

The Role of Montréal's Dykes on Mykes Radio Show

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Les auteures examinent le rôle historique, socio-politique de la programmation radiophonique montréalaise des années '20 alors que Dykes on Mykes, une émission qui a forgé et soutenu la sous-culture des lesbiennes et queers de la communauté anglophone de Montréal. Elles assurent que l'émission Dykes on Mykes a initié un courant alternatif à l'ordre établi en travaillant directement avec la communauté lesbienne et queer de Montréal et en contribuant à leur représentation positive dans les médias.

As queer academics and community media activists, we believe that the preservation and documentation of our history as lesbians and queer women is not only necessary, but also our responsibility. As two of the new co-hosts and technicians for the show, we have begun the tasks of archiving the last 19 years of Dykes on Mykes.

Dykes on Mykes was founded in 1987, when CKUT, Montréal's Community Radio Station was in its foundation years, applying for their FM license, and in need of new programs. A couple of local anglophone GLBT community activists responded to their call, and pitched the idea of hosting a weekly dyke radio show, and another weekly show for the guys, called the "Homoshow." At this time in Montréal, there were very few local media outlets for the GLBT community. The idea behind these shows was to produce media that would both represent the diversity of the community, and would provide the opportunity for these communities to critically examine pertinent political and cultural issues. CKUT radio was the perfect place to do this because of its commitment to maintaining a feminist and community-focused structure, and because as a political tool, radio necessitates established scheduling and broadcasting and as a result is accessible to most. Over the last 19 years, Dykes on Mykes has both shifted drastically as it followed and reflected the changes in lesbian and queer women's identities, and at the same time, has stayed committed to the goal of providing a political and cultural outlet for the community. In radio,

the "community" includes both out and/or visible lesbians/queer women *and* listeners who do not necessarily participate in lesbian public life in any tangible way, but who for a variety of reasons relate to the content or believe in the diversity of shows like those programmed on CKUT (community radio).

Dykes on Mykes has never had a formal mandate, but everyone who has been involved with the show has had the same ultimate goal of working for the community and reflecting a distinct lesbian subculture. The show has always offered lesbian and queer women's perspectives on politics, music, arts, and culture. It has worked to promote local artists and activists, and to provide Montréal's anglophone lesbian and queer women's community with a forum for discussion and debate on all of these issues. As a community, we have put lesbian and queer women's voices and realities onto the airwaves and have claimed a public space for ourselves. And by doing so, we have questioned the parity of lesbians with gay men, and of queer with their straight counterparts.

Today, Dykes on Mykes is the longest running Anglophone lesbian and queer women's media outlet in Montréal, and because many of the shows have been archived, it can offer this community almost 20 years' worth of complex history—a history that not only traces the life of the show, but one that traces the history of the Anglophone lesbian and queer community movement in Montréal.

The recently formed the "Dykes on Mykes Archiving Project" is working towards digitizing the audio-tapes that hold most of the last 19 years of the show. The goals of this project are preserve the history of our guests, and more importantly, to trace the political, cultural and social shifts that have occurred within the lesbian movement in Montréal during this time. By documenting these shifts, we hope to complete an analysis of the community's political and artistic trends. And we hope that this project will ultimately offer insight into the significance of a lesbian and queer women's perspective—one that is often overlooked,

even within GLBT and queer movements, and one that is not static but rather shifts and reconfigures itself within these movements.

This article documents and presents our preliminary research on Montréal's Dykes on Mykes Community Radio Show. This research consisted of an examination of 19 years of archived material, as well as several interviews and discussions with past and present show hosts, which we conducted in October 2005. It was a four-hour group interview that was open-ended and conversational. The information we gathered allowed us to begin to identify

women performers and artists; interviews with various queer academics, writers, and so on. Radio is also an excellent tool for mobilization, networking and community building. That said, radio also has the potential to reach far beyond the confines of the dyke community. Much like the Internet, the radio can function as a private or public medium, disseminating information for people who are closeted, just coming out, or those interested in queer women's culture. There have been no studies to date that look at Dykes on Mykes listener demographics, although, we do hope to conduct one in the future.

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the ideological shifts from one generation of lesbian and queer women to the next, as well as the particularities of each host as an individual within a much larger context. The interview also provided some insight into the relationship between these people as individuals and as radio hosts, and between the host and the listener.

In this paper, we examined the material gathered from these sources in light of academic theory and media, and GLBT/queer activism. We did this with the hope of gaining insight into the political, social, and artistic shifts that have worked to define the Anglophone lesbian and queer women's community in Montréal over the last 20 years.

Media Activism

In this paper, we highlight the increased usage of media, such as radio and video, in the construction and self-representation of queer identities in a Canadian context. The issue of media activism has played an important role in queer Canadian history, serving the dual purpose of providing an alternative to mainstream representation *and* serving as a self-reflexive tool within the community. Media activism plays an important role in creating and sustaining queer identities. This is done by calling into question the established structure of media, by incorporating people into the communication process, and by encouraging participatory forms of representation. Radio also facilitates discussion on issues of particular interest or concern to the dyke community, as these are often underrepresented or misrepresented in mainstream media. Examples include conversations about lesbian representation within the broader lesbian and gay movement as well as in popular culture; discussing the changing relationship and tensions between lesbianism and feminism, queer sex and sexuality, transsexuality; lesbian documentaries; dyke music; queer

The show is currently run by three white women, covering a ten-year age span, ranging in preferred identity category, all with significant experience organizing and living in the lesbian and queer community in Montréal—as artists, activists, community media organizers, and as prior guests and volunteers for Dykes on Mykes. The switchover occurred with a new trio replacing two volunteers who had dedicated 14 years of their lives to the show, and whose opinions are figured in the interviews below.

As the new hosts and technicians of the show for the past two years, we are also responsible for the programming, which covers two to three hours of Anglophone content every month. We will return to the issue of “lesbian content” later on in this paper, but the point here is that “doing” radio means establishing and maintaining links with a wide range of community members and organizations. For Dykes on Mykes such links have served us, as well as these communities. For example, because of the long standing overlap between feminist and lesbian political movements, our ties to local feminist organizations are strong and we are committed to using our airtime to broadcast a wide range of feminist political voices, and to contribute in various ways to the local feminist movement. For us, doing radio, means reaching out to feminist groups, youth groups, radical and political queer initiatives, academics, gay mother's group, artists, queers of colour community organizers, and so on. It also means recruiting contributors for the show, and training people to use the mixing board and recording equipment. It is this entire process, with each of these variables holding equal weight for the content of the show, which make community radio a necessary alternative to mainstream radio. In his book, *Up from Invisibility*, Larry Gross emphasizes the importance of community-based queer media by stating that:

Ultimately, the most effective form of resistance to the hegemony of the mainstream is to speak for oneself, to create narratives and images that counter the accepted, oppressive, or inaccurate ones. While many groups and interests are ignored or distorted in the media, not all have the same options for resistance. The opportunities for resistance are greatest when there is a visible and organized group that can provide solidarity and institutional support for the production and distribution of alternative messages. (19)

The Challenges of Representation: Lesbian and Queer Women's Communities

The issue of “dyke content” is one that demands some thought. We often ask ourselves who OUR target audience is. To say that we are appealing to queer women, or lesbians, or dykes, often seems too simple an answer. When we asked the previous hosts, they were much more adamant about the fact that their guests were lesbian-identified, and that it necessarily meant that the content was of interest to dykes at large. The idea (according to a past co-host) was this: “We have one hour of air time every two weeks—so lets make it lesbian!” And to “make it lesbian” meant interviewing lesbians. And even if the issue of their sexual orientation never came up, it was still a valid way to demystify lesbian lives, or at least to survey what lesbians were doing in the world. Whether they were lesbian plumbers, lesbian artists or lesbian academics, it was the fact that they were lesbians that got them on the show, but it was more often than not, other aspects of their identity that were highlighted. The idea was that if you were on the show, there was no mistaking who you were. As one ex-host pointed out, “there is nothing ambiguous about the name of the show.”

We started our interview with a question about our audience—“who is listening?” One interviewee told us:

Before I got involved in the show, when I first moved to the city, in my first summer here, I was just coming out and I listened to it every Monday. I listened to you (points to former host). And at the time, there was a section called “Helen’s pick up tips.” She always recommended that going to the “tam tams” on Sundays would be a great place to meet girls, so I did.

She also informed us that they used to make regular announcements. “Before email, we would announce everything and people would sit there with their pencils and paper and call in with questions.” Another participant agreed with her, and said:

It’s true, with the Internet, there are now so many ways of getting information.... But one thing that I know for sure is that over the years, there were people who listened to the show when they were closeted, and it

helped them come out. Once they moved to the city and closer to the action they tended to drop us. But there was a fringe period when we were really, really important in their lives. And you have to keep in mind that this was before the Internet, when radio was more powerful, and we were probably their only source of lesbian cultural information. We never really knew who was listening, but we knew that somebody was. I stayed in this town and ran into people that listened to the show, and at some point I began to understand that when people were confused about their sexuality, there was something really relevant about having a voice on air that they could tune into and listen to while trying to figure out their sexual orientation.

In response to our question about the audiences, another ex-host commented:

Yeah, people are out there. Dykes on Mykes not only reflects a sense of community, but it is that community. I remember once, years ago, I was tuned in and you were talking about the Boudoir! There were actually people on the radio talking about this party. It was so cool. It gave a weight to the lesbian community for me. It anchored it. And I knew that there were other people around the city sitting in their kitchens listening to the same show. You’d always ask what people were wearing. Fashion was definitely the highlight.... And it meant that if people were flipping through the radio in their cars, or whatever they were doing, they were flipping past a station where people were talking about lesbians, about what lesbians do, and about their own experiences as lesbians, and there was nobody saying “shhh” don’t say that. It was just there. And knowing that I was okay, and that everyone in my community was Okay was one thing, but knowing that it was just out there for people to consume or not consume as they wished was something that was very powerful.... You’re not going to find dyke stuff on other radio stations. You’re just not.

Lesbian and Queer Content

With an entirely new crew at the show for the past two years, the mandate of Dykes on Mykes seems to have shifted. There are fewer assumptions about what “dyke content” is, or is not—there has been a definite move away from identity-politics. We (the new hosts) often meet to discuss and debate what we think is of interest to our listeners. We still privilege lesbians and queer women as guests, but we are also pushing for a broader understanding of what is of interest to the community. We are continually balancing what we have built in the last 19 years with a more political, if not critical introspection. In essence, the show now serves a hybrid purpose: to maintain a lesbian identity as one that is distinct and worth preserving; and to continually push the boundaries of that definition by

addressing the complexities of people's lived experience and by unifying against all forms of oppression. The show has also served as a bridge between GLBT identities and a more broadly (undefined) queer identity. This shift has been influenced by (but has not necessarily followed) the academic progression from gay and lesbian studies to queer theory. Recently, the GLBT movement in Canada has been a leader in the fight for equal rights and access to marriage. These struggles have often been argued through the language and policies of the state, and have ultimately been fighting for state recognition and support. On the other hand, we have seen the recent emergence of a queer movement that stands in stark opposition to the state. This movement mobilizes for a queer identity and politic that opposes mainstream straight culture, and the mainstream GLBT movement with their agenda of normalizing homosexuality. Queer identity is often grounded in politics and does not necessarily reflect or depend on sexual practices and orientation. In terms of how these identities and cultures reflect lesbians and queer women, the divisions between the social, political, and cultural activities and beliefs of these communities are often quite vast. Lesbians tend to weave in and out of mainstream GLBT culture, while queer women take a political position against the mainstream, be it gay or straight.

When, as the new hosts, we asked the question, what do you see as the mandate of Dykes on Mykes? One interviewee replied:

Ideally I would like us to play specifically lesbian or queer music on the show. Sometimes we want to cover an issue, but we don't have a queer spokesperson for a subject and that's fine, but at some point our show topics should relate back to dykes.

Another agreed, and stated, "Yeah, For me it's a prerequisite." Someone else voiced another opinion:

I fear assumption. I fear checking people at the door. What if we have queer, bi, or trans, people talking about topics of interest to the dyke community. We focus on catering to a dyke audience, but our audience base is expanding to include queer and trans identified people. I think that yes, we should have dykes talking about stuff that is of interest to us, but I do get weary.

Another interviewee commented: "I wouldn't want to have a situation where it was strictly lesbians. But I would also hate to see it get to a point where it's enough that we're queer... It's harder to maintain the lesbian voice. And there's added pressure to keep the lesbian voice."

When one of the participants asked, "What about separation? Aren't we all on the same team?", another quickly answered:

No. We're not all on the same team. We're not fighting for

the same things or coming from the same place. I think that's what makes the show interesting. It's not a generic queer voice. Generic queer ends up being gay male. And it's part of CKUT's and Dykes on Mykes' responsibility to cover stuff that's not going to be covered anywhere else, and, as we know, issues about the anglophone lesbian community simply are not covered anywhere else.

The divisions between lesbian and queer identities both pose a number of challenges, and offer us interesting opportunities for expanding the definitions of our community. For one, the broad definitions of queer identity raise questions about what exactly makes us a lesbian and queer show. Is it the fact that the current hosts and technicians of the show identify as lesbians and/or queer? Is it the topics covered on the show? Is it the sexual orientation of our guests? Do our guests have to identify as dykes or as queer in order to be part of the show, or is talking about lesbian and queer issues enough? How do we approach the question of our guests' sexualities? Do we ascertain them or leave them behind? And if so, how do we approach this in the face of a broadly-defined queer identity that is now claimed by a number of people who, before identifying as queer, identified as straight? And if we offer primarily "lesbian" content (as we have done over the last 19 years) than are we actually appealing to the queer women's community? How can we move forward and reflect the political ideas of the queer community, while also staying true to the lesbian community? Is the divide between them really that vast? And if so, can we honestly appeal to both of these communities at once? If "queer" is the new lesbian or gay, then what happens to lesbian identity and to the long history of the lesbian movement that was tied so closely to the feminist movement? What happens to the years of struggle that women before us endured in order to proudly claim not only a women's identity, but a lesbian and dyke identity?

While we are raising questions and confronting challenges on the show, we are also recording, documenting and mapping the political and artistic shifts as the history of the lesbian and queer community in Anglophone Montréal. By tracing the history of Dykes on Mykes, the role of lesbian and queer women's perspectives are revealed. The history of Dykes on Mykes shows that there have been various shifts in areas of interest, politics, music, art, culture, hosting styles, guests, etc., and that throughout these shifts, we have always addressed issues that would have otherwise been overlooked, even on most community radio shows.

This paper was originally written for, and presented at, the "Lesbian Lives XIII: Historicizing the Lesbian" Conference in Dublin, Ireland in February 2006.

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¹Le Boudoir has been described as "a magical evening of retro entertainment, silent films, and circus acts" for lesbian and queer women in Montréal. It has been presented annually for the past 12 years and is a "mainstay of the city's queer cultural scene."

References

- Gross, Larry. *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men and The Media in America*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2001.
- Le Boudoir. Online: <http://www.leboudoir.org/home.html>. Accessed January 12, 2007.

ANN ELIZABETH CARSON

A STORY

My grandfather made my grandmother
cut off her long chestnut hair
and throw it in the garbage. Because
it was unseemly, in a married woman.
My mother heard her cry through the closed
door.
It was the only time she heard her cry. No one
was ever the same.

I don't know
how old my Mother was
or how she happened to be near
when she heard her Mother cry.
I don't know how she knew
what her Father had done
to her Mother

for her to cry so loud that
she was heard that one time.

Or how she knew – there was
no speaking –
that it wasn't the only time,
just the heard time.
(The length of her hair?)
But she heard and she knew.
That much is certain.

I don't remember when
my mother told me her mother's story,
except that I was a woman then,
with her own first daughter,
my grandmother long dead. Was she
the first to speak?

Already I knew

that part of my grandmother's "never the
same"
was not answering the call her husband heard
to minister in Cleveland.
She didn't follow him. Against the grain, she
left him, came
To live with one of her unmarried daughters.
Opened a space for speaking.

Did my mother tell me
because I was the oldest daughter?
Or because I now had children and should
hear it?

Why do I think she would think I should hear
it?

Did she speak out
because she needed to pass it on
to the next generation of (procreative)
women?

I don't know whether my sister heard
our grandmother's story. We've never talked
about it.
Until now my children know her story only
In the ways I have lived my life,
-just as my mother knew her mother's story
– in
daily no-word ways which tell, and re-tell
our stories

Ann Elizabeth Carson's poetry appears earlier in this volume.