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The Educational Functions of the First Woman's Almanac in Britain: Media Literacy and *The Ladies' Diary*, 1704–1713

Abstract

While 18th-century almanacs transmitted usable information that was meant to be relevant to daily life, at the beginning of the century they also began to function as an educational tool that enabled readers to act as producers of media content, and, as a result, to develop media literacy via the practice of writing and responding to amateur poetry. In this article, I define media literacy as a cultural category shaped by specific media-related skills: the creation, interpretation, evaluation, and negotiation of media content. I examine John Tipper's *The Ladies' Diary* (1704–1713), one of the best-selling almanacs of the era, as an educational tool that, through the strategy of inviting and publishing amateur poetry, promoted and taught media competencies. Tipper's almanac, I argue, should thus be acknowledged as an influential document in the history of media education.

Keywords: history of media education, media literacy, 18th-century British almanacs, 18th-century British literature and mathematics, *The Ladies' Diary*, John Tipper

Introduction: The originality and achievements of *The Ladies' Diary*

The year is 1703 and John Tipper, a mathematician and master of Bablake School for boys in Coventry, is planning to launch the first almanac addressed explicitly to a female audience – *The Ladies' Diary*; or, *The Woman's Almanack* – despite his doubt that the Stationers' Company, the London guild that has the exclusive right to publish almanacs, will be interested. Tipper does not even keep a manuscript copy, since he “was told the Company would hardly meddle with a New Almanack” (Tipper, 1703/2011, p. 308). However, surprisingly, they do accept *The Ladies' Diary* “at first sight” (Tipper, 1703/2011, p. 308). Thus began the long saga of an almanac that turned out to be a phenomenal success, evolving into one of the best-selling publications of the 18th century (Miegon, 2008, pp. 93, 187–204).

The traditional features of English 18th-century almanacs consisted of such key elements as a calendar with weather forecasts, astrological observations and prognostications, common-knowledge tables, information on annual eclipses, and weather forecasts for the four seasons. Sold widely and cheaply on an annual basis, the Stationers' Company's almanacs were a print medium transmitting current, everyday information. While the almanac genre remained largely conventional throughout the century, under Tipper's aegis, *The Ladies' Diary*, still relying on its informational appeal, diverged from traditional almanac content. The core features that set *The Ladies' Diary* apart from other almanacs at the turn of the century included original enigma puzzles and mathematical problems along with answers, most often presented in verse and submitted by both female and male contributors whose names or pseudonyms were acknowledged alongside their submissions and listed at the end of each almanac.

However, although *The Ladies' Diary* was a unique almanac, the literary and mathematical content supported by contributor activity was deeply ingrained in the popular cultural practices of the day. As Kathryn James has observed,

like many of the early eighteenth-century botanical or historical works, *The Ladies' Diary* took on the air of a public salon, in which readers were included in the theatre of the publication, the performance of the reader-participants, however fictitious, pseudonymous, or real. (2011, p. 14)

As to the mathematical content, Benjamin Wardhaugh, in his account of one of the bestselling almanacs of the time, *Poor Robin*, explores how mathematical learning was facilitated in the 18th century, from charity schools founded at parish churches, to private tutors and mathematical schools, arithmetic primers, and manuals of basic accounting. Wardhaugh points markedly to clubs: "Clubs of all kinds were an extremely popular type of activity, and one contemporary estimated that they involved up to 20,000 men every night in London alone" (2012, p. 82). He also explains that mathematical learning offered by mathematical societies combined "lectures, problem solving, and mutual instruction" (2012, pp. 81–82). Further, Jacqueline Wernimont, in her recent chapter on "esthetic rationalism" as reflected in *The Ladies' Diary's* poetry and mathematics, shows that it is crucial to understand "the last three decades of the 17th century as a time flush with the idea and the practical realities of women engaging in the literary and scientific cultures of England and France" (2017, p. 341). Indeed, mutual instruction via problem-solving among eager male and female reader-participants was a popular activity within the pages of *The Ladies' Diary*. A range of familiar cultural practices of the day, such as an participation in the intellectual club on which Tipper's almanac drew, helped the publication sell well during and beyond the inaugural period of its establishment.

The formation of media literacy through John Tipper's *The Ladies' Diary*

History

My earlier work on *The Ladies' Diary* revealed that the contributors to Tipper's almanac came from diverse localities in England and Wales, and that the *Diary's* club of correspondents was characterized by interactions among the editor and readers based on the conventions of epistolary and conversational modes of communication (Miegon, 2008, pp. 126, 242, 234). Because *The Ladies' Diary's* community of correspondents was not imagined, but real, the interactive character of the publication enables us to examine how instruction took place through the almanac and how *The Ladies' Diary* offered its readers opportunities to engage in media literacy.

Often classified by critics as a periodical or miscellany, *The Ladies' Diary* has been analyzed by scholars interested in the history of the women's periodical, including a focus on how, over the 18th century, women benefitted from their engagement with the periodical press in such roles as editors, authors, and readers (Batchelor & Powell, 2018). By studying the insights that 18th-century women's periodicals offer into women's learning processes, James Wood has established that those publications aimed to "engage their audiences in the wider cultural conversation around women's learning and its place within women's lives" (2018, p. 27). Tipper's almanac, with its enigma puzzles, mathematical questions, and corresponding answers – as Wood further discusses – created "an effect of revelation: a sense, however fleeting, of actually participating in the creation of knowledge as opposed to passively imbibing it" (2018, p. 30). Readers of *The Ladies' Diary*, both men and women, not only contributed to knowledge creation via the submission and solution of enigma poems and mathematical questions, but also responded to the vibrant learning environment of the almanac. In particular, the birth of Tipper's *The Ladies' Diary* at the turn of the century, predating the later multitude of periodicals and magazines that followed similar practices, is a significant moment in media history, when the function of the almanac

genre as a repository of information was transformed to embrace an educational model encouraging media literacy.

It was in the first decade of *The Ladies' Diary* in print, from its inaugural issue in 1704 until Tipper's death in 1713, when the educational functions of the *Diary* were established. The almanac thus cannot be neglected in the history of media education that allows us to determine how media literacy was being taught and promoted. In 18th-century studies, researchers have begun to examine how individuals, including editors and readers, learned to understand and negotiate the conventions and society-level influences of media. My argument is informed by a study of media "letteracy" undertaken by Eve Bannet in her book entitled *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820*. Focusing on popular 18th-century publications – letter manuals – Bannet demonstrated that they not only taught readers about letter-writing and letter-reading, but also engaged them in how to use the medium. In Bannet's words, letter manuals contributed to "letteracy": "the collection of different skills, values, and kinds of knowledge beyond mere literacy that were involved in achieving competency in the writing, reading, and interpreting of letters" (2005, p. xvii). Bannet further explains that the term encompasses

associated cultural information, such as common conceptions of letter-writing, awareness of current epistolary practices, basic knowledge about where letter-writing was taught and about how it was taught or to be learned, even how to 'read' and use a letter manual. (2005)

As with letter manuals and Tipper's almanac, we need to investigate a range of literacies to understand how popular texts instructed their readers to read, use, and – even further – negotiate their content and recognize the skills and knowledge that were needed to interpret and respond to such instruction. Drawing on Susan Whyman's study of the 18th-century novel in the context of "epistolary literacy" that she defines as a "cultural category" and describes as "a dynamic set of practices that

involves letter writing, reading, interpretation, and response by networks of individuals with shared conventions and norms" (2007, p. 578), I position media literacy as a sibling cultural category that relies on a series of similar competencies: writing, reading, the interpretation and evaluation of media content, and response to media delivery.

The analysis of various types of popular media, including the almanac, in the context of media literacy, opens new avenues for research about the skills, experiences, and knowledge of media users and the benefits of media education. Media literacy is developed when readers are offered the opportunity to become producers of interactive media. As I will argue, Tipper relied on his printed medium – his new almanac – as a tool through which he trained his readers in writing poems in the form of word and mathematical puzzles as well as poetic solutions. He advocated hands-on experience – learning by reading, analysis, and poetic composition – while revealing how readers influence media through active engagement in intellectual exercises.

Enigma Praxis

In the 18th century, informal education was common and widespread. Such sources as "almanacs, parental tutelage, shop signs, nursery rhymes, church sermons, and decorations, instruction by trade masters or journeymen, and advice from neighbors and relatives" (Olsen, 1999, p. 222), might have served as the only available means of learning. Tipper made *The Ladies' Diary* an important source for encouraging informal learning by offering practice in the writing and solving of the enigma poem, a popular element of the almanac, typically written in verse at the time of his editorship, and the only distinct feature that appeared in all issues of *The Ladies' Diary* throughout Tipper's editorship.

A typical enigma was a puzzle written in verse, most often in rhyming couplets of iambic pentameter with various poetic devices, such as metaphor and paradox, which allowed for the gradual development of an argument (Hunter, 2001, p. 22). The practice of enigma sleuthing involved a write-and-response progression in which the publication of an original enigma elicited an answer, the latter feature appearing in the subsequent

issue of the almanac. Similar to enigmas, answers were usually written in the era's popular verse patterns. The common solution that such answers presented was in the form of a single noun, for example, "rose" or "almanac," though longer answers, such as the Copernican system, also appeared.

Tipper's intention to establish his almanac as a source of education was indicated in his 1710 issue where he explains that a set of his diaries designated for winners in his annual contest is meant "both to encourage, and promote, useful Learning and Ingenuity" (*Ladies' Diary*, p. B8v). The definition of an enigma that Tipper chose to include in his 1704 inaugural issue was a "dark description of things clear and well-known, to be explained for the diversion and exercise of the mind" (as cited in Hutton, 1775, p. 12), also highlights his educational intention. Tipper here distinguishes enigmas from "trifling and foolish *riddle-my-riddle, one two three*," the outcome of which is to amuse the ear. In contrast, he describes the aim of the enigmas as a form of intellectual entertainment for readers keen on undertaking exercises that edify the mind.

In this educational setting, Tipper's inclusion of reader correspondence and names, as well as his awarding of prizes, laid a foundation for a publication that encouraged trajectories of response: from verse reading to verse composing. In the 1710 edition of *The Ladies' Diary*, Tipper began to offer a set of his diaries for correct answers to a Prize Enigma. The prizes turned out to be stimulating incentives for reader engagement: Tipper assured his readers in the almanac for 1711 that he had received an "abundance of thanks and complements, and a multitude of letters from all parts of the kingdom" (as cited in Hutton, 1775, p. 87). To "gratify the curiosity of the inquisitive fair ones," Tipper commented on the responses he received, including for example, an amusing story about a correspondent who pompously asserted his wife's correctness, insisting that she "was positive [the answer] was the *Moon*, and therefore he as positively demanded, and would not be bubbled of the promised reward".

In this almanac number, Tipper also provided the real and fictional names of the contributors. Further, after a lengthy narration about and exemplification of several answers in verse, Tipper concluded the account,

admitting that to “set down all the answers I have received to this enigma, I should fill a volume twice as big as my diary,” and emphasizing that “it would be almost endless to insert” other answers (as cited in Hutton, 1775, p. 90). These strategies invited responses with the assumption of real or playful identities, and turned out to be effective for obtaining original material for *The Ladies’ Diary*. They also highlighted a praxis of verse-study and verse-making for readers eager to see their names and verses in print on a regular basis. While being involved in such a praxis, readers could become, and – as reflected in Tipper’s responses and in the content of *The Ladies’ Diary* – could remain skilled media producers. A number of contributors were doubly awarded: they benefitted by receiving a set of diaries for correct answers and, at the same time, they acquired social cachet as distinguished media users.

Once the contributors started to submit poems, Tipper withdrew various elements from his almanac, such as entertaining stories, so the enigma and answer poems became the most popular features. *The Ladies’ Diary* thus shows that its readers had actual agency over the construction and reception of their almanac. Over time, they displayed proficiency in media literacy to such an extent that their own contributions dominated the pages of the publication. Such proficiency involved a range of skills, from a conversational sociability to the ability to compose poetry or, in other words, to write media content.

Being competent as an effective verse contributor in the vibrant cultural hub of *The Ladies’ Diary*, meant, among other capabilities, being skilled at sociable conversation. Along with John Dunton’s *Athenian Mercury* (1691–1697), a miscellany relying on readers’ questions and editors’ answers, Tipper’s almanac laid the foundation for an emerging trend that periodical publications eagerly embraced by the middle of the 18th century – to promote sociable conversation where a question could not be left without an answer. One historian of domestic pedagogy, Michèle Cohen, has shown that children’s active involvement in learning conversation at home meant “asking as well as answering questions,” and was inherent in the “practices of sociability and politeness aimed at individual improvement and self fashioning” (2015, pp. 448–449). Tipper arranged

The Ladies' Diary in a way that welcomed rhetorically-based sociable conversation and the practice of self-fashioning, with the use of real or imagined identities, via an enigma poem, and, of course, its subsequent answer. Both forms often displayed polite language and offered addresses to other correspondents or to the editor, following the mode of sociable conversation. As one example, in 1712, Mrs. Sarah Newbold's Enigma 43 salutes the "sweet English Ladies," whom she encourages to solve her enigma by inviting those who guess the answer to "drink a Dish of Tea" with her (*Ladies' Diary*, p. 11). Polite, conversational tone was modelled by Tipper within the enigmas that appeared in the almanac in 1704–1710, and, that with time became commonly mimicked by correspondents. The pages of the almanac can therefore be read as recording a process of transition where exemplification was followed by a display of conversational accomplishment, revealing how readers learned to become adept producers of media content and respondents to media delivery.

Conversational accomplishment was equivalent to poetic achievement for Tipper. He taught his readers how they could influence *The Ladies' Diary* by exemplifying model enigma poems. In addition to this modelling, Tipper explained the standards of quality that he expected from the poems, emphasizing that readers need a sufficient period to "put their Answers in good Verse" (*Ladies' Diary*, 1712, p. C3v). He also showed which verses he favored, as in the 1713 number where he highlighted all enigmas that were "incomparably answered by Mrs. Sidway" (*Ladies' Diary*, p. B8r). Kate Loveman (2019), in her analysis of the 18th-century epigrammatic satire, has concluded that "verse games taught participants and their audiences to recognize the skill in rapidly producing a well-turned rhyme and must have tended to increase their awareness of how rhyme words in poetry were used to set up and surprise expectations" (p. 507). Writing word puzzles in good quality verse required skills, such as the use of compressed language and the ability to read, plan, and compose verses in which meaning is encoded imaginatively and can be decoded through the successive unfolding of diction and imagery. These skills were essential for engaging in the word play presented in *The Ladies' Diary*, and, further, laid the foundation for media literacy – poetry writers

were, at the same time, producers of media who reacted to Tipper's instruction and to the contributions of other readers in a way that showed their skills in reading, interpreting, evaluating, responding to, and writing media content.

Conclusion: The practitioners of an early media literacy

A number of research questions related to the topic of the educational function of *The Ladies' Diary* and almanacs remain unaddressed: What are the multiple literacies, beside the epistolary and media forms of literacy, that 18th-century media – manuscript and print – engaged? How are these sibling cultural categories dependent on the co-existence of or interaction among oral, manuscript, and print media? How did readers learn and practice media literacy skills while exploring other forms of writing than amateur poetry?

Instead of reading *The Ladies' Diary* as a text written *for* and *with* women (Miegon, 2008), my attention has shifted to studying the interpretations of media as presented and experienced by audiences. In this study, I highlight the educational functions of *The Ladies' Diary* in the first decade of its publication, gesturing towards modes of almanac readers' acquisition of media literacy. The consideration of media literacy leads to a conclusion that *The Ladies' Diary's* readers were no strangers to an awareness of media use, since they actually served as producers of media content. Traditional literacy, as reflected in the basic ability to read and write, was insufficient in this age for people who wished to contribute to media culture. My case study reveals that the early media literacy integrated in Tipper's almanac meant a range of competencies, including the understanding, evaluation, creation, and negotiation of media content, and thus the ability to address media conventions and society-level media effects. *The Ladies' Diary* was a pioneering site in which readers could both teach and practice such instantiations of early media literacy.

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