

Abstract

The name of Mary Bacon Ford (1859–1948) is unknown to most media and communication scholars, including those interested in history. After all, her career in journalism did not last very long and her work for *Cosmopolitan* and *The Illustrated American* can at first sight be associated with the practice of “society reporting” to which most women journalists were restricted at the end of the 19th century. Compared to Nellie Bly (1864-1922) and the other “girl stunt reporters” of the era, or even to the more sophisticated investigative journalism practiced by Ida Tarbell (1857–1944), her work may seem bland.

This paper proposes a different approach to a career that has been eventful and to a work that appears quite original and innovative. Based on extensive archival research, this paper will cover the professional trajectory and lived experience of Mary Bacon Ford, which are deeply interconnected. From her early work in the United Kingdom as an art agent to her work as a journalist and editor in New York, Ford’s trajectory has been shaped by her union with her husband, another not-so-well-known journalist named Sheridan Ford (1860-1922). Together, the Fords developed an original theory about the relationship between art and journalism. Their concept or “Organized Art” was both the object of their work and an approach to their different activities, which cover a broad field. Both journalists, the Fords were also art critics, art merchants, art agents, and editors. They collaborated to publish a pirate edition of the letters of painter James McNeill Whistler, a friend who became a powerful enemy. In 1894, their divorce, which Mary Bacon Ford chronicled in the *Illustrated American*, marked a turning point in their respective careers, whose trajectories have moved apart. While Sheridan Ford became a respected Michigan State representative, Mary Bacon Ford career slowly went downhill. The many editorial projects she launched or directed (namely the *News-Leaf* (1895), *Art* (1899), and a still-born Parisian newsletter (1896)) were all very innovative—perhaps too much for their time—but can be considered failures. Revisiting her work allows to delve into the ordinariness of late 19th century and early 20th newswork in the United States, a moment of technological, social and political upheaval in which many aspects of society—including journalism, how it worked and what role it should play—remained open-ended.

Bio

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