultures, and between the mediated realities of a mass print environment and the period’s persistent stagings of celebrity, authority, and presence. Investigating the material circuits of communication between fictional and non-fictional texts, oral performances, and the institutional settings of ‘rational entertainment’, the project researches archival ‘traces’ and representations of the bodies and voices of female “lecturers” and “lectured” (Belgravia, 61:241, Nov. 1886, p. 32). By elucidating shared modes of sensationalism across the range of texts examined, the project also develops models for reevaluating New Woman and suffragist writing, whose sensational narratives are read as remediating the late-Victorian and Edwardian mediascape. Finally, narratives of female agency are also submitted to scrutiny in some of our later pieces in the context of (pre-) Modernist scepticism about presence, immediacy, and individual political impact in an increasingly technologised world.
2. The Periodicals

With a total of 2250 entries, the database presents the results from a content analysis for the period 1860-1910 and is restricted to 14 popular and feminist periodicals (9 weeklies, 5 monthlies): Belgravia, Bow Bells, English Illustrated Magazine, Englishwoman’s Review, Good Words, Illustrated London News, Judy, Leisure Hour, London Journal, London Reader, Punch, The Strand Magazine, Sunday at Home, Women’s Penny Paper, Women’s Herald, Woman’s Signal. Our analysis is based on a complex grid of metadata (5 main categories: genre, content, context, form of participation, textualisation of lecture, and 76 further sub-categories – see below, 3.–), together with precise bibliographical information for each item. Periodicals were accessed online via ProQuest’s British Periodicals Collections I & II, ProQuest’s Gerritsen Collection, Gale Cengage’s 19th Century UK Periodicals, and Gale Cengage’s Illustrated London News Historical Archive.

Like the culture of popular lecturing, late-nineteenth-century periodical culture is amorphous, even if we ignore the vast area that Patrick Leary has termed the “offline penumbra” (2005, 83). Lyn Pykett observes that “many students of the periodical press [...] seek a degree of conceptual possession of a ‘documentary’ culture which must elude them even in relation to a living culture” (1990, 101). As the “entire textual base can never be known” (Turner 2000, 228), we delimit our material by focusing a thematic and hence selective analysis on a carefully chosen, representative selection of 14 periodicals (9 weeklies and 5 monthlies), all of them metropolitan, with editorial offices based in London, a high circulation and a long print-run inside (or extending beyond) our period of analysis. They all offered mixed feature materials and targeted an audience of (female) (lower-)middle-class readers. As popular and women’s/feminist periodicals, they belong to a genre that until about a decade ago was not studied extensively. In 2004, King noted that the popular penny weeklies are “not quoted or studied nearly so much [as periodicals in the Wellesley index]” (2004, 15); similar statements could have been made about less upmarket monthlies. Academe traditionally regarded women’s periodicals “as, by definition, frivolous or marginal or both”, and David Doughan, writing in 1989, saw them as “a largely unused resource for the study of nineteenth-century social and political history” (72, 73). Of course the situation is now slowly being remedied, not least due to resources like the present database (compare other recent content-analysis databases: Cantor / Shuttleworth 2007; Howsam 2012; Korte / Lechner 2014; Korte / Hadamitzky 2017; Munford 2017). Our selection combines a focused thematic interest with due attention to the periodicals’ developing outlook on gender issues and “recognisable conventions which were re-worked over the years” (Beetham 1996, 6); this allows us to assess some significant trends for the representation of women in the late-Victorian culture of lecturing and speech-making.

Weekly-issue papers, often sold for a single penny, combined fiction pieces and other feature material with news items and thus “encouraged a straddling of the divide between newspaper and magazine” (DNCJ, “Weeklies”). Targeting an upwardly mobile, lower-middle class to working-class social segment, their weekly ‘society news’ and announcements captured the vibrant rhythm of metropolitan culture, the rota of lecturing in sites of rational entertainment. Their fiction pieces likewise staged a fast-paced consumption of lectures that imitated the weekly consumption of the periodicals’ pages, thus reinforcing the sense of seriality and fragmentation that Alberto Gabriele sees as characteristic of the expanding Victorian mass reading market more generally (see 2009) – but also incorporating and replicating the community-building aspects of urban social routines and rhythms. Victorian
middle-class monthlies were slightly more expensive and hence more exclusive; besides fiction and other items, they usually offered more complete assessments and article-length paraphrases of individual lectures, coinciding with the rhythm followed at Literary and Scientific Institutions for special evening lectures or conversaziones, which typically served as monthly highlights.

This is the alphabetical list of periodicals (bibliographical data gleaned from DNCJ; Ellegard 1957; Bassett; King 2004; Doughan 1989; Shiman 1992):

Belgravia (1867-1899), ed. John Maxwell; sold to Chatto&Winds in 1876; to F. V. White&Co. in 1889; ed. Mary Elizabeth Braddon until 1899. Popular monthly family magazine. Circulation 18,000 in 1868.


Englishwoman's Review (1866-1910), founding ed. Emilia Jessie Boucherett. Successor of the Englishwoman's Journal (1858-64). Feminist monthly. Circulation only 2,000 by 1910, but the journal was long-lived and well-known.


London Journal (1845-1928), ed. G.W.M. Reynolds; George Stiff from 1847. Popular penny weekly. Circulation 120,000 (in 1869) - 510,000 (in 1855).


The Strand Magazine (1891-1950), founding ed. George Newnes. Popular monthly family magazine. Circulation 300,000-500,000 during the 1890s.

Sunday at Home (1854-1940), ed. James Macaulay until 1895, William Stevens until 1899 for the RTS (monthly since 1895). Popular religious penny weekly. Circulation 130,000 by 1865.
Women’s Penny Paper (1888-90), renamed: Women’s Herald (1891-93), Woman’s Signal (1894-99), ed. Henrietta B. Muller (“Helena B. Temple”) until 1892; Christina S. Bremner until 1893; Lady Henry Somerset and Edwin H. Stout until 1895; Florence Fenwick Miller until 1899. Feminist weekly. Circulation: uncertain, but the periodical was “renowned” (DNCJ).

There are several significant cross-links between our periodicals; for instance, Florence Fenwick Miller used her editorship of the Illustrated London News’s “Ladies’ Page” (1886-1918) as a suffrage platform after the Woman’s Signal had folded. Our database design speaks to the new awareness in Victorian scholarship about the ‘feminisation’ of late-Victorian mass print culture, a new perspective revising earlier histories of the ‘common reader’ – i.e., of an assumed male reader – as produced by Altick (1957) and James (1963), tying in with recent revisions by Vincent 1989, Palmer and Buckland 2011, James 2013 (“most of my readers were not men but women”, 145), and J. Reginald Tye, who singles out the London Journal and Bow Bells as periodicals of predominantly “female orientation” (1989, 20). Gender issues and social aspirations were closely interwoven: Jennifer Phegley sees family literary magazines as “strong advocate[s] for cultural experiences that are beyond [their] pages and that extend [their] own project of bringing culture to the vast range of the middle classes, particularly to women” (2004, 17). The evidence collected in our database shows that this is also true of the more downmarket publications. Our popular periodicals on the whole express favourable attitudes towards female education and public speaking, yet the database also includes some of the famous Punch caricatures of ‘suffragettes’ holding forth to less than enthusiastic audiences. Likewise it reveals the high incidence of narratives that depict women’s rights activists as disappointed ‘spinsters’ with a self-defeating mission, and of romance or even ‘wife-taming’ plots that end with the silencing and (re-)domestication of the woman speaker.

3. The Database

The database lists all fictional and non-fictional pieces from the sample periodicals between 1860 and 1910 which represent women as speakers or as part of the audience at lecture or speech events. We have compiled a corpus of 2250 articles sourced from our 14 periodicals. The database offers users a maximum of flexibility in navigating the materials: with altogether 76 freely selectable and combinable categories, the database design facilitates differentiated and target-oriented research into nineteenth-century female public speaking.

The entry for each item starts with the following bibliographical information:

- **author**, if named (by real name or pseudonym); if no author is given, the article is listed under ‘unknown’
- **year of publication**
- **title** and **subtitle** (if applicable) of the article (for entries with the same title, the issue number is included)
- **title of publication**
- **volume and issue number** (some publications without volume)
- **page range**

Entries are sorted into specially developed clusters of categories and sub-categories, which can be searched separately or in combination. The five main categories are:
• **Genre**, including 24 sub-categories, e.g. advertisement, anecdote, announcement, (auto)biography, column/opinion piece/commentary, drollery, fiction (mode: realism / sensationalism), news, proceedings, satire, etc.

• **Content**, including 23 sub-categories, e.g. economics, elocution, family/marriage, housekeeping, relationships, society/class, suffragism/women's rights, etc.

• **Context**, including 11 sub-categories, e.g. international, indoor/outdoor venue, urban/metropolitan, etc. (subdivided again into 9 categories including drawing-room, town hall, university, etc.)

• **Form of Participation**, divided into the 2 sub-categories audience and speaker

• **Textualisation of Lecture**, divided into the following 6 sub-categories: complete rendering, excerpt, mentioned with title, mentioned without title, paraphrased, summarised

For each entry, an abstract offers a summary of the content, names prominent speakers, and quotes very short items in full, or the relevant passages from long articles that contain only brief mention of female public speaking. Abstracts of articles containing several reports reproduce these relevant elements as a list true to the order in which they were printed. The entries also note whether items were illustrated, and whether they were part of a series.

Abstracts, titles and sub-titles are searchable by key term search. Additionally, the database can be browsed by date, author, title, publication, or sub-category.

By providing these clusters of searchable details, our database also makes visible the material and (gender-)ideological conditions of the Victorian culture of lecturing (e.g., ticket prices, rules of admission, the role of chairpersons, conventions of audience behaviour; and the social implications of the various venues used for lecture events, such as Literary and Scientific Institutions, lecture halls, town halls, schoolrooms, drawing-rooms, indoor and outdoor venues). Similarly, journalistic lecture reporting techniques were far from neutral, and their implications are made evident through our search categories differentiating between established formats of summarising, paraphrasing, satirising, or suppressing female public speech.

4. Research Results and Trends

With a view to the lectures (fictional or non-fictional) that are represented in our pieces, certain topics can be identified as particularly prominent. The following percentages reflect the most frequent subjects spoken on by women in our textualised lectures (overlaps occur; calculations: Weig/Graef):

- women's suffrage (32.1 %)
- professions and work (18.1 %)
- temperance (15.6 %)
- education (children's and women's higher) (15.5 %)
- medicine and health (15.2 %)

These percentages are not surprising if we consider the close link between women's rights campaigning and other reform movements – Clare Midgley, for instance, has shown how the anti-slavery and temperance movements served as vehicles preparing later feminist campaigns from the 1860s onwards (1992, 172) –, as well as the obvious nexus between women’s higher education and political representation. The late-Victorian University Extension Movement and the new women's colleges, founded from the 1870s onwards (see
Pease 2012, 9; Shaw and Randolph 2007, 3), offered women unprecedented access to higher education. As for women’s entry into the professions, teaching and medicine were among the pioneer sectors. It is important to note that ‘progressive’ articles about women’s employment and public speaking were not restricted to the feminist periodicals, but that all of our popular periodicals, including the downmarket, penny-fiction publications like Bow Bells or the London Reader, actively engaged in these debates. Periodicals increasingly targeted specific audiences such as (male) professionals, women, families, or children; but they also remained eclectic and miscellaneous: at least in the popular publishing sector, sociological and thematic subdivisions were protean.

Female public speaking as represented across the periodicals under investigation occurs in fiction pieces (short stories, serialised novels), satirical and humoristic formats, and especially (in terms of percentage) in non-fiction pieces: i.e. lecture reports, reports about conferences and association or reform society meetings, the latter primarily in the feminist and programmatic periodicals, the Englishwoman’s Review (see Korte 2013, 109, 117-19) and the Women’s Penny Paper with its follow-up journals, the Women’s Herald and the Woman’s Signal, all of which were heavily oriented towards both propelling and documenting social and political reform, female suffrage – and female public speaking. Victorian women had to develop their self-confidence about speaking in public, and our periodicals collectively trace this process as they represent and discuss women’s reciting and speaking in front of “mixed” (i.e. male and female) audiences. In fact, the Women’s Penny Paper claimed in 1888 that “speech-making is now rapidly becoming a matter of course among women” (“Leaderettes”, Women’s Penny Paper, Dec. 22, 1888, issue 9, p. 4), and the first issue of the Woman’s Signal (Jan. 4, 1894, issue 1, pp. 4-5) programatically offers its later editor Florence Fenwick Miller’s autobiographical account, “How I Made My First Speech”.

Subjects treated less frequently in our textualised lectures are religion, arts and literature, natural and social sciences. The very few represented lectures on travel and archaeology, in our corpus, tend to figure as settings for imperial romance where a (male) speaker’s authority is negotiated and corroborated with a view to both the imperial and domestic context. Our periodicals here offer insights into the ambivalent moments of a culture struggling over gender norms, moving towards educational inclusiveness and political franchise while in part, and ambivalently, continuing to celebrate the domestication of female voices. Yet larger geographical vistas are incorporated at least indirectly by the feminist periodicals, which functioned as platforms and networks of international exchange: European and transatlantic lectures or lecture tours were frequently documented. Such coverage facilitated personal and professional liaising between British lecturers and those from other countries such as the United States, France, or Germany.

The database also addresses the paradox that British, and Western, modernisation and democratisation was construed as a history of political emancipation for the working classes and women, while an accompanying polemical discourse saw democratisation itself as a ‘feminisation’. On the one hand, “female literacy increased from about 50 percent in 1843 to almost 93 percent in 1891” (Pease 2012, 9). On the other, “the political, psychological and aesthetic discourse around the turn of the century consistently and obsessively genders mass culture and the masses as feminine, while high culture, whether traditional or modern, clearly remains the privileged realm of male activities.” (Huyssen 1986, 47; see Brantlinger 1998, 2) New Journalism entrepreneurs endorsed the feminisation of the reading public not least for commercial reasons (Beetham 1996, 121-22); yet representations of a ‘feminised’
metropolitan lecture circuit also express anxieties about the consequences of political inclusiveness.

Not surprisingly, there is a perceptible increase in coverage of female public speaking during the 1880s and 90s, a trend which mirrors the greater activity of groups campaigning for women’s rights during this time. Simultaneously, our periodicals here reveal a trend away from fictional representations and theoretical imaginings of (and debates about) the woman speaking in public, towards pieces that offer assessments of the actual achievements of women lecturers.

In their engagement with previous work on Victorian public lecturing and speech-making, the larger framing project as well as this database thus open up new perspectives on a research topic previously approached from more traditional, party-political and historiographical angles. Joseph Meisel in his analysis of Victorian public speech-making, for instance, focuses exclusively on “great men” and their political oratory (Meisel 2001, 9), excluding popular lecturers – and women –, and Hewitt's groundbreaking work on Victorian ‘platforms’ and ‘pulpits’ (Hewitt 2000; 2002) concentrates mainly on political speeches and an archive of newspapers, while acknowledging that “the precise role of women within nineteenth-century public speech remains obscure” (Hewitt 2002, 13). The evidence provided by this database, geared towards more popular publication formats and more diverse (i.e. also female) audiences, goes some way towards remedying this lopsided view of British public history.

In examining the materials made accessible through this database, the theoretical frameworks of literary and cultural studies also enable us to shift the focus to textualised stagings of platform speech, to the articulated impact of speech as performed ‘form’ as well as ‘content’: in the narratives about women speaking (and listening) that we have unearthed, what is mediated through oral performance is often secondary to how, where, when, and by/to whom it is mediated. Often designed as a series, lectures also shared with serialised fiction specific performative and narrative techniques, e.g., for the production of suspense and readerly affect (on recurrency in fiction see Hughes and Lund 1991, 1 and Dames 2007, 254). Together, these observations draw our attention to the fact that questions of social impact and social relevance were assigned high priority in the representation of lecture events across our periodicals.

Importantly, it was at this intersection of oral and print cultures that women negotiated how, where and when they were able to raise their voices in public. Gender conflict added political poignancy to what Ivan Kreilkamp has described as the nostalgia for presence and vocality, the cultural and technological “mystifications of orality” (2005, 29) in a modern (i.e. also late-Victorian) mass print culture: as the pieces collected here demonstrate, women’s oral performances were submitted to rigorous scrutiny in terms of the ‘respectability’ and ‘propriety’ of their clothing, facial expressions, gestures, enunciation and intonation. Such censorship was especially strong for middle-class women, who did not share the comparable liberties of either the lower or the upper ranks of society (see Shiman 1992, 125). One of the project’s premises, now borne out by its results, was that the female appropriation of (middle-class, semi-public) speech forums and other private, circumscribed speech events like drawing-room meetings and ‘at homes’ both preceded and informed the hyperbolical vocality of the early-twentieth-century suffragette movement, which took female oral delivery from indoor settings out into the streets, culminating in megaphone speeches (see Oliver 1987, 185). Offering evidence of late-Victorian (female self-)censorship, but also of the de facto permeability and cross-referentiality of the alleged ‘separate spheres’ of Victorian gender
politics (male/female, public/private), our database thus allows us to reassess how during the late nineteenth century many women underwent what we might call collective training for the specific oratorial competences and emphatic performativity employed by later women suffrage agitators “sent to lecture” (Strachey 1928, 117).

Only rarely, however, do our published pieces evince any open triumphalism about women’s increasing agency and vocality. Even the most affirmative representations remain aware of their precarious positioning in a period of political and cultural transition. Obviously, a challenge discussed with much consistency across our popular, and even our feminist, periodicals is how to reconcile the traditional ‘feminine virtues’ associated with the roles of mother, wife, and homemaker, with women’s activities in the public sphere. Our pieces provide a range of answers, from bluntly rejecting women lecturers and public speakers, through satire and parody, to admiration, encouragement, and a clear-headed emphasis on speaking as a political tool – and a profession for educated women. Most importantly, an impressive number of pieces and reports are actively mapping out a new enfranchised society which will offer women equal political and cultural participation and a public voice, both through print and oral performance.


5. Works Cited


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