

Feminist and Lesbian Periodicals in the Digital Age

Following is my talk at the “Women’s History in the Digital World 2015” conference that was held at Bryn Mawr College this past Thursday and Friday, May 21-22. I was honored to be joined by Laura X and Andrée Rathemacher as fellow panelists and Julie Enszer as chair of our panel, which was titled “Feminist and Lesbian Periodicals in the Digital Age ... Rebroadcasting Our Voices.”

Quick bios:

- Laura X: legendary feminist archivist and founder of both the Women's History Research Center and the National Clearinghouse on Marital and Date Rape as well as, more recently, the [Laura X Institute](#) to house her Social Movements Archives from the women's movement and overlapping social movements
- Andrée Rathemacher, professor and head of acquisitions in the University Libraries at the University of Rhode Island, and long-time advocate of open access and scholarly communication reform
- Julie Enszer, visiting scholar in the Department of Women’s Studies at University of Maryland and editor of *Sinister Wisdom*, a multicultural lesbian literary and art journal

Upcoming guest blog posts will be the presentations of Laura and Andrée.

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When I got the word that my panel had been accepted into the conference I announced on Facebook that I would be speaking on the topic of the feminist and lesbian underground press. A college friend of mine, who I haven’t seen in over forty years, wrote, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

We lived in the dorm together back then. Today I think he’s Tea Party. I got busted after Kent State and emerged from solitary confinement as a committed radical. Not everyone who lived through the sixties experienced the magic of the period. Those of us who did read the underground press.

I’m not surprised today that so many young people have never heard of the underground press. Vietnam was a national embarrassment. We were the bad guys. We got trounced. And then, instead of having a national dialogue so that we could heal as a nation, Vietnam was disappeared from national discourse. Schools and colleges didn’t teach it. Generations grew up having no idea what happened.

So here’s a quick summary: The antiwar movement during the Vietnam years was the broadest, most diverse antiwar movement in the history of our country, no exception. The underground press—the independent, alternative, non-corporate, antiwar, underground press—was the voice of that movement. There were underground papers everywhere. They were all united against the war. But they all spoke to their individual communities. There was the gay press, the lesbian press the feminist press, the black press, Native Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asian-

Americans, GIs, campus, community, high school, psychedelics, socialists, Southern consciousness, prisoners' rights, rank-and-file workers, senior citizens....

I'm talking today about the women's papers. Like the others, they were everywhere. In fact, I'm going to make an assertion and then I'm going to tell a story.

The assertion: You can't fully know women's history, especially in the sixties and seventies, without studying the feminist and lesbian underground press.

The story: Fifteen years after the war ended, I published my book, *Voices from the Underground*, a series of histories of different underground papers as written by key people on each of the papers. I included as many different sectors of the antiwar movement as I could because I wanted to create a mosaic of what the antiwar movement looked like. For the feminist press I chose *off our backs*, the first national feminist paper to emerge from the east coast. A group of radical lesbians broke away from *off our backs* and became known as The Furies, soon The legendary Furies. Their paper, *The Furies*, is also in *Voices*.

The book came out to much critical acclaim, and then it went out of print, in a story for another time but way too soon. Not long after it went out of print, I received a phone call from Susan Brownmiller. I'm sure most of you know who Susan is but for those of you who don't, Susan was—is—a feminist author and organizer who became famous in the early seventies after publishing her book, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, the book that put rape on the map as a feminist issue. At the time of her call she was writing a history of the feminist movement (*In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (1999)) and wanted a copy of my book so she could read the *off our backs* and *Furies* entries. I didn't have one—fortunately she found one on her own—but the experience stayed with me: Susan Brownmiller, the famous author, liked my book. I was pretty full of myself.

So another fifteen years later, when I was working on the revised and expanded second edition, which came out as the four-volume [Voices from the Underground Series](#), I contacted her for a testimonial quote, which she graciously gave to me. It appears on the back cover of volume 1; *off our backs* is one of the stories in that volume. On my next trip to New York, I met her for the first time.

On my way from the subway to her apartment, I was visualizing our greeting: *She opened the door to her apartment. She had a warm smile on her face. With outstretched arms, she embraced me and told me what a great book I had created and how much she admired me as an author and editor and a supporter of the feminist cause and how just all-around wonderful I was....*

Okay, I admit it, I was in groupie mode. In fact, although I'm sure she said hello, I don't remember it. What I remember is her opening the door and saying, "You don't have enough women's papers." I was immediately thrown on the defensive. I tried to explain to her that I had *off our backs*, so I had feminist papers covered, and I had *The Furies*, so I had lesbian papers covered. And, after all, *Voices from the Underground* didn't make any claims to be exhaustive; it was just representative.

But she insisted. She said the women's papers were everywhere. "You can't fully know women's history, especially in the sixties and seventies, without studying the feminist and lesbian underground press." Those are my words, not hers, but that was the exact message that I took away from her conclusion.

And then she said, "You've got to have *It Aint Me Babe*." Those were her words. *It Aint Me Babe* was the first feminist paper to emerge from the west coast. It actually came out a few weeks before *off our backs* so it gets credit for being the first national feminist underground paper. But to Susan it had another level of significance. Her consciousness-raising group, New York Radical Feminists, used to read and discuss every issue as it came out. During one meeting, they discussed an article that was an interview with a woman who recently had been raped on her way home from a late-night meeting. Her boyfriend's response had been less than sensitive: He had tried to make a joke out of it. The article was about that experience and what it meant. So Susan's group discussed the article, and Susan had her light bulb moment that inspired her to write the book that made her famous.

Then she said to me, "You've got to contact Laura X." It was Laura who conducted the interview and wrote the article; I'm honored to be sharing this panel with her today.

So I put "Laura X" in parentheses, did a Google search, and found her. Laura reconnected with other former staff members and they put together an amazing piece, the last history to be accepted into the series. It appears in volume 3 along with the history of *The Furies*. Susan wrote the foreword.

It was around that time that I was contacted by Jeff Moyer.

Jeff was the former head of the digitizing department at ProQuest. With a partner, he bought out the department and founded IDC, Image Data Conversion. But on his own he also started Reveal Digital because he had an idea for an economic model that would create wondrous keyword-searchable digital collections in a way that was friendly to library budgets and would end up with the collections going into open access, the holy grail for librarians. The first collection he wanted to create was of underground newspapers. He approached me after discovering the first edition of *Voices from the Underground* at the library of Eastern Michigan University, where I used to teach. He brought me on board as a consultant and not long after that he hired me full time. *It Aint Me Babe* was the first paper to become part of the collection.

What attracted me to the project, besides the opportunity to expand my knowledge of the underground press, was Jeff's economic model, what he calls "cost recovery = open access." Basically, we promote upcoming projects to libraries through our [crowd-funding website](#), where we describe each project, explain its significance, lay out the proposed contents as well as the sourcing libraries, and list the line-item expenses. Then we invite libraries to commit to purchasing the collection but we don't yet invoice them. When we have enough commitments to recover the costs, what we call our "sales threshold," sales stop and we go into full production, including rights gathering, sourcing from libraries, and scanning and digitizing.

Libraries pay according to a tiered structure but it amounts to about 20% of what they would pay one of the larger digital publishing companies for a comparable project that the company would keep behind a pay wall forever. Those libraries that support us have immediate access to the evolving collection while it is in development. Once it is completed and after a certain period of exclusivity for our supporters, it goes into open access where even those libraries that didn't support it have access to it. In other words, some libraries pay, every library and their patrons benefit. Meanwhile we'll be working on other projects with the same model. No library pays for every collection but everyone benefits from every collection.

This is a righteous model that deserves library support. In an earlier life I worked for many years as managing editor of *Reference Services Review* and *Serials Review*, two journals that were read widely by, respectively, reference librarians and serials librarians. I read countless articles and heard countless librarian laments about rising costs and decreasing budgets. But I also remembered the community feeling that librarians shared. The focus was always on increasing and facilitating user access. Usually it was the larger libraries that made the big investments and then the benefits would trickle down to the smaller libraries. With Reveal's tiered structure, everyone can help.

So this is the project and the model. Projects that are looking for funding include

- [SNCC Digital Archives 1960-1969](#): Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee was the premier Civil Rights group of the early sixties.
- [Highlander Folk School Archives, 1932-1983](#): Not everyone has heard of Highlander but everyone has heard of Rosa Parks, Pete Seeger. They and others received their training here.
- [Liberation News Service Archive, 1968-1981](#): LNS was the AP-UPI of the underground press. This collection will include their twice-weekly news packets and their photo archives.
- [Sylvester Manor Archives, 1649-1996](#): The archives contain records of a sugar plantation that has been in the same family's hands continuously for over 350 years.

With [Independent Voices](#), the underground press collection, we're still looking for funding but we are already actively working on it because we wanted to get one live collection out into the public. Our goal was to get over 1,000 titles. We already have more than that including some 120 women's papers, 130 literary magazines—what were known as “little” magazines back then, 180 campus, community, gay, minority, and other underground and alternative newspapers and magazines from the period, some 600 papers published by and for members of the military in all branches of the service, and even 4 papers published by the FBI to sow dissension in the Movement.

So far we're about 40% of the way to being fully funded. We could include a lot more titles, and we would like to, if we had the funding.

We're working with a growing team of libraries that are sending us original papers from their collections that we scan and digitize and then return safely to them along with keyword-

searchable digital files and metadata of the papers that we scan. For the women's papers, we've worked most closely with Duke and Northwestern.

Our goal is to upload some three-quarters of a million pages of exact keyword-searchable digital reproductions by the end of January 2017. So far we have uploaded about 250,000 pages. Currently the collection is accessible only to patrons of our supporting libraries, those who have invested in the project. After we reach our sales threshold, we'll go into open access, which is the vision. However, libraries can make the files that we send them accessible immediately.

So this is where we are now. This is an amazing project—the first of hopefully many—that can be even better with your help. And we have a library-friendly model that achieves the holy grail of open access in a way that is friendly to library budgets. We're looking for friendly libraries that believe in the community of libraries to help us make it come true. Let's talk.