

The Pen and the Picket

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A travers les pages des magazines féminins, des essais, des pamphlets, les femmes ont communiqué entre elles pour constituer des appuis à leur cause. Cet article donne une vision historique des médias féministes qui ont surgi quand les femmes eurent besoin d'information autour du mouvement qui s'épanouissait. Elle ajoute que l'édition féministe est toujours un outil du militantisme, même aujourd'hui.

The way many of us remember it, the pen and the picket teamed up in the early 1960s when a young journalist named Gloria Steinem went underground as a Playboy bunny and wrote a scathing two-part series for *Show* magazine on the working conditions of women in the men's entertainment industry.

But a lesser part of the history of journalism and women's activism began in North America 100 years earlier. The first woman newspaper publisher in North America was Mary Ann Shadd. As a child, Shadd's father's Delaware shoemaking store housed part of the underground railway and after her family emigrated to southern Ontario in 1850, Shadd, published the abolitionist newspaper *The Provincial Freeman* in Ontario starting in 1853. A suffragist as well as an anti-slavery crusader, Shadd returned to the U.S. in 1860 and became the first Black female lawyer in North America.

Within a decade or so of Shadd's legacy, feminist journalists were unabashedly trumpeted social causes in women's newspapers. In the mid to late 19th century, a time when suffragist pioneers Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony began their movement, Anthony also published *The Revolution*, a feminist newspaper, from 1868 to 1870. Twenty years later in Canada, Margaret Benedictsson founded the country's first suffrage newspaper *Freyja* (Icelandic for "woman"). Benedictsson emigrated in 1887 from Iceland, after putting herself through college. Began in Gimli, Manitoba in 1898, *Freyja's* aims were to support "matters pertaining to the progress and rights of women" and to "support the betterment of social condi-

tions." Articles emphasized education for girls, the right to fair treatment upon divorce, economic independence for women, and equal pay--sound familiar?

Early presswomen in Canada were fervent advocates for women's equality. Benedictsson started the Icelandic Suffrage Association in 1908 and organized early delegations to the provincial legislature. A few years later, one of Canada's most famous writer-activists, Nellie McClung, dragged provincial premier Rodmund Roblin to Winnipeg sweatshops, demanding that work conditions for female workers be improved. McClung was part of a larger community of writer activists in the province that included Lillian Beynon who edited the women's pages at the *Manitoba Free Press* in 1907 and was the founding president of the Political Equality League, an early women's equality organization.

Through women's pages, magazine essays, and pamphlets, women communicated with one another to build support for their cause—the male-dominated newspapers certainly weren't taking up the cause. Through the printed word, activist writers argued that farm women were equal partners with their farm husbands; they deplored the conditions of immigrants and in particular immigrant women. McClung packed theatres across Canada with firebrand speeches arguing for equal pay, public health services (long before Tommy Douglas), and mother's allowance, the precursor of welfare. The presswomen argued and then lobbied for property rights for married women, improved conditions for factory workers, and the vote for women on equal terms with men. Prohibition, many (though not all) believed, would stop men from beating their wives and children.

Fifty years later, women writers were pushing the envelope once again. Through their involvement in the U.S. civil rights movement and the Vietnam War protests, women gained the organizing skills and the confidence needed to start a revolution of their very own. Gloria Steinem, who would later co-found *Ms.* magazine, blew the whistle on

sexual harassment at work; the Kinseys had documented women's woes in the bedroom; Robin Morgan decried beauty pageants for their objectification of women as well as the male left for its sexism.

Conned out of the paid workforce and sent home after the war, a new generation of women rejected the kitchen as their destiny and started typing. In 1963, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* struck a chord with many white, middle-class women. The second feminist wave, like the first, saw women demand equality within marriage and in the world at large. They wanted better social conditions:

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equal pay, birth control, abortion, and respect.

Ms magazine started in 1972 in New York and North American feminism had a glossy, new, radical soapbox. Just as the first wave women's movement had done 100 years earlier, women were communicating directly with one another. Feminist media sprang up to share ideas and, more importantly, to mobilize women to demand change. And once again, the mainstream media didn't take women's liberation seriously. In fact, criticism of the male belittling, sexist male-dominated media was seen as a central part of the problem.

By the late 1960s, violence against women, divorce reform, birth control and equal pay were back on the agenda. In 1966, la Fédération des femmes du Québec was formed and helped lobby for what would become the blueprint for the modern women's movement: the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, which issued its final report in 1970.

Canada had plenty of women's magazines, but they were propaganda tools of a different sort, created as vehicles to house soap and laundry detergent ads. Dedicated to honing happy housewives, the copy reinforced the superficial themes of those products. An exception was Doris Anderson who occupied the helm of Canada's largest women's magazine, *Chatelaine*, in 1957. By the time of the birth of The National Action Committee on the Status of Women in 1972, *Chatelaine* carried ground-breaking stories about birth control, wife abuse, and abortion in between recipes and fashion pieces.

The occasional article in *Chatelaine* was no substitute for the unapologetic mouthpiece needed to catalyze activists. Feminists needed to communicate with each other directly. And so, in the mid-1970s, regional feminist newspapers sprang up, serving an activating role in communities of feminists for emerging issues like child care, the rights of

immigrant women, pension reform, abortion, equal pay, wife abuse, rape, and pornography. Printed on cheap newsprint and typeset on waxed galleys on kitchen tables in the homes of volunteers armed with Exacto knives, feminist newspapers were both affordable and effective: notices of meetings or marches appeared in their pages along with local and national reports. Newspapers could be printed quickly and distributed for free or a nominal charge.

The Pedestal feminist newspaper played a key role in organizing an Indo-Chinese women's conference in Vancouver in 1971. Women were coming together politi-

cally. In 1973, the Congress of Black Women of Canada started and the Native Women's Association of Canada in 1974. Within a few years, *Kinesis* was being published by Vancouver Status of Women in Vancouver, *Broadside* in Toronto, *The Manitoba Women's Newspaper* in Winnipeg, and *The Optimist* in the Yukon. These newspapers brought together like-minded women to work on issues reported on in their geographic communities.

Feminists were breaking new ground and it was exciting. Susan Cole, a collective member of *Broadside* in the mid-1980s, recalls that "every issue feminists raised in the '70s and even the early '80s was a new one, fresh and fascinating."

Says Cole, "women relied on the feminist presses for ideas and inspiration." Volumes of feminist books were being published as well and feminist publishing grew as an industry in Canada, starting with the Women's Press in Toronto in 1972—five years ahead of Britain's women's press. Press Gang became a women's press in 1974 and Second Story joined, followed by women's bookstores that distributed feminist information and served as meeting places.

One of the most successful feminist magazines during this time was Quebec's *La Vie en Rose*, founded by journalist Francine Pelletier. *La Vie en Rose* was publishing a colour, feminist glossy magazine at a time when many newspapers still relied on volunteer labour. Some publications made the switch to magazine format in order to gain wider reader appeal. *Healthsharing*, started in Toronto and covered women's health issues from a feminist perspective; many of its writers were also health activists.

Herizons expanded from *The Manitoba Women's Newspaper* into a national magazine by 1985, under the direction of Deborah Holberg Schwartz, its founding editor, and a handful of staffers in Winnipeg. Meanwhile, *Broadside*

had taken on the dissention among feminists over pornography. In the mid-'80s and *Women and Environments* (a publication at risk of closing) began. *Kinesis*'s circulation grew well beyond B.C.'s border with an increased focus more on women of colour and vital issues of immigrant women that no one else was covering.

Modern Feminist Media

"One thing that is very striking for me is that the issues have changed so little," says former *Kinesis* editor, Emma Kivisild. "We are still fighting rape, battery and murder. We are still fighting for choice on abortion, still looking for equitable wages, working at building a global movement."

Cole adds: "Go back to some of the books published in those days—*Women and Madness* (Phyllis Chesler), *Against our Will* (Susan Brownmiller)—they old up astonishingly well."

Importantly, this was a time when funding was available for many equality initiatives through the Secretary of State Women's Program (the precursor of Status of Women Canada grants) or employment initiative grants such as *Herizons* received in its start-up in the 1980s. When the Mulroney era began, funding for many initiatives was cut long before the goals were reached. *Broadside* closed in 1988, *Herizons* entered a five-year hiatus and *Healthsharing* ceased by the mid-1990's.

Before many of them closed, feminist newspapers debated controversial topics like pornography, homophobia, and the involvement of men. All the while, most were trying to operate as some form of collective running on volunteer labour. The east-coast newspaper *Pandora*, was taken to a human rights tribunal for not publishing contributions by men; eventually the time and money taken to fight the case did in the volunteers and *Pandora* closed.

Today, it seems unimaginable that women had the time to volunteer time to publish newspapers; Cole remembers going to twice-weekly *Broadside* meetings. One noticeable change today is the diversity of women who make up the women's movement. "Different forms of activism are conflating—green, queer, feminist—which, I think, is a good thing," Cole says.

Another shift is the form that media and activism is taking for young feminists. Audra Williams ran *Marigold*, a national young feminist website and online forum from 1999-2003. She observes that, "Marigold was the only community for some young feminist girls."

The "girl culture" movement, Williams observes, "certainly is feminist, but might not always have strict and specific political goals in mind."

Nicole Cohen, a founder of the feminist youth magazine *Shameless*, sees owning the means of production as political in and of itself. "As we began the process of founding the magazine, we realized that we had become media activists, critiquing corporate-owned media and using media

production as a form of resistance."

The same was said about *Ms*' beginnings, as well as *Herizons*, where I have worked as editor for 15 years. "We are trying to resist dominant portrayals of young women in the mainstream media," says Cohen. "The glossy teen mags not only promote a normative idea of sexuality, body size, skin colour and class, they overwhelmingly present young women as little more than passive consumers in a competitive world."

Today, the need is as great as ever for feminist media because issues like violence against women still demand collective resistance. That resistance is more likely to incorporate race and poverty. Eating disorders are the latest manifestation of the sexism that drove women to protest the Miss America Pageant in 1968. The toxic damage to girls' self-esteem and body image today demand new forms of resistance.

The challenge for today's feminist media is not to simply get information out there, but to distil, condense, and synthesize it in well-written articles that offer fresh analysis, solutions, and hope. More sophisticated readers inundated with too much information want to read about powerful and empowered women making change happen.

And not just in North America is notion of letting women tell their own stories is a radical act. The monthly magazine *Navodayam* is the only Indian magazine owned and run by women. Initially 60 rural women were trained in the basics of print journalism and today, the 24-page monthly is distributed in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. It is an activist newspaper run by 12 women; it analyzes issues of alcoholism, child labour, sexual harassment, and HIV/AIDS, and facilitates a dialogue among women and with the outside world. In the northern part of the province where literacy rates are low, video journalism is made by women.

"By producing media, we are able to do something about our critiques of the corporate media," Cohen observes, "We are trying to demonstrate that you can become the media, that media should be accessible to anyone who wants to put their ideas into the world and talk to each other."

Today, new feminist media are demonstrating that is possible. Websites, and increasingly blogs, analogous to early feminist newspapers or consciousness-raising groups, share ideas, build community, and help women create change.

In doing so, the media also has an effect upon those who participate in it, as Marshall McLuhan observed. Cohen's feminist consciousness developed as a result of reading feminist zines and independent magazines, as well as from the music that came out of the Riot Grrrl movement.

Feminist media also support McLuhan's notion that media are technological extensions of the body—in this case, the body politic. The global body of women's magazines, journals, and websites are growing and thriving in most part of the world, including *Haqooq-i-zan* in Afghanistan, South Africa (*feministing.com*); Iran (*Badjens.com*)

Muslim women in North America (*Azizahmagazine.com*). A Google search of “feminist magazine” plus a country or topic brings up hundreds of sites where women share strategies for changing the world.

“We are talking about problems in our lives that relate to gender, race, class and sexuality, and sharing strategies for dealing with them,” says Cohen of young feminists. “We are promoting ideas of community and solidarity. Most of all, we are getting a say, in our own terms, while many times young women are taught to just shut up.”

As long as inequity and oppression of women exists, the feminist media will keep on speaking up.

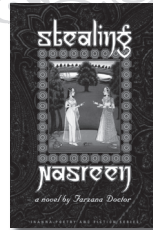
Penni Mitchell is Managing Editor of Herizons, a subscriber-driven Canadian feminist magazine you can see at www.herizons.ca.

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