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The Role of Marie Skłodowska-Curie's 1921 U.S. Visit And Its Coverage in *The New York Times* in Shaping the Global Phenomenon of Her Legacy

This article examines the role of Marie Skłodowska-Curie's 1921 visit to the United States, its extensive coverage in *The New York Times* and the possible influence it might have had in shaping the global phenomenon of her legacy. Orchestrated by journalist Missy Meloney, Curie's visit captured the American imagination through a compelling blend of scientific purpose and human interest. The donation of a gram of radium for her research, coupled with widespread admiration and media attention, marked a turning point in both Curie's international reputation and public perception of women in science. Central to this transformation was *The New York Times*, whose articles between February and September 1921 constructed a narrative of perseverance, sacrifice and scientific heroism. Through close analysis of these articles, alongside historical records and Curie's own reflections, the study explores how media framing contributed to her mythologization and helped anchor her status as a scientific icon. By tracing this media-mediated legacy, the article highlights the enduring influence of press narratives in shaping historical memory and the public vaporization of scientific achievement.

Keywords: Marie Skłodowska-Curie, Mme Curie, phenomenon, American press, *The New York Times*, legacy, the USA

Introduction

The phenomenon of Marie Skłodowska-Curie is well established internationally, her role as a pioneering scientist sealed. She became a symbol of persistence, gender equality in science and intellectual striving for excellence. Her legacy continues to resonate globally, influencing both the scientific community and wider society. Marie Curie's inner world can be viewed from several contemporary perspectives, which only strengthen her legacy. Those attributes became characteristic features of her persona, and after so many decades since her passing, resonate as strongly as ever. Quinn notes that: "The triumphal version of Marie Curie's life tends to portray her as impervious to these defeats and humiliations" (Quinn 1995, 14).

The article attempts to investigate how media representations contributed to the construction and dissemination of Marie Skłodowska-Curie's international image during the early 20th century. Drawing on press materials from *The New York Times* published between Feb 7 and Sep 23, 1921, the study explores how journalistic narratives surrounding Curie's visits influenced public perception of her scientific achievements, gender identity and symbolic status in both scientific and sociopolitical spheres. By situating these articles within the broader context of transatlantic cultural exchange and the emerging discourse on women in science, the research aims to trace the formation of Curie's legacy as a global scientific icon.

The research

Utilizing methods of discourse analysis, the study delves into the linguistic, rhetorical and thematic structures of the articles to uncover the ideological frameworks and narrative strategies employed by the media. This approach allows for a critical examination of how language and representation shaped Ms (French: *Madame/Mme*) Curie's public image. The article attempts to answer the following research questions: 1) How did *The New York Times* represent Marie Skłodowska-Curie during her 1921 visit to the United States?; 2) In what ways did these representations reflect or challenge contemporary attitudes towards women in science and public life?; 3) How did the media's portrayal contribute to the transatlantic construction of Curie's legacy as a scientific and cultural icon?; 4) What rhetorical and narrative strategies were used to elevate Curie's image within American public discourse?

When Missy Meloney met Marie Skłodowska-Curie

Marie (Missy) Meloney, an American journalist, had been striving for years to meet the renowned physicist and chemist, Professor Marie Skłodowska-Curie, hoping to interview her and gain insights into her groundbreaking work. After persistent efforts, Meloney's dream came true in May 1920. Meloney recalls:

"The door opened, and I saw a pale, timid little woman in a black cotton dress, with the saddest face I had ever looked upon. Her kind, patient, beautiful face had the detached expression of a scholar. Suddenly, I felt like an intruder. My timidity exceeded her own. I had been a trained interrogator for twenty years, but I could not ask a single question of this gentle woman in a black cotton dress. I tried to explain that American women were interested in her great work and found myself apologising for intruding upon her precious time." (Curie E., Ch. 23)

It was by no means an easy task. Due to painful experiences with the press (especially the French press), the scholar had a habit of ignoring non-scientific meeting proposals. This situation was a consequence of an article with the telling title *The Love Story of Mrs Curie and Professor Langevin*, published on November 4, 1911, in *Le Journal*. Shelley Emling notes: "Not surprisingly, he told her that the reclusive researcher would see no reporter as she absolutely abhorred publicity, preferring instead to stay in the background. He was right. Stung by the hyperbolic judgments of the press during the Langevin scandal, Marie avoided the media at all costs" (Emling, Ch. 3). The hostility of the French towards Marie Curie was attributed to the publication of letters addressed to Paul, some of which were fabricated, provoking widespread outrage among the French public. Marie Curie was accused of attempting to disrupt the unity of the Langevin family, with sensationalist media outlets asserting: "Concern should rather be directed towards the French mother, who (...) seeks only the welfare of her children. (...) Public sympathy aligns with this mother, not with the foreigner (...). All French mothers stand in solidarity with the victim, not with her persecutors" (Emling, Ch. 1). Consequently, reaching Professor Curie must have presented a significant challenge for a journalist, yet Missy Meloney appeared to comprehend the circumstances surrounding Marie Curie's position. As a result, she chose to send a personal letter to her. Her note to Marie Curie said, "My father, who was a medical man, wrote: 'It is impossible to exaggerate the unimportance of people.' But you have been important to me for twenty years, and I want to see you for

a few minutes" (Quinn 2011, Ch. 17). Susan Quinn concludes that perhaps due to the humiliations she endured related to the Langevin affair, Curie was particularly sensitive to any signs of respect and admiration. Such especially favorable gestures of support were coming from the United States. In one of her letters, Loie Fuller, an American dancer who had met the scientist and her husband several years earlier, comforted Marie, assuring her of the affection she felt for her and urging her not to be concerned with the lies, ending with the words *C'est la vie!* (Emling, Ch. 1). However, it seems more significant that Marie Curie also received material support from the United States. For example, in 1907, many years before her trip, she received funding for research and scholarships for her employees from philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, who was also a personal admirer of the scientist (Ogilvie, 85). The above-mentioned positive gestures may have influenced her final decision to travel, particularly at a time when she felt like a *persona non grata* in France. The opportunity to leave could not have come at a more opportune moment. In response to those flattering words, Marie Curie granted Missy Meloney an interview. To the journalist's surprise, she was not confronted with a spectacular female scientist. On the contrary, she faced an ordinary, modest lady conducting her groundbreaking scientific work in a substandard laboratory and residing in an average apartment. The meeting, initially intended to serve as an interview with the scholar, transformed into a conversation about America and the amount of radium present within its borders. The journalist realized that the inventor of the infamous element, which America was actively utilizing at the time, did not possess enough of the precious mineral to conduct research and continue her work. Eve Curie cites the conversation between her mother and the journalist: "America, she said, has about fifty grams of radium. Four of these are in Baltimore, six in Denver, seven in New York. 'She went on, naming the location of every grain. And in France? I asked. My laboratory has hardly more than a gram. You have only a gram?' I? Oh, I have none. It belongs to my laboratory" (Curie E., 323). Soon after, Missy Meloney arrived at the conclusion that she must find a way to offer much needed assistance. Therefore, she asked Professor Curie, "What would you like to possess most?" And Curie replied gently: "I need a gram of radium to continue my research (...)" (Curie E., 324). Their exchange proved a pivotal moment, filling Meloney with a new sense of purpose and Marie with a new source of funds and goodwill. Most importantly, a beautiful, lifelong friendship was born. Quinn notes that "there was something about Missy Meloney and about what she had to offer, that appealed to Marie Curie" (Quinn 2011, Ch. 17). The observed modesty of the two-time

Nobel laureate, along with the conditions under which she conducted her research, left a powerful impression on the journalist. As a result, she resolved to correct the injustice that had befallen the scientist sitting before her. The belief in the possibility of overcoming the social injustice Maria Curie faced, as perceived by the journalist, led to the organization of a fundraising campaign to raise a substantial sum of money for a gram of radium, enabling the Nobel laureate to continue her scientific work.

To illustrate the scale of the undertaking to Marie Curie, whether consciously or not, journalist Meloney compelled her to travel, presenting it as a moral imperative resulting from the acceptance of the gift – radium:

“The generous American women offered Marie Curie inestimable help; but in exchange, they asked her gently, amicably: ‘Why should you not come to see us? We want to know you.’ Marie hesitated. She had always fled from the crowd. The trials and display of a visit to America, the one country in the world that most thirsted after publicity, terrified her. Mrs Meloney insisted and swept her objections away one by one. ‘You say you don’t want to leave your daughters? We invite your daughters too. Ceremonies tire you? We shall draw up the most reasonable and limited programme of receptions. Come! We shall make it a fine journey for you, and the gram of radium will be solemnly presented to you at the White House by the President of the United States in person.’”

(Curie E., 324-324)

Meloney went even further. She promised to limit Marie’s public appearances. She promised to go to Europe and make the trip across the Atlantic with her. Most significantly, she promised to muzzle the American press so that no reporter would mention the Langevin scandal. From a purely selfish point of view, Meloney also realized that resurrecting the love affair could backfire and set back the fundraising effort (Emling, Ch. 3). Through immense persistence and determination, the journalist, previously unknown to Marie Curie, organized the initiative within just a few months and successfully executed a fundraising campaign to procure a gram of radium. In her autobiographical notes, Curie wrote:

“The idea was that the gift would come exclusively from the American women. A committee, including several prominent women and distinguished scientific men, received some important gifts and made an appeal for a public subscription, to which a great number of women’s organisations, especially colleges and clubs, responded. In many cases, gifts came from persons who had experienced the benefit of radiotherapy. In this way, the ‘Marie Curie Radium Fund’ of more than one hundred thousand dollars was collected for the purchase of

a gramme of radium. The President of the United States, Mr Harding, kindly agreed to deliver the gift in a ceremony at the White House." (Curie M., Ch. 4)

Initially, the organizer intended to raise funds from a small group of the wealthiest women, with each contributing ten thousand dollars. However, this proved unfeasible, as even these amounts were too high for them. Ms Meloney decided to collect donations in much smaller amounts – ranging from one to five dollars. Thus, the fundraising campaign began, alongside a planned media initiative aimed at introducing Marie Curie to American women. "Missy Meloney turned out to be a brilliant fundraiser. [...] Her fundraising methods were a faithful mirror of the story she had chosen to tell about Marie Curie" (Quinn 1995, 389).

Marie Curie's image in the United States

American press outlets played a key role in this effort, publishing flattering articles about her long before the scholar's arrival in the United States. The numerous articles in prominent American newspapers dedicated to Marie Curie were a result of the increased activity of journalist Meloney. Her desire to promote the fundraising campaign and ensure a positive outcome led to the publication of many articles about the scholar's discoveries and her life, thereby reinforcing the image of Curie in the American context – an image that continues to be recognized. Consequently, "If asked to name a woman scientist, most Americans would probably mention Marie Curie (...)" (Rossiter, 312-323).

The terms frequently used in articles from 1921 to describe the scholar ultimately became identifiers for her persona, synonymous with both "woman" and "scientist" – two terms that had rarely been associated together until then. The American press, lavish in its praise, regarded Marie Curie as the preeminent scientist, a pioneer and a "priestess of science" (Krzyk, 239). The article dedicated to the scholar was titled *Mme Curie Called Greatest Scientist; Professor Pupin Pays Her Tribute for Helping to Create New Theory of Physics. Prediction Made That Her Research Will Serve to Hasten Cure of Cancer in All Forms (Mme. Curie Called Greatest..., May 18, 1921)*. For many American women, the arrival of the scholar represented an opportunity for firsthand engagement with an icon of the scientific world at the beginning of the 20th century. It served as proof that a woman could achieve comparable, if not greater, success than that attained by countless men and the few women who had succeeded, among whom

was one every American woman could support. This had significant psychological implications and aligned with another key value of American society: the "Yes! We can!" slogan. Finally, American women were able to undertake the great task of assisting the distinguished researcher, whose work was intended to benefit them all, both directly and indirectly — by altering men's attitudes towards American women and by providing radium, which could potentially cure those suffering from cancer. Marie appeared as the embodiment of the hopes and dreams of the American nation: a woman who achieved professional success while also being a devoted mother. She was now about to receive the honors she deserved. Marie Curie wrote:

"The American nation is generous and always ready to appreciate an action inspired by considerations of general interest. If the discovery of radium has so much sympathy in America, it is not only because of its scientific value and the importance of medical utilisation; it is also because the discovery has been given to humanity without reservation or material benefits to the discoverers. Our American friends wanted to honor this spirit animating French science."

(Curie M., Ch. 4)

Prior to the scholar's arrival in the United States on February 7, 1921 — four months before the ship on which she was to board was set to dock — an announcement appeared in the American press titled *Radium Gift Awaits Madame Curie*, revealing plans for her visit to America:

"Mme. Marie Curie, co-discoverer, with her late husband, of radium, is to visit this country in May and will remain here for a long visit. This was announced yesterday by Dr. F. C. Wood of the Croker Memorial Cancer Research Laboratory, who heads a committee of scientists which will receive the distinguished Frenchwoman. She will be accompanied by her daughter Mlle. Irene Curie, also a scientist although just 20 years old. Mme. Curie visit will be the result of an invitation by Mrs. William Brown Meloney, editor of *The Delineator*, and while in this city she will make her home with Mrs. Meloney at 31 West Twelfth Street." (*Radium Gift Awaits Mme. Curie...*, Feb 7, 1921)

The extensive article recounted facts from the scholar's life, detailing her background, marriage and scientific work. The author summarized the history of her research and that of her late husband, the discovery of polonium and radium and the work they put into these discoveries. The author speculated on what motivated her to work day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year to provide results that would ultimately benefit the world. He also pointed out her lack of a patent, which in

his view highlighted her uniqueness among other scientists — her selflessness and her current dire financial situation.

Just before the start of her visit, *The New York Times*, then a leading and highly popular newspaper, published additional extensive articles dedicated to Marie. In the article titled *Madame Curie's Genius. Career of Scientist Forecast in Her Predilections as a Child*, published on May 1, 1921, the scholar's biography was presented. It focused on her childhood, emphasizing the role of her upbringing, which, according to the author, influenced the scholar's personality. The highlighting of her difficult life circumstances was likely intended to capture the readers' interest, evoke respect and showcase the scholar's diligence. Emphasizing traits such as her care and devotion to her family and staff was likely aimed at underscoring her more subtle, feminine side, so that she could serve as a role model even for those who still demanded a more traditional role for women in society. Furthermore, the hardships she faced, both in her childhood and in her professional life — evoking sympathy — were intended to stimulate readers to take a more active part in the fundraising efforts. The emphasis on the steadfastness of her goals, her determination in pursuing them and the sacrifices she made elevated the presented image, while an aura of mystery enhanced curiosity and her humility fostered respect. The author painted Marie in the following way:

"With honors heaped upon her, he writes, she remains the same unobtrusive, reserved person that I saw in the tumbledown shanty that the City of Paris gave to M. Curie for a laboratory and a school for chemistry. She is a little better dressed now than then, but with extreme plainness. The complexion is still that of one brought up in stove-heated rooms, ashen, and the lustreless hair unchanged in all but a few silver threads. She remains hard to read, a consequence of being brought up at Warsaw under the heel of the Russian boot and the eyes of an officialdom, jealous of all scientific investigation. (...) she apparently had got to that state in which joy has no balm and affiliation no sting." (*Madame Curie's Genius...*, May 1, 1921)

Madame Curie visits the USA

On the 4th of May, Marie Curie began her journey with her daughters and journalist Meloney, travelling to Cherbourg, located on the northern coast of France. There, aboard the ship *Olympic*, she embarked on a transatlantic voyage to New York, on the eastern coast of the United States. (Curie M.,

Ch. 4) The ship was headed for the port on Ellis Island, where the Statue of Liberty, situated nearby, greeted vessels arriving in the United States. The scholar's arrival was meticulously planned. Among those awaiting her were numerous women's associations, including doctors and nurses, all eager to meet the female scientist. Maria was presented with several bouquets and a red leather handbag. This took place amid the playing of three national anthems — American, French and Polish — with flags from these countries waving in the hands of hundreds of people gathered for the occasion. Emling notes:

"On that first day in America, even after having survived the realities of a week-long, numbingly cold 3,000-mile crossing of the Atlantic, the fifty-three-year-old was judged by a New York Times reporter to be 'energy personified ... walking with a quick step. Several of those at the pier spoke of the clearness of her eyes and the lively interest she took in everything she saw.' Marie had spent most of her trip from France holed up in her cabin, a bridal suite arranged for her by Meloney. No doubt Marie's quick gait had more to do with wanting to flee from the mob as fast as possible than with any sort of laudable energy level. From the ocean liner, the Curie women were whisked away after the press conference in a limousine sent by Andrew Carnegie's widow to Meloney's Greenwich Village home at 31 West Twelfth Street. Marie thought it charming." (Emling, Ch. 4)

Given her distinguished status, the scholar, Professor Curie, was allowed to disembark directly from the dock, bypassing the immigration procedures, or these were significantly expedited. In fact, Mme Curie, sitting for a prolonged period in a chair, was greeted by photographers and prominent guests, patiently answering questions while still aboard the ship.

The scholar described the journey and its planning as overwhelming, analyzing its course with remarkable precision in her autobiography, calling it unforgettable. Indeed, the journey was impressive; in contemporary terms, it would be referred to as a tour. By 20th-century standards, it was undoubtedly a grand undertaking but also, according to journalist Meloney, a gesture of appropriate respect. Maria summarized her American visit as follows:

"The following day we went for a visit of a few days to Smith College and Vassar College, a few hours from New York. Later, I also visited the colleges of Bryn Mawr and Wellesley, and I saw some others on my way. (...) Back in New York, several ceremonies awaited me before my leaving for Washington:

a luncheon of the Chemists, a reception at the Museum of Natural History and the Mineralogical Club, a dinner at the Institute of Social Sciences and a great meeting at Carnegie Hall, where many delegations represented the faculties and students of women's colleges and universities. At all these receptions, I was greeted with warm addresses by prominent men and women, and I received honours very precious to me because of the sincerity of the givers. (...) It was in this atmosphere of affection, created by the convergence of intellectual and social sympathies, that there took place on May 20th the beautiful ceremony at the White House. It was a deeply moving ceremony in all its simplicity, occurring before a democratic gathering, including the President and Mrs Harding, cabinet officers, Judges of the Supreme Court, high officers of the Army and Navy, foreign diplomats, representatives of women's clubs and societies and prominent citizens of Washington and other cities. It comprised a short presentation by the French ambassador, M. Jusserand, a speech by Mrs Meloney for the American women, the address of President Harding, a few words of gratitude said by me, a defile of the guests and a group picture for a souvenir, all this in the admirable setting of the White House, peaceful and dignified, white indeed between its green lawns with wide prospects on that beautiful afternoon of May." (Curie M., Ch. 4)

While the scholar was in the United States, a comprehensive article titled *The History of Radium* was published in *The New York Times* on May 15, 1921. It presented key moments from the scholar's life that led to the discovery of the element. The most significant aspect was that it was referred to as "therapeutic", which seemed to be a groundbreaking development in shaping the image of Marie Curie in the United States. In the 19th century, cancer was primarily treated through radical surgical procedures. However, after the discovery of radium and the publication of scientific papers on its destructive effects on tissues, doctors began experimenting with placing ampoules containing microscopic doses of radium or radon as close as possible to the tumour site. This may have been one of the reasons why the scholar was so warmly embraced by both scientists and the general public. Undoubtedly, it was primarily Meloney who contributed to the popularization of the myth that Madame Curie's work represented a cure for cancer, which was highly advantageous in securing funding. Susan Quinn wrote:

"Yet another, more dangerous myth was promoted by Missy Meloney's campaign: that Marie Curie could find a cure for cancer. The April 1921 issue of *The Delineator*, which orchestrated the campaign, opened with an editorial headlined THAT MILLIONS SHALL NOT DIE! And Missy Meloney's

hagiographic profile of Marie Curie in the same issue ended dramatically thus: "And life is passing and the great Curie getting older, and the world losing, God alone knows, what great secret. And millions are dying of cancer every year!" (Quinn 2011, Ch. 17)

Undoubtedly, the scholar's stay in the United States was influenced by the deeply rooted American fundamentalism, which developed from Christianity (Puritanism), as well as the growing strength of feminism. The increasing prominence of science in America was evident, with people venerating science and its foundational principles. Ewa Curie pointed out that since 1870, "women in America have been surrounded by privileges and attention unknown in the Old World." Margaret W. Rossiter highlights numerous examples of women in scientific organisations. In America, women could join The California Academy of Sciences as early as 1853, the year of its founding. Rachel Bodley, dean of the Women's Medical University of Philadelphia, joined the American Chemical Society in 1876, while Mary E. Pennington became a member of the Biological-Chemical Society in 1907. Charlotte Scott helped establish the American Mathematical Society in 1894, and Marcia Keith and Isabelle Stone were co-founders of the American Physical Society. It seems that Marie's persona played a key role in bridging the conflicting views of traditional Christian depictions of women — mother and homemaker — and the more Darwinian, emancipated image of the woman as a scientist. Marie was seen as a gentle fusion of these two distinct elements, connecting tradition with modernity: the paradigm of the traditional woman (mother, wife, homemaker) with the paradigm of the modern woman pursuing a professional career. Indeed, American progress allowed women to access education much more rapidly, but true equality was still far from being achieved. Rossiter claims that:

"The women were employed at women's colleges and in low echelons elsewhere, where they were less visible, had less access to research facilities, fewer stimulating colleagues and heavier teaching loads. Perhaps worst of all, there was much less incentive for them to persevere to overcome their obstacles, for there was no place else for them to go. The generally low level of accomplishment among women scientists and their virtual segregation raises the question of whether they really were a part of the profession." (Rossiter, 312-323)

Rossiter's conclusion presents a paradox by overlooking the most important aspect: Marie Curie's visit to America contributed to increasing the involvement of American women in the public and professional spheres. This could not be undone. Here, then, was the Messiah who led women

out of the “land of Egypt”, out of the house of social captivity, showing them a new way of life, pointing out a goal and providing a path. With some exaggeration, but in line with the rules of American mythology, one could say that, three hundred years after the arrival of the *Mayflower*, another emissary from Europe — the *Olympic* — docked on the shores of America, marking the beginning of a new era in the lives of American women. Because the *Olympic* was the twin of the *Titanic* and did not sink, the myth could spread with great force, as it was accompanied by symbols of optimism.

During Marie Curie’s visit to America, readers could find certain parallels between the events of her life and their own experiences, thanks to numerous publications: “In exchange for a successful fundraising campaign, Marie had to make a concession and agreed to serve as living proof to American women fighting for women’s rights that a woman could be just as intelligent and achieve as much as a man. She could do nothing about the fact that she became an object of adoration.” The challenges in obtaining an education, the harassment and the more widespread aversion towards women in this field were not unknown in America. As a result, American women had fewer opportunities to secure paid positions and were more often unemployed. Only a few succeeded in combating discrimination and entering the scientific workforce to dedicate themselves to it professionally.

To illustrate the position of women in American science during the time of Curie’s visit, one must refer to data regarding their participation in science. In 1906, James McKeen Cattell, a professor of psychology at Columbia University and editor of *Science*, published the first edition of *American Men of Science*. In this compilation, he listed 149 women, representing only 3.6% of all scientists included in the list of 4,131. In the second edition, published in 1910, there were 204 women, which, when compared to the number of men, accounted for only 3.5%. It wasn’t until 1921 that the number of women in science doubled to 459, resulting in a 4.8% female participation. One cannot help but feel that this may have been an effect of Marie Curie’s visit to the United States. The entirety of the Nobel laureate’s impressive achievements becomes even more remarkable when considering the obstacles present in her life. In Europe, the persistent resistance to creating the image of a woman scientist seemed to hinder the recognition of Madame Curie’s work. As a result, there were numerous instances where the Nobel laureate’s contributions were undervalued by other scientists or attempts were made to downplay her accomplishments. An example of this neglect is seen in the fact that initially, the Nobel Prize was awarded solely to

Pierre Curie for their work on radioactivity, excluding Marie Curie (Krzyk, 242-243). Additionally, Marie Curie's candidacy for membership in the prestigious Académie Française was rejected, as French scientists were not ready to admit a woman into their ranks. These negative experiences likely sparked admiration among members of countless women's organizations, female university students and ordinary American women, for whom the scholar became one of their own due to her multitude of experiences, serving as a role model to emulate.

The expansion of radium's use to include its therapeutic properties ensured the media success of Marie Curie's visit. The supposed benefits of the element discovered by the scholar were highlighted in another article titled *Madame Curie's Plans for the Eradication of All Forms of Cancer*. The article conveyed the message that radium could even treat the most advanced stages of cancer. (*Mme Curie Plans to End All Cancers...*, May 12, 1921) In this way, Marie Curie's discovery was linked to the therapeutic properties of radium. This approach was intended to facilitate the quicker gathering of funds and secure the goodwill of the Americans towards the scholar. The aim was to convince the undecided public, and to achieve this, numerous articles were published that described the scholar, her achievements and the impact of her discoveries on science and its progress, either directly or indirectly. The association of the element discovered by Marie Curie with medicinal properties was once again reflected in an article from March 7, 1921, in which Americans had the opportunity to read an unequivocal statement: *Cancer deaths are becoming increasingly common among us*. Similarly, representatives from the New York Department of Health published a report informing the public about the rising mortality rate among cancer patients, which in New York City was reported to have reached 6.6%. Quinn emphasizes: "Although she was convinced of the practical use for radium, it was a fascination for pure science that motivated Marie Curie. However, her absorption with the basic structure of matter would not have appealed to the general public as much as radium's potential to fight the dreaded disease, cancer" (Ogilvie, 115). Susan Quinn attributed the source of the public's interest, with the scholar at its centre, to the gratitude of individuals who were supposedly cured by the effects of the element. Supposedly, Meloney's home was inundated with flowers for Madame Curie from friends and admirers who knew of her fondness for flowers. One such gesture of gratitude was sent by a gardener who, having been cured of cancer through radium treatment, wanted to express his thanks by sending a large bouquet of roses, which, as he explained in the accompanying letter, he had cultivated over the course of two months. Madame Curie was convinced of the therapeutic

properties of radium, yet she herself corrected a publication from the previous day, which claimed that the substance was a cure for all types of cancer. Another time, a cheque for \$10,000 was received yesterday by the Marie Curie Radium Fund Committee located at 3 Macdougal Street. The donor's wish was for the amount to be allocated to a fund dedicated to purchasing a gram of radium, which was to be presented during Madame Curie's visit in May. The donor was a woman living in New York who had been cured as a result of radium therapy.

The journalist proved to be an excellent strategist, adept at appealing to human emotions and leveraging archetypal associations embedded in society to achieve her intended goal. Missy Meloney crafted an image portraying Marie Curie as a person living in poverty. In doing so, she used a comparison that would resonate with every Christian:

“(...) allusions to Marie Curie's poverty – and greatness – were sprinkled liberally throughout Missy's inflated prose. 'France is poor,' she wrote, 'and there is less than a gram of radium at the Radium Institute in Paris.' And then, going to a wild extreme, 'When Christ died on the cross, His name was not known five hundred miles from Calvary. And Madame Curie, who after long, hard years of struggle against resistant nature wrested from the earth the secret of radium, is too poor to purchase the precious stuff for further and much-needed experiments.'” (Quinn 2011, Ch. 17)

Moreover, numerous articles invoked her attributes, and in the previously mentioned article *Radium's Gift Awaits Madame Curie*, Marie was portrayed as a woman of extraordinary beauty. Her features were seen to reflect signs of suffering, patience and maternal care. Journalist Meloney, in support of this portrayal, recalled the scholar's stance, claiming that Marie Curie could not come to America because she could not leave her daughters: “How much meaning there is in this sentence; she cannot leave her children,” wrote the fascinated American journalist in her article, admiring her devotion.

William Brown Meloney accentuates selected elements of the scholar's life to create a desirable image, free of controversy, highlighting the positive aspects of her life and work while distancing it from politics, misogynistic prejudices and conflicts. The portrayal is based on egalitarian values, broadly understood equality and justice and helping those in need.

“The portrait, which was meant to meet the reader's expectations, was an element connecting two worlds – the European and the American. The ideal of a devoted mother was harmonised with the image of a scientist, while

conveniently omitting uncomfortable elements, such as atheism, which would certainly have been too radical a subject in the face of emerging shifts in world-view in the United States." (Krzyk, 249)

What made this image more comfortable was the fact that Marie Curie was closely bonded with her daughters. She did not raise them alone in their early years but had governesses to assist her, reflecting the norms of the time in educated Polish and French households. As they grew older, she maintained communication with them, often through letters, ensuring the flow of information, especially when the girls spent their summer holidays by the sea. The company of her daughters – elder Irene and younger Eva – during her visit to the United States contributed to the creation of an image of a scientist who was also a loving and caring mother. This depiction effectively countered the argument from opponents of women's involvement in science, who believed that such scientific work disrupted family life and was socially destructive.

Thus, the emphasis on Marie's attachment to her daughters and their care for her during the trip added to her image as a scholar – everywhere Marie Curie could not reach due to her declining health, her daughters stepped in for her: "The University of Pennsylvania today conferred Mme. Curie the degree of doctor of laws and the Women's Medical College gave her the degree of doctor of medicine. The honors were received for her by Mlle. Irene Curie, her eldest daughter, as she had become ill in Washington from fatigue and did not arrive here until 6 o'clock this evening" (*Honors for Mme Curie Received by Daughter...*, May 24, 1921). The image of the woman scientist and exemplary mother, achieved thanks to the journalist's efforts in the American press, became a bridge between conflicting Christian values and the nascent ideas of feminism. The visit of Marie Skłodowska-Curie cannot be disconnected from the so-called "women's issue". This occurred because it was primarily women's organizations that were engaged in fundraising efforts. The visit itself must have had a profound impact on the minds of many American women: here was a solitary woman, a foreigner, asking American women who sought self-determination for help. A woman who had achieved so much in the scientific world needed the support of solidarity from women to continue her life's work: "Marie Skłodowska-Curie did not directly engage in the campaign to improve the status of women, but one cannot avoid the impression that her visit had a great influence on many American women, allowing them to believe in their own abilities" (Krzyk, 252). Indeed, much needed to change in the minds and perceptions of women in America.

The most eagerly anticipated moment of the entire visit came on May 20, 1921, in the East Room, the largest room in the residence of the American presidents – the White House:

"The presentation ceremonies took place in the East Room of the White House in the presence of a notable group of American and diplomatic officials and leaders of science and philanthropy Jules Jusserand, French Ambassador, formally introduced Mme. Curie, and she responded to the President's presentation address with a little speech of thanks delivered in broken English. In handing over the little vial with its precious contents Mr. Harding declared it represented in small part the gratitude of the American Nation to its distinguished guest for the years of effort which culminated in the discovery of radium." (*Scientists' Medal Given Mme Curie ...*, May 20, 1921)

The long-awaited climax was about to unfold shortly, as in the same room gathered, in addition to President Harding, government officials, Supreme Court justices, members of women's clubs and associations and other residents of the capital and American cities. During the ceremony, the French Ambassador, Mr Jusserand, introduced the scientist, followed by a speech from the president. Madame Curie herself also addressed the assembled guests with a few words. The gift presented during the ceremony was merely symbolic – a small mahogany box reinforced with lead, to which the scientist received a symbolic key engraved with the inscription: *From the women of America to Madame Marie Curie*. In reality, a gram of radium was contained in twelve sealed glass ampoules, resting in a box lined with lead to prevent the radiation from escaping. On June 28, Marie Skłodowska-Curie's visit to the United States came to an end. The scientist boarded the same ship that had brought her to America. Marie bid farewell to the organiser of this extraordinary journey with the following words: "Let me look at you one more time, my dear," she said. "This may be the last time we meet." She thanked Meloney for everything, and the two embraced, shedding tears. Irena and Eva also said their goodbyes to their companion, who had made this extraordinary adventure possible for them" (Emling, Ch.5).

In a series of articles devoted to Marie Curie, *Many Notables Sail Abroad Tomorrow* – Jun 24, 1921, *Mme Curie Finds America a Marvel* – Jun 25, 1921 and *Mme Curie Back Home* – Jul 3, 1921, the authors described the final moments of the scientist's stay in America. At 2.00 p.m., she departed aboard the ship *Olympic* for Europe, accompanied by her daughters and twenty photographers eager to capture her image. The articles relayed the gratitude expressed by Skłodowska-Curie towards her American friends, while

also lamenting that her fragile health had prevented her from accepting all invitations. The newspaper suggested that the radium she obtained would contribute to her research in developing cancer treatment. As Em-ling observed, the scientist returned to France enriched not only by the radium. The scientist herself also commented on her stay on the American continent:

"I would not take the liberty, after so short a period of time, of giving an opinion on America and the Americans. I would only say how deeply I have been touched by the warm reception which was tendered everywhere to me and my daughters. Our hosts wanted to make us feel that we were not with strangers; and, on the other hand, many of them assured me that they felt entirely at home when on the soil of France. I returned to France with a feeling of gratitude for the precious gift of the American women, and with a feeling of affection for their great country, tied to ours by a mutual sympathy which gives confidence in a peaceful future for humanity." (Curie M., Ch. 4)

Maria Skłodowska-Curie, along with her daughters, returned to France. The Olympic ship arrived in Cherbourg on July 2, 1921, and the three of them boarded a train heading to Paris –

marking the end of the scientist's first trip to the United States. In one of the last articles dedicated to Madame Curie's stay, she shared her impressions and thanked the American public for the wonderful reception and the unforgettable visit: "I feel that I am part of three countries — the country of my birth, the country of my adoption and the country of my new friends," said Madame Curie yesterday while expressing her eternal gratitude for the American hospitality she experienced during her seven-week visit to our country.

""It is with much regret that I come to the last day of my visit in America," Mme. Curie said. "There has been only one disappointment, that has been my physical inability to do all the things I would wish to do and to meet all of the American people I much desire to meet. My work with radium, and especially during the war, has so damaged my health as to make it impossible for me to see many of the laboratories and colleges in which I have a genuine interest. "I am especially impressed in New York," Mme. Curie said, "with the generous opportunities for free education, providing for both men and women. Hunter College, City College and your other institutions of learning here, where boys and girls may be trained for useful work, even while they support themselves, have commanded my admiration. Here, too, in the midst of this great industrial and financial center, I have noticed that much attention is given

to public health, to playgrounds for children and to the pleasures of the people. Washington, your Capital, is one of the most beautiful cities I have ever seen. The wide streets, the many parks, shade trees and gardens are features which should be planned for all cities. I have especially admired the White House with its dignity and simplicity. a fitting home of the chief of a republic. Philadelphia was to me like an Old World city. I felt at home and I was sad not to be able to enjoy more of it. Pittsburgh, of course, had great interest for me, because, among other great industrial enterprises, it is the place where the greatest amount of radium in the world is produced. I was interested to see there that the method of extracting radium is the same instituted by me when we discovered radium many years ago. Chicago is an amazing place. Its wonderful growth both for beauty and permanence in fifty years is more than has ever been accomplished in the history of any other city. It interested me. In Buffalo I was not well enough. to enjoy all that charming city had to offer. I was deeply touched by their consideration of my comfort and I hope some day to be able to visit Buffalo again. In Boston I have been especially Interested in the chemical laboratory of Dr. Richards and in the radiological work of Dr. Duane. I was grateful for the opportunity to go to the laboratory of Dr. Kovoia and to see the work laid out by Dr. Beltwood at Yale. They have a program there which will be a contribution to the world of science. The Harkness Quadrangle and Tower at Yale is one of the most beautiful pieces of architecture I have seen. I especially appreciate the opportunity of seeing two or the great natural wonders of America: the Grand Canyon, which, despite the heat, was a rare pleasure, and Niagara Falls with its matchless beauty.”” (Mme Curie Finds America a Marvel..., June 25, 1921)

Findings

The analysis of *The New York Times* articles dedicated to Marie Skłodowska-Curie (Mme. Curie) during her 1921 visit to the United States reveals the pivotal role of press coverage in transforming her scientific reputation into a global legacy. Across more than 40 articles, the newspaper consistently framed Curie not only as a pioneering physicist and chemist, but also as a moral exemplar, humanitarian, mother and symbolic figure.

Through a combination of scientific praise, emotional appeal and gendered narrative, *The New York Times* helped construct a multifaceted public persona of Curie. She was portrayed using elevated and often metaphorical language – “foremost woman scientist”, “high priestess of science”, “leader among women” and “queen of the world of science” – that

aligned her with both intellectual pre-eminence and personal virtue. These articles frequently emphasized her physical fragility and self-sacrificing character, juxtaposing her feminine humility with the enormity of her scientific contributions. Such rhetoric positioned her as both accessible and extraordinary, which was essential to her mythologization in the American imagination.

Furthermore, the articles reflected a broader narrative of internationalism and cultural diplomacy. By emphasizing her Polish roots, her French scientific standing and the American enthusiasm for her work, *The New York Times* cast Curie as a transnational figure — a scientist who transcended borders and ideologies. This construction of a universal scientific heroine helped lay the groundwork for her enduring global legacy as a cultural and intellectual icon. *The New York Times* coverage in 1921 was not merely reportage but an active agent in legacy formation. By shaping public perception through specific linguistic choices, thematic emphases and symbolic framings, the newspaper elevated Marie Curie from renowned scientist to global phenomenon — a legacy that continues to influence public memory, science communication and gender narratives in science to this day.

List of words used to describe Mme Curie in NYT articles from Feb 7th to Sep 23rd:

Descriptive Adjectives used in *The New York Times* to describe Marie Curie:

Professional brilliance: foremost, distinguished, great, eminent, brilliant, discoverer, acclaimed, co-discoverer, honored, actual discoverer, conclusive, famous.

Physical appearance: fairly tall, slender, pale, golden (hair), remarkable (eyes), exceptional (forehead), tired, visibly ill, somehow anaemic.

Personality & demeanour: unassuming, motherly-looking, generous, devoted, self-sacrificing, energy-personified, tired out, studious, willing.

Symbolic & honorific: leader of her sex, high priestess of science, adopted daughter of France, queen of the world of science, greatest woman in France, wonderful woman, exemplar of liberty's victories, first among women, immortal.

Nouns & titles (professional roles): scientist, professor, discoverer, co-discoverer, recipient of the Nobel Prize, guest of honour, honorary member, professor at the Sorbonne.

Recognitions & honors: doctor of science, doctor of laws, doctor of medicine, honorary degree, tribute, honor, recognition, award, humanitarian research, distinction.

Contributions & impact: great discovery, magnitude of her discovery, contribution to science, benefit to humanity, scientific services, achievement of a great intellect, pre-eminence in science, zeal.

Qualities / Traits (in descriptive phrases): “leader among women”, “the woman who has brought more comfort to human beings than anyone of this generation”, “willing to devote her energy to the cause of suffering humanity”, “refused to think of defeat”, “indefatigable working power”, “self-denying home life”, “contributed to the conquest of disease”, “builder of a new physics”.

1. During the 1921 tour of the United States, *The New York Times* portrayed Marie Skłodowska-Curie as an exceptional figure who embodied both intellectual rigor and moral virtue. She was described with reverence, frequently referred to as “the foremost woman scientist”, “high priestess of science” and “greatest woman in France” (NYT, Feb-July 1921). Her scientific accomplishments were framed as monumental, and her character as humble, devoted and altruistic. The language used in the press emphasized her physical frailty, modesty and intense dedication to research, all of which contributed to an image of a near-mythic figure – a scientist whose accomplishments transcended gender expectations.
2. Curie’s representation simultaneously reinforced and challenged early 20th-century gender norms. On one hand, descriptions of her “plain black frock”, “tired appearance” and “motherly” demeanor underscored traditional femininity and maternal virtues (*Mme Curie Plans to End All Cancers...*, May 12, 1921). The press often highlighted her physical weakness and exhaustion, subtly reminding readers of her deviation from male-centered scientific norms. However, these depictions were juxtaposed with acknowledgments of her extraordinary achievements – breaking academic barriers at the Sorbonne, securing two Nobel Prizes and leading groundbreaking research. Her portrayal as a woman of “self-sacrificing bravery” (*How Mme Curie Discovered Radium...*, Feb 27, 1921) and “builder of scientific civilisation” (*Mme Curie Called Greatest Scientist...*, May 18, 1921) offered a progressive reimagining of women’s roles in science and public life. She was framed not as an exception to the rule, but as a pioneer forging a new path for women globally.
3. *The New York Times* played a central role in shaping Curie’s legacy as a transatlantic icon. Through a narrative of international admiration and scientific heroism, the American media helped globalize Curie’s image. The symbolic gifting of a gram of radium – funded by

American women and presented by President Harding — positioned the US as an equal participant in honoring scientific excellence. Curie herself acknowledged the importance of this cultural exchange, stating, “I feel that I have three countries: the land of my birth, the land of my adoption and the land of my new friends” (*Mme Curie Finds America a Marvel...*, June 25, 1921). The narrative consistently emphasized shared values of liberty, education and humanitarian science, constructing a vision of Curie not just as a French or Polish figure, but as a universal role model.

4. *The New York Times* employed a variety of rhetorical strategies to elevate Curie's public image. Her life was framed as a heroic quest marked by poverty, sacrifice and ultimate triumph. Superlatives were common: she was described as “the greatest living scientist” and “the woman who brought more comfort to humanity than anyone in this generation” (*Mme Curie Called Greatest Scientist...*, May 18, 1921). The narrative was steeped in emotional appeal, highlighting her wartime service, her devotion to curing cancer and her struggle against illness and exhaustion during the American tour. Media coverage also capitalized on personalization; frequent interviews and quotes from Curie allowed readers to connect with her directly, amplifying her symbolic significance.

Public ceremonies, honorary degrees, the presence of many dignitaries and commemorative medals further cemented her status as a scientific and moral exemplar. “After 1921, Marie would become more driven by human relationships. She would endure the burdens of overseas trips, public ceremonies and social engagements. Instead of relying on a small coterie of like-minded physicists, Marie reached out to a larger circle of people” (Emling, Ch. 6). Meanwhile, Susan Quinn pointed out the change in attitude towards the scientist not only in the United States, but also in France. The invitation to America led French dignitaries to organize a grand gala in her honor just before her departure to the United States. Upon hearing about the planned donation of radium by the President of the United States, the French magazine *Je sais tout* organised a ceremonial academy in honor of the pride of French science — the discoverer of radium.

“On April 28, shortly before her departure for America, the highest dignitaries of France, including President Aristide Briand, gathered at the Opéra to hear Jean Perrin and others discourse on the accomplishments of Marie Curie and the promise of her discoveries. The great Sarah Bernhardt read an ‘Ode to Madame Curie’, referring to her as ‘the sister of Prometheus’. No, you have never

led an army, no voices command. whispered stern but your sincere consuming ardor far outshines the burning brands. The 'foreign woman' of the Langevin scandal was forgotten; Marie Curie was now France's modern Joan of Arc." (Quinn 2011, Ch. 17)

Conclusion

Marie Curie's visits to the United States were pivotal in shaping her scientific career, personal confidence and global recognition of her work. While she had already achieved groundbreaking discoveries in radioactivity, her reception in America elevated her status beyond that of a scientist, transforming her into a symbol of perseverance, scientific dedication and societal progress. The contrast between her American acclaim and European scepticism significantly impacted the way she was perceived, particularly in France and Poland, demonstrating the far-reaching influence of her American journey.

One of the most important outcomes of her first visit in 1921 was the acquisition of radium for scientific research. The American fundraising campaign, led by journalist Missy Meloney, underscored the intersection of science, philanthropy and media, where Curie's heroic image as a determined and self-sacrificing scientist captured public imagination and facilitated her work. The success of this campaign not only supported Curie's research but also highlighted the crucial role of media and public engagement in advancing scientific progress.

Curie's American experience also helped shift the perception of her achievements in Europe. Her return from the United States, coupled with the recognition she received at the 1923 Sorbonne ceremony, marked a turning point in the acceptance of her contributions. The French government's decision to grant her a lifelong salary demonstrated an institutional acknowledgment of her work, which had long been overdue. Moreover, her involvement in international organizations like the Academy of Medicine and the League of Nations reflected the broader influence of her fame and the increasing recognition of her authority in both scientific and humanitarian fields.

Ultimately, Curie's visits to the United States were transformative not only for her personal and professional life, but also for the broader scientific community. They highlighted the importance of international collaboration, public engagement in supporting research and the role of women in scientific advancement. Her image, shaped by the American press and

public, remains a powerful symbol of intellectual dedication, perseverance and the potential of science to bring about positive change. Marie Skłodowska-Curie's legacy continues to inspire future generations, particularly women in science, affirming her place as one of the most influential figures in scientific and cultural history.

The press not only amplified her visibility, but also actively contributed to mobilizing public support for science. The radium gift campaign, which was prominently covered, highlighted the unprecedented intersection of media, philanthropy and science – effectively allowing the American public, especially women, to participate in scientific advancement by funding her further research. This contributed to the growing idea of science as a collective civic enterprise, with Curie as its ideal figurehead.

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