

# Women's Media Transformed by Internet

By Sheila Gibbons

In the feminist-periodical field, the news is both happy and sad. As some publications of the modern feminist era sign off, new ones appear, most often on the Internet, where their potential reach is far beyond what could have been envisioned by editors in the 1970s, lashed to their mimeograph machines, mailing labels and stamps that needed licking.

The downside of the online boom is the worry that historians will lose a documentary record.

Without archives of bound volumes, or even microfilm, researchers of the future will have a hard time tracking trends.

Even with the blossoming online 'zines, journals and blogs (Web logs), the environment for feminist media is harsh. While they face some of the same challenges as other media—drops in advertising and subscriptions in a bad economy—many also contend with problems that do not affect large publishing companies. The volunteers who produce much of women's media are increasingly strapped for time; the founding editors are ageing and there may be no one waiting in the wings. In addition, during this sagging economy, foundation support has become even less reliable.

"Things are definitely iffy for us," says Karla Mantilla, a longtime and the only full-time member of *off our backs*, a women's newsjournal collective. *Oob*, as *off our backs* is known, was founded in 1970, making it the longest surviving feminist newspaper in the United States. "The only reason we're still publishing at all is we unexpectedly received a bequest."

*Oob* has always been a collective effort. Mantilla says the strains of a work ethic that keeps people at their jobs for long hours (especially in Washington, where *oob* is based) cuts into the time its volunteers need to write, edit, produce and mail the publication, as well as do the other essential tasks, including selling ads, raising money, and soliciting subscriptions.

"It's really tough to keep a social movement going when people are working so much," she said. "They just get exhausted."

## Dynamics of Economy, Culture 'Seem So Overwhelming'

*LOLApress*, an international feminist magazine founded in 1994 and edited by women on three continents, announced it was suspending publication last fall after longtime financing from the Heinrich Boll Foundation ended. Regina Michalik of *LOLA-Europe* says *LOLA* will attempt to

publish online while other resources are sought.

*Ms.* magazine, which has served a mass market since its founding in 1972, also has been a successful high-wire act among feminist periodicals. It has had a series of owners, has existed with and without advertising, and has been back from the brink several times. In late 2001, *Ms.* was acquired by the Feminist Majority Foundation from Liberty Media for Women, a group of women investors led by Gloria Steinem and Marcia Gillespie. Its headquarters was moved to Los Angeles and it has continued publishing, albeit sporadically.

In 2002, the venerable *Sojourner: The Women's Forum* again suspended publication (it has done so twice before, in 1977 and 1984), although its website suggests it will continue to have

some presence. Fran Hosken has produced *WIN* (Women's International Network) *News*, an overview of information and initiatives for women in dozens of nations, for nearly three decades. She has announced that 2003 will be the final



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year for publishing a hard copy of *WIN News*; it is seeking partners to explore an electronic version.

*Feminist Bookstore News* ceased publication in 2000 after 24 years. At that time, publisher Carol Seajay said rising costs, the brutal economics of the book industry and a need to secure her financial future all played a part in her decision. *Feminist Bookstore News* had been popular with fans of women authors as well as women's bookstore proprietors, whose numbers have declined sharply. In 1997, there were more than 120 women's bookstores in the United States and Canada; by summer 2001, there were only 74,

according to the Feminist Bookstore Network.

Mollie Hoben, who with Glenda Martin founded the *Minnesota Women's Press* in St. Paul in 1984, mourns the loss of pioneering feminist titles even as she and Martin prepare to turn the reins over to new publishers, Kathy Magnuson and Norma Olson.

"When we started, it seemed like there were a lot more feminist and women's publications," Hoben says. "There was even a national association that struggled for a few years to try to do things together. I feel really discouraged now as I hear of publications closing. The dy-

namics of the bigger economy and bigger culture seem so overwhelming that I don't know what the answer is."

**Local Publications Find Staying Power**

*Minnesota Women's Press* has managed to compete in commercial white water and thrive. In addition to printing 40,000 copies of a biweekly newspaper, *Minnesota Women's Press* promotes the reading of women's books and has a small retail book operation. It also publishes the *Minnesota Women's Directory* of women in business and women-centred organisations. Hoben credits the character of the community and long-range planning for the company's growth.

"It's one of the best places to be doing what we're doing," she says, "because of the strong women's and feminist communities here and the progressive na-

ture of Minnesota, though that's not true everywhere. But if you look at what's gone on here over the decades, there remain very strong women's efforts."

"Another piece of our longevity was our decision from the beginning to be a for-profit business with the expectation that everyone would get paid for what they did and that we would operate in what we think of as a feminist business mode: minimal hierarchy, real attention to process and communication, with everybody in the company having the authority to carry out their responsibility."

Hoben sees advertising as "a major differentiator" for *Minnesota Women's Press*. "Being very locally focused and coming out every other week gave us access to advertisements that less frequent publications have a harder time getting, like employment ads."

Martha Leslie Allen is director of the Washington-based Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press, which has resumed publishing a directory of women's media. The energy expressed in periodicals such as *Global Black Woman*, *Azizah Magazine*, *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, and *We* magazine give her reason for optimism about feminist publishing.

"I was concerned when I



started up the directory again in 2000 after we hadn't published it in a number of years, because I didn't have the numbers of entries that I had in the 1970s and 1980s," she says. "But now I realise it's not a matter of numbers—a lot of publications have been coming on internationally and in different formats so the level of communicating is great and we are probably reaching greater numbers." The Internet has been key to this, Allen says: "Inexpensively, we're able to communicate on a global level."

In addition to founding Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press (WIFP), Donna Allen—Allen's mother—also founded *Media Report to Women* in 1972. The publication tracked depiction of women by media and advancement of women in media. She produced it until the Communication Research Associates acquired it in 1987. I've served as its editor since that time.

Phyllis Holman Weisbard, Women's Studies Librarian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says that from her perspective, the ebb and flow of women's periodicals is the natural order of things. "We really do feel that this is always happening," she says. "They

come and go. I think over time, people lose steam; they move into other endeavors; they may have a hard time pulling in new blood."

Weisbard publishes *Feminist Collections: A Quarterly of Women's Studies Resources*, now in its 24th year, edited with colleague JoAnne Lehman. The two have carefully tracked the coming and going of feminist periodicals. Startups are encouraging, Lehman says, pointing out that "in every issue of *Feminist Collections* we're announcing a new print publication, plus everything from online 'zines to online scholarly journals." Asked if the rise of Internet publishing has offset the decline in the availability of some older print titles, Weisbard says, "Absolutely." Two-thirds of feminist titles have online-

only versions, she says.

Weisbard, Lehman and Allen all say that the flip side of reaching larger audiences via the Internet is that online publishing is unlikely to have the archival presence of print materials.

"I think the unfortunate thing I've seen develop is that when some publications added an online version, the print publication ended up ceasing because it was so much easier and less expensive to reach people via the Internet," Allen says. "However, the historical record will not be documented as well for the online magazines, and as a historian, I find that very unfortunate.

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*news, research and commentary about women and media. She is also co-author of Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism (Second Edition), published this summer by Strata Publishing, Inc.*

For more information:  
Off our backs: a women's newsjournal: <<http://www.offourbacks.org>>  
Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press: <<http://www.wifp.org>>  
Minnesota Women's Press: <<http://www.womenspress.com>>  
University of Wisconsin—Women's Studies Librarian's Office: <<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/>>

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