New York Public Library

Work/Cited Episode 7 Transcript:

Finding Princess Mysteria and Other Adventures in Mining the Newspaper

Meredith Mann: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much for coming. Thank you for joining us at this, our seventh episode of our programming series Work/Cited. I'm Meredith Mann. I'm the librarian for manuscripts, archives and rare books here at The New York Public Library's Stephen Schwarzman Building, although I don't know why I'm saying I'm here because I am coming to you live from the comfort of my home. So we're excited. It's a new program series that showcases the latest scholarship supported by the rich collections of Tthe New York Public Library with the behind-the-scenes look at how the finished product was inspired, researched, and created. I'm going to post a link in the chat now where you can find blog posts for our prior episodes and you can -- from these blog posts you can watch the video recordings, read transcripts, and explore related resources. So in this episode, we are joined here today by Ian Fowler who is our geospatial librarian and map curator at the 42nd Street Library. And we're also here with Dr. Julie Golia, our very own curator of history, social sciences and government information because she has a new book, brand new book, just out, very exciting. You see it here on the screen, *Newspaper Confessions: A History of Advice Columns in a Pre-Internet Age*, and she's here to talk to us about it. So our guests today are going to speak for about 30 minutes then we'll open up the conversation to your questions. Please use the question and answer feature of Zoom rather than the chat to share your questions and comments and I'll be feeding them to our guests at that point. You can submit throughout the talk and if you wish to remain anonymous, just make sure you click that option before submitting your question. Of course, if you'd like to chat with our panelists and attendees, you're free to use the chat box. Just make sure you switch the "to" field over to panelists and attendees. Before we jump into it, I'd like to take a few seconds to take a quick poll that will help us with the series and I'm going to launch that now. And while you're filling that out, I'm going to put a few other links in the chat. The first is to another event that Julie is participating in. This is the official book launch for her book on May 6th. It's at 5 P.M. and she's going to be in conversation with Daniel Lavery who runs the Dear Prudence advice column for *Slate* which is super exciting. I can't wait to attend and listen in. And then -- let me just make sure I have this whole link. I'm also pasting a link to where you can purchase a copy of Julie's book if you are so inclined to do so. So, at this point, I think that that is all of my spiel out of the way and so, I'm going to turn things over to Ian and Julie to kick us off.

Ian Fowler: Thank you so much, Meredith. Wonderful to be here with you, Julie. Congratulations on your new book.

Julie Golia: Thanks, Ian. Thanks, Meredith. And thanks for having me.

Ian: So Julie, I'm thinking to start off, should we kind of frame the debate and talk about what exactly an advice column is, maybe an example?

Julie: That's a great question. So advice has been exchanged for a very long time, well before the scope of my book, but something happened at the end of the 19th century. Well, a number of things happened that really make the newspaper an ideal place for people to seek advice, exchange advice and then, through advice columns, do a lot more than that. Actually, create kind of not only new communities of exchange but also new ways of actually seeking solace in the woes that they write and about. Part of the reason this is happening is because of the rise of cities, the rise of newspapers as kind of mass publications and also newspapers really becoming something that women were seen as readers of, which is a big departure from the way that newspapers were looked at in the early 19th century and earlier than that. But I think in the book, I talk a lot about the way that advice columns became sort of avatars for the way that lots of different Americans are negotiating modern times, that rapid and sometimes jarring and dislocating changes that were shaping almost all aspects of American life in the 20th century. And what we're looking at on the screen right now is sort of your typical advice column. This is one of hundreds of columns that I located in my research and one of eight that I used to kind of really dig deep into the content of what people are talking about. And I think this is a really good example of those questions of modernity that I was talking about. So this is 1910 and in this letter, a young woman is writing. So she's just one of many of those Chicago girls working in a department store. She's single. She's living with friends. She meets a man at her job, they fall in love, they court, he proposes, and then the day of the wedding she's standing at the altar and he jilts her. And so, Laura Jean Libbey who was actually a very popular sentimental novelist turned advice columnist here really responds incredibly sympathetically. And this woman almost takes on that kind of language of sentimental novel. She writes, "O, do pity me, Ms. Libbey in my mortification when I tell you, without mincing words, that he jilted me for no reason. The day I was to have been married dawned. In my bridal dress, my friends waiting, but no bridegroom came. I lost my position and my heart is as one dead." And so, one thing I think is really interesting is that Libbey writes back. She says, "You know, you should take some time away, you should seek the solace of your friends," and then she sort of wraps up her letter by saying, "You have indeed poured your heart woes to someone who sympathizes with you, in your misfortune more than words can tell." And in some ways, it's this idea of this public and anonymous catharsis. That is more of a salve for this woman's problem than any concrete advice made. And this may seem like what you might think is typical advice but there's a lot here. This is a single woman. She's living in the city. There's no mention of her family. She talks a lot about her friends and so we're sort of moving outside of the seemingly patriarchal protection of the family. She's working in a sort of expanded consumer economy and this is a world in which there are exciting and sexy opportunities but also, an enormous emotional precarity and sort of a lack of structure that many people associated with more traditional times. And so, you can see here even in this simple exchange the kind of the, all of the trappings of the modern urban experience distilled into one letter.

Ian: That's incredible and definitely resonates with what we're -- what's going on today. So I think my question would be how did you come to the topic? What drew you to it?

Julie: So I came to the topic in kind of a -- there's like a specific answer and then there's like a broad answer, but the specific story is kind of interesting. Before I even went to graduate school, I worked in documentary film and I was working on a film about the history of Tupperware. And there was a woman who played a really big role in the rise of that company. Her name was Brownie Wise. She was the first vice-president of the company and really pioneered the idea of the home party for Tupperware. And her papers are at the Smithsonian and among her personal papers we found a scrapbook of clippings of an advice column in the Detroit News called Experience. And Brownie wrote in under the pen name Hibiscus and she didn't ask any questions. She just told her life story and so, again, getting back to that kind of theme of confession as being just important and a part of this, as actually soliciting any kind of concrete information. She wrote over and over. There were like 10 letters in the scrapbook and the way that I knew that it was her is because this woman, Hibiscus, who she talked about herself, you know, was born on like a Natchez plantation and grew up in this gentile southern home and had a whirlwind romance with a northerner who she called a Yankee and they moved to Detroit and [inaudible] about her path. Brownie grew up poor in the south in sort of backwoods Georgia. Her mom was a union organizer so she was kind of shuffled from family member to family member. She married a northerner, a man named Robert Wise. He was incredibly abusive and they divorced actually the year that she was writing this letter. She had one young son. She was raising him as a single mother in Detroit. So you could see like the -- this was her, you know, her Instagram filter of her life, right? The life she wished she had, the life she would rather the world know about, and the life that she clearly took great joy in envisioning she lived in the pages of a newspaper where a quarter of a million people were reading it. So I was like, "What is this thing? What is this crazy column and why does it look so much like a chat room?" And so I did a deep dive into that column in my first year in graduate school and then, I realized that nobody had done any work on advice columns. So I didn't know how many there were newspapers at that time. I didn't know the cultural and economic roles that they played. And so, this is where NYPL's newspaper collection comes in because I needed to get my feet really, really wet in newspapers and not just in specific clipping columns like the one that we're looking at on this screen, but in the full pages of the newspaper. And so, I use newspapers in two different ways. Here are Ann Landers and Dear Abby. This is who we normally, I think, associate with the beginning of advice columns but part of what I try to do in the book is talk about the much earlier history. So, actually, I think if we turn the slide one more, Ian, we can see a full page of a newspaper. So I spent a lot of time actually looking at full runs of newspapers on microfilm and I wanted to do this for a couple of reasons. I wanted to actually find the columns, right? So I didn't know what to search for yet. I didn't know their names. You know, most advice columns didn't say, "I'm an advice column," so searching for the word advice column didn't really get me anywhere. And what I actually ended up doing was I looked at about between 35 and 40 newspapers in 1895 and 1955. And I would look at about a week a year and I would sort of scroll through those issues and identify where the women's page was, identify the different kinds

of columns that were on the page. I would take note if there were advice columns, how many advice columns. I would take a note if they were syndicated or local. And then I would also look at them in relation to the other parts of the newspaper, where did this appear in the newspaper, what was the relationship between the women's page and the advertising on that -- in the newspaper? In order to really get a sense not just of the kinds of columns and what they were saying, but what was their role in the newspaper, right? What was the form of the newspaper that people became familiar with? They knew to, you know, swipe through to page 18 in order to get to the women's page. And one thing that I discovered as you can see from this sort of very rich page is that this was actually the era in which the women's page became one of the most important parts of the newspaper, one of the most important parts content-wise because the content was so diverse and also, one of the most important economically because women were seen at that time as the primary purchasers in families and therefore, the primary targets of advertising. And so, newspapers were funded almost completely by advertising at this time and so, newspapers wanted to show their potential advertisers that they had women readers, right? Women readers who were ready and primed to buy and this is where content-like advice columns played such a key role in the economic skyrocketing of so many newspapers at this time. And eventually what I discovered is, you know, there was an advice column in almost every American newspaper that I looked at and I must have located 93 advice columns in the sample newspapers that I looked at. And if you count that out over the number of newspapers at that time, I think it's safe for us to say that there were thousands of columns running in American newspapers in the beginning of the 20th century.

Ian: That's extremely fascinating. I think it might be helpful for researchers if we could zoom out a little bit and if you could just talk about, so how do you research or how does one research newspapers at NYPL? I know that we have a lot of resources. And can you, maybe, talk about the differences between like the different avenues?

Julie: Yeah. I was just in the meeting with colleagues and we were joking about how, you know, so many people today are like, "What's a microfilm?" But microfilm is an enormously useful thing if you are a newspaper researcher. And institutions like NYPL and many others like I did a lot of work at the Library of Congress, for example, maintain often full runs of many American newspapers, not just New York newspapers, newspapers all over the country and in case with NYPL, all over the world in, you know, a tiny box that's filled with a reel of film that looks like, you know, the kind of film that used to be in your Kodak camera if you're of a certain age, right? And you can feed that through a machine. Today, many of the machines are actually connected to the internet so that you can scan something and send it to yourself, which is very convenient. But when I was doing my research, I found it most convenient to use an analog one where you are rolling through with a handle. It allowed me to move with a little bit more ease to have kind of like -- to kind of have one that was more manual than one that was electronic. And you can look through an entire run of a newspaper. Now, if you're looking for a particular topic or a particular article, I think you could see how onerous this could be versus using, you know, a digital -- a database, right, to search for what you're looking for. You'd have to go through, you'd have to find your date, you'd have to locate the page. You'd have to, you know, make a xerox or

a copy of that page or that particular article that you're looking at. But when you're looking to study the form of a newspaper, the way that it has evolved over time, it's length, the use of different typefaces, for example, as we might see on the page here, the changing ways that graphics and photographs were employed in different ways over time, there's no better way to do this than by a microfilm. Now, if you know what you're looking for and we'll talk about this a little bit later with one of the columns that we're going to profile, you know that you're looking for Princess Mysteria, well you know that you're looking for Advice To The Wise and Otherwise. This is where your database access kicks in, right? So I will access the Chicago Defender database that The New York Public Library makes accessible. At that time you had to be on the site. Since COVID, you actually can do this at home via ProQuest. And if you search for those words and quotes, then it pulls up the thousands of columns that were published in the Chicago Defender between 1920 and 1930. So it's a great example of how there's a time for digital databases, there's also a time for the analog experience of the microfilm. Without the former, I could not have written this book.

Ian: That's very fascinating. Take it kind of back into the detail of it. So like we're looking at this page and you talked about women as kind of the purchaser so we have like a class kind of coming in there. This is also the period of the Great Migration. So how do class and race come across in these advice columns through the research that you've done?

Julie: So this is also a really I think essential question and essential topic to think about when understanding the history of newspapers. And so, in the beginning of my project, I found myself using terminology like mainstream or mass circulation newspapers and that's an accurate description, right? So, you're, you know -- Indianapolis Star is what we're looking at right now, one of the three or four major circulating papers in Indianapolis at that time. Once I begin to get into the content of a lot of these newspapers and then also the business history of a lot of these newspapers, it really I think is fair. I started also referring to this as White newspapers. So these mainstream newspapers had almost completely White staff, certainly White content and editorial staff. And they envisioned their readers as White. Their advice columns envisioned their readers as White advice column consumers and they were leveraged, these newspapers and particularly the women's sections were leveraged to advertisers as being able to draw not just women but a specific kind of women readers, right? Who was White, who was -- you know, who had a certain amount of, you know, financial sort of security to be able to be a significant purchaser, right? And so, all of these notions, sort of aspirations, class aspirations, racial visions were sort of glommed on to this vision of the ideal woman reader. A really important thing to understand is that, though this was the vision of the newspaper, whether it was spoken or unspoken, this was not the reality of the time, right? So never before had newspaper readership been as diverse as it was in the early 20th century. And when I say diverse, I mean economically diverse, way across class. Those certain newspapers definitely geared themselves towards the working class or more towards what they saw as the home newspaper. The implications of that was that the newspaper was delivered to the home, right, rather than getting it in, say an urban workspace. But also ethnicity, so this is the time of massive immigration. And so, we also see in addition to these mainstream English newspapers the rise

of a lot of foreign language newspapers. And then, of course, there are growing numbers of Black Americans pouring into northern cities like Chicago, like New York, like Detroit as part of the Great Migration which over a number of decades in the beginning of the 20th century brings literally millions of Black Americans from the rural south up to the north. They, too, were readers but I think that there is a way in which the implicit sort of -- the sort of unspoken White supremacy of newspapers at that time could also be a really alienating force for Black readers. And this is part of the reason why we see also at the same time a parallel flourishing of Black newspapers. The one that I profile in the book is the Chicago Defender but there are hundreds actually across the country [inaudible].

Ian: That's great. So what's going on with this ad?

Julie: Yeah. So here's our ideal woman newspaper reader. So one thing that I'd really hoped for with the book was to be able to find sort of business smoking guns of the role that advice columns played in shaping the business model of newspapers. So, one thing that was particularly attractive about advice columns was that it gave editors and publishers concrete evidence of engaged women readers. So these were people who were not just passively glancing at the newspaper. These were people who were so involved in the newspaper that they put pen to paper and they wrote letters into that newspaper to have their voice sort of be placed there, right? So there's like a real -- it shows a real long-term engagement with that publication. And so I wasn't able to find most business newspaper -- most business records for newspapers in part because there just wasn't kind of -- like most newspapers actually burned their business records after 10 years. This is actually not an uncommon thing with a lot of businesses, not just media businesses. So one of the ways that I kind of try to be creative around this is that I then went to trade journals. And so, I started to look for conversations in newspaper trade journals and advertising trade journals around the roles that women were sort of playing and as envisioned like idealized readers and that advice columns were playing in really drawing them. And indeed, again, this is another great NYPL resource. So this is actually a -- there are bound versions of printer's ink that are offsite here. So they can be requested from ReCAP. It can be scanned from ReCAP or we can bring them, you know, onsite for a researcher to take a look at. And so, I looked at four decades of articles and then really interestingly, advertisements placed by newspapers into advertising trade journals. And so, this was the reader that the newspaper wanted advertisers to know that they could get, right? So here's our ideal reader. She is pretty. She's White. She is just about to get married and start a household and look at all of these consumer goods in the background that she's dreaming of and thinking about. And so, this is a person with disposable income and she's modern, right? She's got this short, little bob haircut but she's also still deeply domestic, right? And this is, I think, an exact kind of amalgam of the traditional wife with touches of the new woman that was seen as the ideal audience for any kind of advertising you might want to put in newspapers.

Ian: And so, I think a question that probably has come to mind for a lot of our audience today is, so are these kind of like sponsored influencers or were the actual advice columnists removed from that kind of capitalist chicanery?

Julie: So I would say, at a very practical level, advice columns -- advice columnists were not necessarily involved in, say, placing these ads, right? But advice columnists themselves, like an influencer, were something that was marketable to people, right? And so, a number of really successful advice columnists, the one that I think comes to mind most prominently is Dorothy Dix who was a syndicated advice columnist. She was very much the precursor to Dear Abby and Ann Landers. She worked with the newspaper's marketing team to create materials that would then be sent directly to advertisers. You know, Dorothy Dix is receiving, you know, 90 million letters worldwide this year. You know, we feature her. She's a central part of our women's page, advertise with us. And so, she was definitely a willing partner and then, she, herself, then also became an influencer, if you will, because she would then create relationships with like, you know, LUX detergent. Like Dorothy Dix says if your clothes look shabby, that man is not going to marry you. So Dorothy Dix says buy LUX detergent and keep all your, you know, under things beautiful, right? So there is very much the origins of the notion of a journalist influencer in these advice columnists who took their jobs really, really seriously but also, were really savvy self-promoters and very careful, almost like Brownie and Hibiscus, very careful editors of their own role in the public sphere.

Ian: Fascinating. So what are we looking at here?

Julie: I think this is another -- so this is a small -- it's a little blurry, everybody, so forgive us. But this is the common issue when you're researching in the newspapers that some things were just never high resolution and you have to just live with the fact that nothing -- it never looked good to begin with so we're never going to make it look good on the other end. This is a small clipping from actually the Experience column that Brown Wise/Hibiscus wrote into. This is the first year, actually, that Experience ran. It started in 1919. That time it actually looked a little bit more sort of traditionally like question and answer columns that we are used to. So I -- one of the most interesting things about the kind of the racial politics of advice columns is that you're very hard-pressed to actually find race mentioned in a lot of them. A lot of these sort of notions of who the readership was or conversations around sort of a person's place in the world went unsaid. So things like segregation were not talked about, things like job discrimination were not talked about, racial violence. Very little violence was talked about in these pages at all. So this is one of the few examples when I was actually able to find references to race actually explicitly printed in a White advice column. So, in this case, this woman is writing in. She's saying, you know, I have a suitor, I really like him. He seems like a really good prospect but he's Greek and my parents don't want me to marry him. And so then she writes back here and she says, "If the young man's nationality is the only objection, I see no reason why you should not marry him. The Greeks belong to the White race which is the main consideration." There's been a few other examples of this column. This advice columnist was Nancy Brown where she actually does the opposite to somebody who's interested in a Jewish suitor. So she's like, you know, "They're not the White race so you really should stop seeing him." And then, literally, I mean, I looked at this column very closely from 1919 to 1942. I found no references to Black Americans whatsoever. A few other sort of complicated relationships to race but almost like no reference to a column -- a

participating person writing in over and over, ever being anything but White so it was -- even as race was sort of a subtext of almost everything they talked about it was almost never mentioned.

Ian: That is absolutely fascinating, especially considering the parallel histories that are going on at the same time.

Julie: Yeah. I mean, and just like, to your influencer point, I think also, I think speaks to a lot of the whitewashing of content that we see on Instagram today. It's like what it means to, you know, have a particular kind of preset or to choose to mention politics or not mention politics. I think, you know, so much of the political implications of what goes under an influencer's Instagram feed go unsaid or in the comments, right?

Ian: Right. But, obviously, looking at this example from 1906, we do get racist caricature and we do get stereotype.

Julie: That's right. That's right.

Ian: But what's the context around this?

Julie: And so, this is a column that is not an advice column but a column that was written by an advice columnist, one that I just mentioned, Dorothy Dix. So, Dorothy Dix was enormous, an enormously active reporter beyond just her advice column work. She's one of the original sob sisters so she reported on like really emotionally wrought murder cases in the 1900s and 1910s including the Stanford White, the very famous Stanford White-Evelyn Nesbit murder case. And this was just one of her very popular columns at the time, Mirandy, which was written in dialect and with obviously, enormously offensive visual caricature of African-Americans. And I think one of the things -- you know, I have a chapter that just focuses on the advice columnists, their sort of biographies themselves. Dorothy Dix was born in the south and she actually marketed herself as somebody who was sort of like deeply familiar with the genteel ways of the south. Talked a lot about, played up, really played them through like lost cause imagery. Talked often about the faithful slaves that stayed with her family after the war, how, you know, she grew up, you know, sort of surrounded by African-American servants in ways that went completely unquestioned by clearly her publisher, by the people who were writing into her columns at that time, by the many, many reporters who were interviewing her in order to learn more about her successes. All of these aspects of her persona relied on Black Americans as props for the way that she marketed herself to the world and drew on these kinds of tropes that were everywhere in the media at that time [inaudible] to, you know, D.W. Griffith, right? And so, this is I think another really important way that sort of race and racism suffused the work that these White columnists did in ways that almost never were questioned at that time.

Ian: So there were advice columns for Black people, for African-Americans. This is one, I guess, of the most famous from the Chicago Defender. So how were these constructed and how do

they play off what you were just talking about and what can you tell us about it?

Julie: The early 20th century was also a golden age for Black newspapers, right? And so, some of the same patterns that we see emerging in the newspapers that I just talked about, the sort of mass circulation newspapers of the time, the idea of a women reader, the rise of advertising as a sort of a key form of income for newspapers, the diversification of content, all of this is taking place in newspapers like the Defender and like the Amsterdam News and so on, right? And so, my instinct was then there surely must be advice columns in these papers as well and I was very glad to find out that I was correct on this one because this advice column ended up being -- you know, everybody says this about something in their book but my absolute favorite of all of the columns that I looked at. And so, this is a column that ran for a decade called Advice To The Wise And Otherwise written by a vaudeville mesmerist named Princess Mysteria. And Princess Mysteria was pretty well known on the vaudeville circuit and was pretty well known to Chicago Defender readers, had this kind of nice symbiotic relationship with the Defender where she would write in from her tours in order to give information about the circus and then also get people excited about coming to it when it went to their own town. The Defender of course is a Chicago-based newspaper but in the height of the Great Migration it was being circulated all across the country. So many, many people were reading this even if they weren't based in Chicago and might be learning that Princess Mysteria and her act are coming to them. But we talked a little bit about in the beginning of this about how advice columns were sort of this lens through which to understand modern change in America. And this is very much the case for Black Chicago as well where Black majority takes on a particular kind of meaning. And so, many of the cultural influences here, things like the nation of Islam and the rise of Shriners, a growing sort of nationalist interest in taking back the historical narrative of Black history from the sort of racist grasp of White academia and tying it to something grander and more ancient, a sort of an oriental or an Asiatic past. And these ideas are taking place among Black intellectuals and then, they're filtering their way down into the consumer culture and to broader movements in the populace. And so, you know, this is when astrology became really popular and the Chicago Defender as well. And Princess Mysteria is shaping her persona, growing on a lot of these themes. So from my demographic research, Princess Mysteria is an African-American woman who was born in the south and like so many people was part of the Great Migration that moved people to northern cities, right? But in her telling, she was born at the foot of the Bengali mountains and she could speak, you know, six languages and most importantly, could read your mind from across the room. And this was her act. She would go and she would read people's mind and she would say, "You know, you're going to have a baby next year and, you know, your husband's name has a letter C in it." And she even spoke supposedly with a very affected Asian accent. So this was very much a persona that she, herself, is playing with and taking on. And ironically, while her persona was seemingly exotic, her advice was exceedingly practical, very much tied up with ideas about racial uplift that marked the Chicago Defender at this time, sort of more conservative ideas about ways that you should, you know, act and be respectable in public. But then, also, more so than any advice column I looked at, just stridently feminist in the way that she advocated for women, particularly Black women to stand up for themselves, to seek their own safety, financial independence and to be willing to dump boyfriends, husbands,

anybody who sort of stood in that way.

Ian: I think that's really fascinating and I feel like there's kind of a thread in this entire conversation which is, you know, the history of these advice columns and then also what's going on with current internet culture. Am I making that up or does that -- or do you see that as well?

Julie: Well, it's actually -- I find it so interesting that you observed that, Ian, because there's a way in which like some of the communities that were built in the pages of the Defender and other Black newspapers feel a little bit like there are parallels to Black Twitter in the sense -- one of the notable things is that like White people were not reading these newspapers. And so White people like the way that -- we talked about how racism was never mentioned in White newspapers. White people were never mentioned in these newspapers so it's kind of -- it must have been refreshing for many readers to be able to have conversations in the pages of the newspaper without the kind of onslaught of like the cartoon that we just saw. Do you know what I mean? And so, there is a way that these dialogues are able to be incredibly complex because they're done outside of the White race. So like, I mean, we should -- let's talk about some Mysteria content while we have time because I just think she's so fantastic. Like, this is an example of a column where like literally hundreds of her columns that I read, she tells somebody to divorce their husband. Now, I have to tell you that in all of the White columns that I looked at divorce was never, never, never suggested. It was only suggested in examples of extreme physical abuse and even those were rarely featured because the columnists didn't like to talk about abuse in the pages. Princess Mysteria does not shy away from talking about abuse and emotional abuse as well as physical abuse. And so, here this is a woman whose husband -- she writes, her name is Worried Wife and she says, "My husband seems to be satisfied to drag along where we merely exist, but I want to go where we can make and save some money." So, Worried Wife had arranged for the couple to move to a more prosperous area. She had been saving up money for her family and her husband refused to comply with any of them, right? And so, for Mysteria, this was evidence enough that worried wife needed to cut bait and she writes, "I advise you to talk the matter over with him and if he still refuses to go elsewhere then go yourself. There are so few of these days who care enough for their wives to even try to make a living for them and still they have the nerve to think that they love them. I guess your husband tells you the same thing. Love is one thing and happiness is another and it is far more preferable to be truly happy and successful than so deeply in love that you make a clown of yourself. Loyalty and obligation cause many good women like you to suffer but all suffering must cease some time. And so, I advise you to cut your short with him if he will not go and prepare the way." And I think, a nice place to wrap this, she -- this is really I think intersectional feminism. She's honoring the burdens of labor, kind of the double burdens of race and gender that Black women have endured for so many years. You know what I mean? And recognizing the importance of safety and economic security above all else, even love, which is something that you would never see in the pages of a mainstream column.

Ian: Absolutely wonderful. Well, I think maybe Meredith will pop back up and we can do some Q&A.

Meredith: Thank you so much for such an interesting conversation. I knew when the very first story out the gate was about a woman who anonymously wrote into an advice column with no questions and a completely fabricated back story that we would get into some really great stuff, and you guys did not disappoint. So we have some questions for you. First of all, a question or a request, Julie, if you could talk more about how you researched the circulation and the readership of the different newspapers, where you got that data and how granular it was.

Julie: Oh, I just love the person who asked that question because I get to tell you about the burdens of my research. It was very difficult to do. So there are newspaper circulation directories. There are really two, I would say. Rowell's and then Ayer's are the two major circ directories. Selected circ -- like five circ directories over a period of time and so, I tracked the newspapers and circulation changes so essentially -- and I lay out this, the sort of the details of my [inaudible] methodology to this in the book and forgive me if I don't get it all right here. But it's in a very, very long footnote in the book. But I was looking for basically bigger cities because I wanted to -- one of my key research questions was tracking this idea of anonymous community and it was clear to me that like if there was an advice column in like a small farm town like that -- there was no anonymity there, right? So I was very much looking for urban papers. So I looked at circulation newspapers, and the top, I think, five cities in each state and then in the state or like under my population threshold I just -- I [inaudible]. And then I basically created charts where I tracked circ numbers over time over about -- I think it's about 50 years. And that was the kind of the raw data that I used to then select newspapers that I wanted to feature. And so, I was looking to get a really diverse roster of newspapers so many newspapers were still -- still had political affiliations at that time so I wanted to get diversity in political affiliation. I wanted to get diversity of newspaper conglomerates versus independently-owned newspapers. There was a mix of both at that time. I wanted to get working class versus what we call home newspapers. I wanted to look at newspapers that were short lived and others that had very long histories. And then, my last major criteria was can I access these through a microfilm? So the majority of newspapers that I charted in this, I think I charted something like 350 newspaper circulation over several decades, you know, majority of them don't exist in microfilm. You know, they are just small or they were impossible to get to, you know. So the question was like, how could I actually effectively do my research? I did some research here at the library, obviously, before I worked here and then I did a lot of it at the Library of Congress where they ILL-ed a lot of stuff to me.

Meredith: And did you track this data in like Excel or an Access --

Julie: Yeah.

Meredith: Excel, OK.

Julie: I used an Excel sheet for the circ data and then I used a FileMaker database to track a bunch of things. I used it to do all of my archival research and because I wanted to keyword it

and I also wanted to code it by type, so promotional material, syndicate material, you know, all different kind of letters, that kind of thing which I have to say, you know, we could have a whole other conversation about how to useful FileMaker was for me. I would not be able to -- I would not have been able to complete the book had I not built that FileMaker database and to be able to access my brain from 10 years ago, right? So I also used that to track my newspapers. These were all on one database and I had sort of relational subdatabases in them [inaudible]. I also used it to track which archives I went to and then I had one other function in it. No, that's enough. It was a very big database.

Meredith: This program is brought to you by FileMaker.

Julie: FileMaker.

Meredith: Just kidding.

Julie: ™.

Meredith: You know, I think that's often a struggle for scholars and researchers is you're generating so much data especially you're doing a very like quantitative, macro landscape review and that's, you know, half the battle is just figuring out what you want to look for and how you want to keep track of it.

Julie: I would say if there are researchers out there working on this kind of stuff that are struggling with organizing their data, this is something that we've been really interested in doing programming about here at the library, is having conversations with people about how to build databases, what kinds of databases are best, open source versus proprietary, that kind of thing. Feel free to shoot me an email because it will be really useful to know if that will be useful for our patrons.

Meredith: So our next question is, someone is curious, was there a similar convention that the different advice columnists followed when they composed their responses to readers? Like were there overarching themes in terms of how they responded?

Julie: So among the biggest advice columnists, these people were receiving like a thousand letters a day, you know. I mean, and actually, one thing that I found really I think important to understand is like despite many of the problematic things that I just described about, a lot of the advice columns I looked at, this was a very professionalized experience for them. This was a very taxing job for them. Many of them saw themselves as kind of almost like public mouthpieces for like New Deal America, for like a bureaucracy that now offered more and more resources to Americans. And so, they wrote into, like, you know, the children's bureau, they wrote in -- they worked with organizations related to adoption. They worked with the military in order to get information for their readers. They were committed to writing a letter back to everyone who sent a self-addressed stamped envelope.

And so, if you're getting a thousand letters a day to speak to this -- attend to this question, yes, there were certainly canned answers that they gave to things. And so, you know, many of them would get, you know, very similar questions. Questions, should I leave? Should I get a divorce? Do you know what I mean? And most of them were not published, of course. And so, they created a set of standardized answers and then employed a core of secretaries, sometimes self employed by them and sometimes employed by their syndicate, if they were syndicated who would then answer these on their behalf. But every single person got an answer no matter whether it was published in the paper or not. So it's important to remember that these were entertainment sort of vehicles as well and so, letters were selected and featured in order to kind of further that ultimate goal of as much readership as possible. But advice columnists saw themselves as a form of therapists and I think that is very much a through-line from these origins through Dear Abby and Ann Landers and up until today.

Ian: I have a question. So newspapers were obviously different back in the times that we're talking about in the 20s, 30s, the teens than they are today. So did the advice columns, were they like in the morning, late and final editions? Were they just in like the Sunday or like how were they dispersed throughout that print run?

Julie: Very different depending on the newspaper, right? And so, oftentimes morning editions were geared more toward workers, right? And their circulation was very much focused on, like, buying onsite, right? Home papers were often called afternoon papers, right? And so, sometimes newspapers would only publish what they might call feature content in that. Some papers only published in the morning or the afternoon, right? And so, obviously, the advice columns would go on daily. Most advice columns by, I would say about 1920, were running at least one daily column, likely multiples in your Sunday and this is partially made possible because of syndication. And so, another key thing is that a lot of -- almost all American newspapers ran some kind of syndicated advice column and then some would also employ their own. So they would have a local advice column. But as a rule, these were almost always the most [inaudible]. So that Experience column that Brownie Wise/Hibiscus wrote into, this was a local column. They talked about the Detroit Institute of Art. They talked about where they like to go to eat. They talked about, you know, where they lived in the city. And it allowed them to foster a much more tailored and hands-on conversation. But also those tended to run in newspapers that were really monetized, that had the money to support this, right? But it also benefited them greatly. With the growing sort of consolidation of newspapers, corporatization of the newspaper that really comes to a head in the late 20th century, these kinds of local hands-on communities just can't really exist anymore. But that is also when we start to see the rise of internet columns.

Meredith: I think that's also an interesting question, Ian, because, you know, and Julie you mentioned different editions that can also play in terms of how you approach your research since when libraries are -- when microfilm is being made, it's often just a single edition. You know, it affects how these things survive and how we're able to research them after the fact. So another question, did you come across any similar columns in Europe at the same time period

or were you focused more on American advice columns?

Julie: So I was very focused on American advice columns and part of this is that I just had to make a series of limiting decisions on what I had the capacity to research. So this is I think the most important thing to know about researching newspapers, is that it's just -- it's vast. You'll never touch even remotely close to like 1% of what you want to actually touch. You know what I mean? And so, this is actually why a lot of people don't write about newspapers, is because they're beasts to really study thoroughly, you know. I mean, again, I looked at, you know, 50, 60 or so years of newspapers. I only looked at one week a year and it took me -- in like 35, 36 newspapers, it took me two years to do that. You know what I mean? It was just so -- it was a remarkable slog, you know. So all this to say is I did not spend time looking in Europe. You can see from secondary sources that there very much are advice columns in European newspapers as well. I will say, related to this there are also advice columns in foreign language newspapers in the United States as well. Those also did not make it into my study in part because I don't speak those languages and in part because those were I think a different particular kind of ethnic community, kind of debate and conversation that falls somewhat outside the kind of arguments I was trying to make about mass audience.

Meredith: So I think we have one last question for you and it's mine. So I was curious because when you're talking about the ideal advice column reader, you know, you have this sort of representative upper middle class woman. But then you have -- who's kind of domestic and consuming, but then you have the advice columnist herself which, if this isn't a Miss Lonelyhearts scenario, is a woman and she is present on a staff that is predominantly male. So I'm wondering was there -- how much of a voice did these women have in the editorial process at their jobs? And was there any tension between the kind of persona that she was presenting with her business and her profession?

Julie: This is a great question and there is a little bit of a catch-22 to it which is that the advice columnists that I was able to dig deep on and profile, I was able to because they were so successful, right? And so they, you know, they were powerful as a result, right? And so, they had archives and they left them to, you know, archives and I was able to research in them versus like your, you know, like just kind of small, local reporter who might have taken on an advice column whose experience is, based on my research, are essentially less to the historical record. Like there are no business records related to this, like they didn't write memoirs, like I have no way of accessing that kind of local advice column, these particular experiences. But we can make some broad observations here, Meredith. One of them is that, while newspapers across the country, Black and white, small and large, had overwhelmingly male editorial staff, there was a big shift in the beginning of the 20th century toward bringing on women editorial staff to manage women's content, right? And so, actually, if you look at some of the literature at that time, there's all kinds of articles about the the efficiency of having a woman overseeing this. This is like a very, you know, essentialist argument, like, you know, only women can actually cover, you know, cooking, you know. And so, it's better to have them editing. So a lot of these advice columnists were answering to women editors here. Now, those women were, those

women editors were making a lot less than the ones who are overseeing, you know, the news people. You know, they were -- there was still significant marginalization on their part. But a number of advice columnists and other women reporters at that time described how they were kind of left alone in some cases to do their work so that's -- I think that is not something that I would say was the case across the board but was certainly an experience for some. Now, once you get into our Dorothy Dix's or Beatrice Fairfax's, these women -- after a certain point of success, you were almost always going to sign with a syndicate. You were going to make a lot more money that way, right? And so, at some point, a Dorothy Dix is not working with the editorial board at a newspaper. They are working with their massive syndicate conglomerate to build this content and then basically have it telegraphed across the country each day. And so, at that point in that person's career, they actually do have a pretty significant amount of kind of like intellectual independence in the work that they're doing but also, the knowledge of what makes for a successful column in the sense that they are not going to -- they're not going to, you know, rattle the cage too much with the kind of content that they're putting up because they know what people want to see.

Meredith: So, I hadn't -- yeah, that's a great point about the syndicated level of it where you're like, you're beyond even a particular paper, but then you've got your brand.

Julie: You are a brand at that point which, again, I think speaks to how a lot of the origins of our digital media environment today kind of unknowingly have roots in this tradition that has kind of largely been forgotten. And not in Dear Abby and Ann Landers but in a much earlier, much more hands-on iteration of the advice column that [inaudible] these conversations in the pages of the newspaper that weren't possible before that time.

Meredith: Until you unearthed them in your book. So I think that is a great place to wrap things up, also because we're almost out of time. So in closing, I just want to recirculate the links to Julie's book launch and the link to purchase her book. So those are in the chat now. Up on the screen you'll see how to get in touch with us, if you want to reach out to our website or our Twitter handle or our newsletter. And I also want to share that our next Work/Cited program is going to be on June 9th. We're going to be joined by Lyudmila Sholokhova here at the New York Public Library. She's the curator of the Dorot Jewish collection and she's going to be speaking with scholar, Jonathan Schorsch, about his research into the life of Luis Moses Gomez and his family of prominent Sephardic merchants in the 18th century New York City landscape. So stay tuned. All attendees to this Zoom will receive a follow-up email with a link both to the recording of this talk and a link to register for our next talk if you are still inclined to join us and we hope that you do. And that will be actually our last Work/Cited before we take a summer hiatus so that you can all go out and enjoy the sunshine and not be tied to your screens and then, we'll be back in the fall. So once again, I just want to thank Ian and Julie for joining us and for a fascinating conversation and thank you all for joining in and for asking questions and for being engaged and we look forward to seeing you next month.