

“A PUBLIC SENSE OF OURSELVES”: COMMUNICATION AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING IN CANADA’S *LESBIANNEWS/LNEWS*, 1989–98

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***LesbiaNews*, later known as *LNews*, was an alternative media monthly, written and produced in Victoria, British Columbia by a dedicated group of women who devoted themselves to raising the public profile of the lesbian community through its pages.** It was an outstanding example of a counter-public sphere publication, produced by and for a female minority group. Using critical feminist analysis of its contents and oral history interviews with its key editors, this article explores how *LesbiaNews/LNews*’ shifting editorial mandate reflected the conflicts among its contributors and readers over lesbian feminism and sexual identity politics. The editors, who all held their own strong beliefs, found that promoting both solidarity and diversity was difficult in a lesbian community that was increasingly apolitical, fragmented and elusive, and losing its few social supports.

KEYWORDS: alternative media, community, feminism, lesbian

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In September 1991, a letter to *LesbiaNews* paid tribute to Debby Gregory, the founding editor, for ‘your wit, your passion and your ability to make me squirm! Each month I look forward to the arrival of *LesbiaNews*: more letters, articles and commentary to remind me that though “community” is sometimes an elusive place, we all belong there together’ (Morissette, 1991, 3). Exactly two years earlier, *LesbiaNews* had made its debut in Victoria, the capital of British Columbia, devoting itself to providing news and views on political and cultural diversity, religion, sexuality, family and social life from a female, same-sex perspective. Gregory was the first of a succession of editors who devoted themselves to the publication and the lesbian community it served over the next nine years.

Victoria is located on the southern tip of Vancouver Island, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, on Aboriginal land later inhabited mainly by British immigrants. In contrast to the much larger, more multi-racial city of Vancouver, Victoria is home to a predominantly white, middle-class population, consisting mainly of provincial civil servants, professors and students, people working in the tourism and service industries and the many retirees drawn to its temperate winter climate, well-tended gardens and striking sea views. One *LesbiaNews* writer (Lightwater, 1997), adopting the common assumption that lesbians represent 5 percent of any given population, reckoned that there were about 9000 lesbians in the area by the late 1990s, although how many were involved in the local lesbian community was an open question, since they were statistically invisible (McLauchlin, 1998b).

Debby Gregory (now Debby Yaffe),¹ grew up in Los Angeles, California, and had embraced the women’s movement, ‘which exploded inside me’, while she was living in London, England during the 1970s. She injected the same ideological passion and energy into the feminist circles of Victoria when she moved there in 1981. Married to the father of her son and identifying as bisexual, she fell ‘madly in love’ with her current, long-time partner, Donna Murray, and from then on referred to herself as a lesbian ‘because that’s the way my life turned out’. A philosophy graduate from UCLA in California, Gregory decided to start a specifically lesbian-identified newsletter, with ‘no euphemisms or cutesy-poo – I wanted it right out there’. She hoped to provide a public forum in which contributors and readers could discuss and debate lesbian feminist ideas and how they related to their sense of political identity and community (Yaffe interview, 2011).

Lesbians and Their Media: Historical, Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Georgina Turner (2009), invoking Nina Wakeford (1998) and Shane Phelan (1989), characterizes a lesbian community as one that offers open acknowledgement and a measure of safety to its members; attracts other visible lesbians; provides opportunities for socializing as well as instilling lesbian identity and customs; and positions itself politically in relation to the dominant, heterosexual world (Turner, 2009, 707). In her first *LesbiaNews* editorial, Gregory explained to her readers:

Other than the monthly Coffee House and the annual GALA, all lesbian activity in our town seems to take place in private. There is no ongoing public sense in which we are a community. The main aim of this newsletter is to provide us with a public sense of ourselves, as well as to function as a safe forum for communication and exploration. (Gregory, 1989a, 2)

Nine years later, its last editor, Barbara McLauchlin, made the arguable claim that *LesbiaNews*, by then titled *LNews*, was 'the longest-running, lesbian-only, English-language magazine in the country' (McLauchlin, 1998d, 10).²

Many of the 40–50 feminist periodicals in 1980s–1990s Canada included some lesbian content (Freeman, 2011; Godard, 2002; Marshall, 1995; Masters, 1991), but the exclusively lesbian ones tended to be short-lived and are more difficult to track. This study is the first published history of a known, specifically lesbian, English-Canadian periodical that lasted long enough to allow detailed analysis of its editorial progression. Feminist media theory, archival evidence and oral history interviews all elucidate the changes in the original mandate of *LesbiaNews* over the life of the publication as its editors attempted to broaden its readership politically, culturally and geographically. They all wanted it to reflect the perceived diversity of the lesbian community, but on their own political terms, in Victoria, then on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands, and, finally throughout British Columbia. The resulting shifts in editorial perspective reflected a growing resistance to lesbian feminism, a backlash that was occurring nationally and internationally in lesbian communities, among feminists and in the mainstream and alternative media (Carter and Noble, 1996; Freeman, 2011, 2006; Marshall, 1995; Turner, 2009). My findings suggest that, in this particular alternative publication, the concept of community became increasingly fragmented and elusive, reflecting a readership that was rapidly becoming disengaged from lesbian feminism and losing the pillars of its social support system as well.

LesbiaNews' editorial policies, advertising strategies, design changes and distribution methods were aimed at shaping and reflecting the 'counter-public sphere' of lesbian expression in relation to the mainstream media. By terms such as 'counter-public' (Marshall, 1995) and 'alternative' (Atton, 2002), scholars mean specific media produced by, for and about women and/or racial, cultural and political minorities. These media are usually established in counterpoint to the mainstream, male-centred, bourgeois 'public sphere' of communication that Jürgen Habermas originally envisioned as being crucial to participatory democracy. Barbara Marshall (1995), borrowing from Habermas (1989), and his feminist critics, Nancy Fraser (1989, 1992) and Rita Felski (1989a, 1989b), argued that the feminist media helped create and maintain a 'feminist counter-public sphere' that challenged the mainstream media's dismissive or misleading treatment of women,

especially those considered politically radical. Such publications not only promoted women's 'ownership, inclusion and accountability' in communication (Riano, 1994, 7), they also allowed writers and readers of different feminist perspectives to challenge one another, thus creating the type of forum in which 'diversity is actively promoted, identities are constructed and political claims are formed and pressed' (Marshall, 1995, 463). Lesbian periodicals, with their focus on female same-sex issues, reflected those same characteristics, but operated as both a complementary and alternative publication to the predominantly gay male or feminist ones, such as *Angles* (Hellquist, 1987) and *Kinesis* (Freeman, 2011), both based in Vancouver.

LesbiaNews was the only local information sheet for lesbians in Victoria in the 1990s, supporting itself financially through subscriptions, limited advertising, fundraising events and news-stand sales at Everywoman Books and similar outlets. It relied mainly on volunteer labour from its editors, writers, advertising and distribution coordinators, newspaper design and page make-up workers and other production participants (McLauchlin interview, 2011; Perks interview, 2011; Yaffe interview, 2011). On principle, Canadian feminists generally believed that women should be paid for their work, but most of their publications could not afford to do so. Barbara Godard has described their efforts at non-profit publishing as a cultural 'gift' or 'labour of love' to the feminist community (Godard, 2002, 209, 215). That was also true of *LesbiaNews*, until its last editor attempted to revamp the volunteer newsletter as a salary-paying magazine, *LNews*, with limited financial success (McLauchlin interview, 2011).

On average, *LesbiaNews/LNews* published 10 times a year for a total of nine years. All 91 issues, including two editions that were published as *elleNews*, are available in the Victoria Women's Movement Archives at the McPherson Library, University of Victoria, and form the core of the primary research at the heart of this article. Each edition averaged 12–20 pages, depending on the amount of advertising and publishable material from its contributors that month. Aside from the usual editorials and feature articles, at different times *LesbiaNews/LNews* carried regular columns on gardening (Gibson, 1990), sports (Devison, 1994), finances (Anderson, 1995), relationships ('Ask Gertrude', 1990), sexuality (Jana and Otter, 1996) and rural lesbian politics (Stone, 1997a). There were also cultural reviews, community announcements, photographs, cartoons and letters to the editor. Because the archived collection is complete, it is possible to track the changes in the publication's editorial outlook from beginning to end, and the debates over lesbian community politics in Victoria that were appearing in its pages.

My audio-recorded, oral history interviews with the three editors who were most engaged in editing and producing *LesbiaNews/LNews* is a first attempt at analysing the editorial direction of this publication, presented here in the context of some of the editorials, contributors' articles and readers' letters that they published. The qualities

these very different editors shared in common were a devotion to the lesbian community and openness to political debate in the newsletter/magazine. While there were a number of other dedicated women involved in producing the periodical over the years, Debby Gregory (Yaffe interview, 2011), Karey Perks (interview, 2011) and Barbara McLaughlin (interview, 2011) succeeded each other as editor, took the leading and most enduring editorial roles in an endeavour that involved frequent staffing changes, and were willing to be interviewed for the record. Further analysis would involve oral history interviews with other participants and readers, as well as discourse analysis of more of the contents.

Oral history as methodology has been the subject of numerous theoretical articles and books, is recognized as a sub-field of history, and is often used in other disciplines such as Communication and Women's Studies. The oral history interview is not just a primary research tool in its own right, but supplements documents and other evidence-gathering methods (Charlton et al., 2008).³ As this is essentially a feminist media history article, I have approached the interview experience from that theoretical direction. As Sherna Berger Gluck (2008) points out, a feminist perspective is important in determining the value of women's oral history, being one 'that not only understands how women's experience is gendered, but that also understands the tension between women's oppression and resistance'. Moreover, the feminist researcher must safeguard her subjects' vulnerabilities and personal agency, without abandoning her own critical faculties (Gluck, 2008, 138). My interviews consisted of a series of incisive questions resulting in structured, informative conversations with Yaffe, Perks and McLaughlin about their editorial experiences with the publication. I wanted them to speak for themselves in the political and cultural context of their respective editorial mandates, focusing my inquiries on their experiences as journalism activists in the local lesbian community during the 1990s rather than their life stories. I am fully aware that our interviews were mediated by me as a media historian and by them as my subjects through that narrative, conversational prism. We were, in that sense, 'negotiating and creating a text' together (Chamberlain, 2008, 145). From these interviews and the content of the publication, I have ascertained that there were three distinct stages in the life of *LesbiaNews/LNews* that closely paralleled their respective editorial tenures.

***LesbiaNews* (1989–91): a lesbian feminist newsletter**

As the founding editor of *LesbiaNews*, Gregory's main preoccupation was the meaning and tangible evidence of the lesbian community in Victoria, because 'people were always talking about the lesbian community, where is it, what is it, what's the matter with it' – and it was important to her as well that the newsletter incorporate a lesbian feminist editorial perspective (Yaffe interview, 2011). At the time, many Canadian lesbian feminists worked within the women's movement,

bringing to it their critiques of 'compulsory heterosexuality' and other 'patriarchal' values in society. Others wanted to separate themselves from men and heterosexual women altogether (Descarries-Bélanger and Roy, 1991, 17–20, 4). Gregory, who loved her son too much to become a separatist (Yaffe interview, 2011), issued *LesbiaNews* as 'Victoria's (later Vancouver Island's) Monthly Lesbian Feminist Newsletter' (*LesbiaNews*, 1989, 1, 1991, 1). As of July 1990, the editorial credits box carried the following advisory: 'LesbiaNews is published by, for, and about lesbian feminists and allies. We reserve the right to limit subscriptions accordingly' (*LesbiaNews*, 1990, 2). By allies, she meant women who might not share a lesbian feminist perspective, but were generally supportive of those who did.

Gregory loved analysis and debates and acknowledges that she 'didn't register' the segment of the local lesbian community that was not as politically engaged, but simply wanted to socialize together (Yaffe interview, 2011). Her concept of community was, nonetheless, inclusive in that she felt it important that her contributors and advertisers respect the racial and other categories of diversity that existed among her readers, a concern that was in line with the political position of progressive feminist groups. She declared that she would not publish anything that she considered to be 'racist, sexist, homophobic, ageist, classist, able-bodyist, anti-semitic, or a personal attack. Hopefully, we can all avoid these politically dastardly categories without falling prey to the twin deadly sins of Creeping Boredom and Terminal Niceness' (Gregory, 1989a, 2). Other feminist publications, notably *Kinesis* in Vancouver, adhered to similar editorial guidelines in their quest to become as inclusive as possible (Freeman, 2011).

Gregory, as a relative newcomer to the city, repeatedly asked her readers about the history and current nature of the local lesbian community as 'it seems very amorphous and nebulous to me' (Gregory, 1990a, 2). Reva Hutkin supplied a nostalgic, two-part memoir about the lesbian community of the late 1970s: close-knit, busy, activist and sociable. '[W]e tried to be all things to all women and sometimes we were successful and sometimes we failed miserably, but at least we always tried' (Hutkin, 1990a, 6). As for identity issues, Hutkin believed that most lesbians lived their lives on a continuum between radical lesbian separatist and a straight-appearing person who was in the closet at work, often with little in common with each other beyond their sexual orientation. She wondered if her readers really wanted a lesbian community in Victoria, and if so, how to rebuild it (Hutkin, 1990b). Writing in response, A. Bond made a distinction between close friendships and lesbian community:

After the last women's dance, for instance, I was struck by the awesome number of lesbians who attended.... I didn't particularly imagine that they would all bring me chicken soup when I was sick.... The author asks whether we want to rebuild

the lesbian community in Victoria. I think it's already there. I came here as a lesbian, I have attended the occasional lesbian function and have gathered with other lesbians at their homes. This, to me, is the community. I also have a circle of friends, most of whom are lesbians, on whom I can count when I am in need.

It was, however, the reassuring knowledge of a diverse, world-wide community of lesbians, who 'share the global struggle against homophobic/patriarchal oppression', that gave her the courage to come out as lesbian to family and friends in the first place (Bond, 1990, 13).

This kind of discussion was exactly what Gregory wanted to see in the pages of *LesbiaNews*, but the momentum was difficult to maintain. From its founding to its demise, the number of subscribers rose from 15 to about 250, which was certainly not enough to sustain it as a paying venture (Yaffe interview, 2011; McLauchlin, 1996a; McLauchlin interview, 2011). It was very difficult to get members of the lesbian community, aside from a few regulars, to actively contribute articles and other material to the publication at any point in its history, despite heartfelt pleas (Garcia, 1992) and sporadic attempts to survey its readership on their editorial and personal preferences (McLauchlin, 1997). Aside from their editorials, Gregory, Perks and McLauchlin all found themselves writing articles or columns as well, partly to fill gaps in the content in any given month. On a practical level, Perks and McLauchlin in particular found it difficult to negotiate the compromises that working in a feminist collective entailed (McLauchlin interview, 2011; Perks interview, 2011; Yaffe interview, 2011).

The reticence among potential contributors might have been a reaction to a 1990s feminist culture that was heated and divided, especially over racial and ethnic issues, as activists tried to redefine and redirect the women's movement towards inclusivity (Rebick, 2005, ch. 19). These issues surfaced early in *LesbiaNews* as Gregory and her associates challenged the perceived internalized racism they encountered within themselves and members of the lesbian community.

Victoria is such a heavily white-Anglo area, it often feels normal that our groups and gatherings are composed almost exclusively of white women. But of course there are many Native, Black and Asian women living here. If we don't make particular efforts to include these women, then we are effectively excluding them. (Gregory, 1989b, 9)

Joan Garcia, a self-described 'biracial' woman originally from Jamaica, replied with anecdotes about her own resistance to prejudice, including an encounter with a well-meaning woman who referred to her as 'Off-White'. Commented Garcia: 'This time I was less verbally agile, my intellect suddenly rendered useless by the

realization that my entire being has been reduced, in an instant, to a description of a type of house paint.' While she found such incidents amusing, they made her think hard about her situation. 'I've even been asking myself what the implications are of my newfound position on the sliding color scale of the human species. I mean, am I to be courted as a token, or to be shunned?' She went on to state unequivocally that 'Racism is a very serious business, and it is alive in Victoria.' She suggested, as a first step, that:

we commit ourselves personally to making courageous and clear verbal responses to the racist comments, stories and jokes we hear around us. We can remember that silence is perceived as approval, and that denial of the reality of oppression is used effectively to control entire cultures.

She also reminded her readers that class prejudice often works hand in hand with race prejudice. 'Not long ago we were colonized by a country whose class system is among the most rigid in the world', she added, referring to English Canada's British roots (Garcia, 1990, 2). She began contributing articles such as video reviews (Garcia, 1991a) and became a co-editor after Gregory left, once writing an editorial tribute to Audre Lorde, the prominent Caribbean-American lesbian writer who had been one of the strongest critics of the white-dominant feminist movement, and one of the strongest advocates of diversity (Garcia, 1993; Lorde, 1996). In the meantime, a number of women, including Gregory's partner, Donna Murray, wrote about their learning experiences at anti-racism workshops in Victoria (Murray et al., 1990).

These articles, designed to provoke sincere soul-searching within the Victoria lesbian community, were relatively calm and encouraging, compared to those on another difficult topic – anti-Semitism – which struck close to home for the women who tackled it. Lynn Greenough, a gentile woman whose partner was Jewish, wrote of her desire to explore Judaism further after she attended an anti-Semitism workshop (Greenough, 1990a). In response, Lauri Nerman (1990) and Gregory (1990b) both accused her of trying to romanticize and appropriate Jewish identity, especially in her observance of some religious rituals. It 'pushed some buttons' for Gregory, who had only recently become more interested in her own *secular* Jewish roots but found it difficult to discuss openly.

To my surprise and distress, I often find it easier to come out as a Lesbian to straights than I do to come out Jewish among gentiles, most definitely including Lesbians and feminists. The reaction that I most dread in both cases is that slight but tangible sense of 'Otherness' that descends like an invisible plastic film, as though I am somehow different from the woman I was before the words were spoken and absolutely different from Everybody Else.

She added: 'Jews have worked too hard to maintain our own culture to feel easy when others selectively help themselves to the bits they happen to fancy' (Gregory, 1990b, 12). Other Jewish contributors to the debate were more sympathetic to Greenough, who still insisted on her right to explore her religious options regardless of the criticism (Brown, 1990; Greenough, 1990b; Liefshultz, 1990). A supportive gentile 'ally' of all the participants wrote, more optimistically, that their dialogue was important in the quest to end oppression of all kinds (McKirby, 1990), but it certainly exposed some of the cracks in community solidarity. Gregory was glad that these women contributed to the debate in *LesbiaNews*, even though publicly airing personal disagreements could 'very difficult' in a 'very tight' community whose lesbian members had nowhere else to go (Yaffe interview, 2011). Further disagreements about very different identity issues were soon to surface in its pages under her editorial successors.

LesbiaNews (1991–5), a lesbian diversity newsletter

After Gregory began teaching Women's Studies courses at the University of Victoria, she decided that *LesbiaNews* was becoming too much of a burden (Yaffe interview, 2011; see also McLaughlin, 1998d, 1998e). For the next two years, Joan Garcia⁴ and Karey Perks co-edited *LesbiaNews* as part of a collective (Garcia, 1991b), alternating the duties of coordinating the newsletter and writing editorials. During this period, lesbian feminism came under scrutiny and criticism from Perks and several contributors, while the editorial mandate and focus of the newsletter shifted toward sexual identity issues. 'Coming out' became a primary, recurring theme – not just as lesbian, but as 'butch' or 'femme', as bisexual or transgender. Perks had already been writing a regular column, 'Brainfever', recounting in one instalment how she had come out as a lesbian, at least to herself, after she had become a wife and mother (Perks, 1991b). In that same edition of *LesbiaNews*, she wrote in her first editorial that coming out at all still took courage. 'But courage is like a bicep. It strengthens with use' (Perks, 1991a, 2). Ongoing discussions about sexual identity were also current topics in feminist publications, such as *Kinesis* in Vancouver (Freeman, 2011), and in academic, Women's Studies journals as well (Carter and Noble, 1996).

Born in Manhattan, Perks earned a general arts degree from the University of California at Berkeley before deciding to study and work as an electronics technician. She credits Kelevelyn Hurley, a regular contributor, for involving her in *LesbiaNews* and continuing to motivate and support her. To Perks, 'a lesbian community' was just a convenient phrase, but 'politically, it's necessary ... that you gather people around an issue which, at that point was identity and self-defense, and to act as an agent for social change'. *LesbiaNews* was like a 'waving a flag' in that regard (Perks interview, 2011). As co-editor, Perks wanted to break away from

a strictly feminist mandate for *LesbianNews* to one that she saw as more inclusive of all the lesbians in the Victoria community. These discussions with other members of the collective resulted in a new look and title for the newsletter – *elleNews*, which now included the nearby Gulf Islands within its geographical reach (*elleNews*, 1993a, 1). Perks explained to her readers:

A large part of the name change has to do with wanting to serve the whole lesbian community, including feminists and non-feminists and lesbians who don't call themselves feminists but really are and those who call themselves feminists but there's this other feminist who doesn't think they are. You see the problem. It's not the label that's important, anyway; it's what's on the inside that counts. (Perks, 1993a, 2)

In that same edition, the newsletter's unnamed 'Roving Electronic Reporter' phoned several women she knew to ask them if a woman can be a lesbian but not a feminist. There were different answers, pro and con. One respondent explained:

What's happening now is a split that's really healthy, because the alliance of lesbian and feminist was a kind of homophobic cop-out. It was easier to call oneself a feminist, rather than a lesbian, so we denied the power of our sexuality. Now we're sexualizing our lesbianism and I think that's healthy. I'm not sure where it's coming from, whether it's a sexual liberation thing or a feminist backlash. Ask me again in twenty years.

Another responded declared, 'bitterly', that she wished that all lesbians were feminists 'because the fate of lesbians is more tied up with the fate of women generally than with homosexuals.... For a lesbian not be a feminist is cutting the ground out from under herself' (*elleNews*, 1993b, 6).

Joan Garcia's editorial in the next issue also addressed the re-vamping of the newsletter, which she was not entirely happy about as the new mandate statement no longer used the expression 'lesbian feminist' but aimed 'to provide content that inspires, empowers and promotes lesbians. It is published by, for and about lesbians, bi-sexual women and their allies' (*elleNews*, 1993a, 2). She explained: 'Actually, it wasn't the word "lesbian" that seemed to inhibit so many, but the word "feminist" – something that I find even more distressing' (Garcia, 1993, 2). By April, the title had reverted to *Lesbiannews*, with the 'n' in bold type, because *elleNews* felt like going back into the closet to some of its readers (Perks, 1993c). The renewed mandate did not change, however, although the masthead did, with Barbara McLaughlin replacing the departing Garcia as co-editor with Perks in the fall of 1993. Perks, who was taking Women's Studies courses, continued to question

theories of lesbian feminism (Perks, 1993d). *Lesbianews* published duelling articles written by other Women's Studies students, who defended or disputed the value of these courses (Armageddon, 1993; Chandler, 1993), while another contributor defended feminism in one article and promoted sex toys in another, giving the lie to the idea that lesbian feminists were sexually repressed (Newhouse, 1995a, 1995b).

In the meantime, several women who were comfortable identifying as 'butch' or 'femme', rather than lesbian feminist, recounted their personal stories, including Perks, who had secretly felt more male-identified and sexually engaged than she believed was acceptable to her radical lesbian feminist companions of the 1970s. 'Strange that feminism made it easier to be a lesbian and harder at the same time' (Perks, 1993b, 9). Her friends back then viewed gender roles, common among earlier generations of lesbians, as patriarchal and 'thought Butch/Fem couples were trying to be like those sugary figures on the tops of wedding cakes, especially the one in the tux, who reminded them of men'. Referring to the jeans and flannel shirts that lesbian feminists uniformly wore at the time, she added: 'Why an exception was made for dressing like the boys in shop class was never adequately explained to me, but as I was more interested in Alices than analysis, I didn't ask.' In fact, she found the concepts of 'butch' and 'femme' useful for understanding her own relationships. 'The last thing we need is another Lesbian Ten Commandments' (Perks, 1994a, 2).

'ShOut about it', a new coming-out column, included a memoir from a woman who recalled growing up 'femme' as a girl like any other, except that she was not attracted to boys but to her own best girl friends (Anonymous, 1993). Kelevelyn Hurley believed that lesbian feminists should forget their political differences, allow other women their choices, and form alliances with sexual minorities within the lesbian community (Hurley, 1992a, 1992b). Writing about her research on bisexual women, she said it frustrated her that sexual identity was often divided into 'opposites' – straight or gay. She wondered if sexual orientation was innate while sexual identity was chosen. 'I call myself bisexual *and* lesbian. And I'd like to get rid of both labels. I'll settle for queer. To queer something is to make it different than it was.... Here's to polymorphous perversity. I'm working on it' (Hurley, 1992c, 6–7). Other contributors opted for committed, lesbian relationships, even social integration with the mainstream. As Canada did not yet have a law allowing civil same-sex marriages, one couple announced their intention to hold a public commitment ceremony to 'show our extended families that our union is just as legitimate, significant and honorable as any recognized in the straight world' (Allison and Herweier, 1995).

An underlying tension in these 'coming out' articles was possible rejection by other lesbians in Victoria, many of whom had their own fiercely held stances on sexual identity and politics. Before she acknowledged her attraction to women, Jacqueline B. had been married to a man in Tokyo, a way of life she compared to that of the

suburban women in *The Stepford Wives*, a well-known satirical novel and Hollywood movie. She found the transition to her new life very difficult. 'Lesbian communities are not, in my experience, willing to throw a life vest out to those women swimming in the waters of confusion. Women must make it to the Isle of Lesbos before the community will accept them – no hets or bisexuals allowed!' (B., 1994, 10). The agenda of *Lesbianews*, however, was clearly to be as accepting as possible, extending its embrace to people undergoing gender transition, notably Zorya Plaskin, who came out as a male-to-female transsexual in *Lesbianews* (Plaskin, 1993) and co-edited the newsletter with Perks and Barbara McLauchlin between the fall of 1993 and the spring of 1994.

At a time when Canada's gay and feminist organizations and publications were suffering a right-wing backlash from conservative governments and lobbyists (Freeman, 2011; Marshall, 1995), Perks emphasized the need for unity among the diversity in the lesbian community. 'A minority that is small needs all the friends it can get, politically I mean, if we're going to get – and keep – the rights and protections we need' (Perks, 1992, 2). That same edition, with the theme, 'Strange Bedmates', was illustrated with a cover cartoon showing parading women carrying placards that testified to their various sexual identities and interests, including S&M (Cruzille, 1992). This sexual practice, whether fictionalized or real, had long been debated in the feminist press (Freeman, 2011). It was both defended as a personal choice and criticized as patriarchal in the pages of *Lesbianews* (Heiden, 1994; Hunt, 1994a, 1994b; Louis, 1994; Quinlan, 1994; Sept, 1994). Perks saw S&M as a form of 'politicized sex', and therefore open to feminist debate (Perks, 1994b, 2), while Sheila Plunkett, who was her co-editor between 1994 and 1995, explained that 'deciding on any grounds to censor someone's work would be a very complex process' (Plunkett, 1994, 12). This position was underlined with an additional sentence in the newsletter's mandate statement: 'Its goal is to celebrate all aspects of lesbian life' (*Lesbianews*, 1994, 2).

In a number of their editorials, the different editors continued to write about the importance of community spirit among the lesbians in Victoria, despite their very real economic and political differences, especially as there were few women-only places where they could gather regularly. The local gay bar, Rumours, held a women's night only once a month (Rumours, 1995), so the sole weekly, all-female venue was their own Hot Flashes coffee house (Perks, 1995a). As Perks explained in her last *Lesbianews* editorial, her philosophy 'has evolved from a belief in the importance of community to a belief in the importance of community visibility' (Perks, 1995b, 2). At this point, Barbara McLauchlin took over from her as the lone editor of *Lesbianews*, mainly because she did not want it to revert to being 'a totally feminist political paper. I wanted it to be a journal of who we were and what we were doing at the time we were doing it, with all kinds of room for discussion' (McLauchlin interview, 2011). Under her mandate, the newsletter became a more market-focused, lesbian magazine.

***LNews* (1995–8): a lesbian magazine**

Of the three editors interviewed for this article, McLaughlin was the only one with mainstream journalism training and experience. Born in St John's, Newfoundland, she was raised and educated in Ontario, earned a degree at the University of Waterloo, and worked as a reporter on the *Expositor* in Brantford. After three years she abandoned daily journalism for a career in theatre production, moving to Victoria in the early 1970s (McLaughlin interview, 2011; McLaughlin, 2010). She had also abandoned the traditional tenet of journalistic objectivity, which conflicted with her political activism, but still believed *Lesbianews* should be accurate, interesting and offer different perspectives (McLaughlin interview, 2011). During her tenure, McLaughlin brought about two major changes to the publication in a bid to attract more readers and advertisers. First, she decided to produce *Lesbianews* as a magazine, with an arms-length board of directors who would help guide it and raise money to support it, and then she changed its name to *LNews* (McLaughlin, 1995d). She felt that a magazine would have more 'street cred' than a newsletter, and also hoped to make a living at it, but it paid her very little in the end (McLaughlin interview, 2011).

After two years, she started publishing the magazine under the auspices of a short-lived organization that she founded, Victoria Lesbian Community Connections. The February 1997 edition bore a new title and design: *LNews* positioned within a hot pink, gay liberation triangle symbol, with a subheading stating it was 'BC's Premiere Lesbian Magazine', in other words, a province-wide periodical. The mandate statement inside announced that its aims were:

to provide a monthly written forum for lesbians, bi-sexuals, transgendered lesbians and allies that celebrates all aspects of lesbian life, to promote a healthy, visible lesbian community by giving voice to and honoring diverse and common interests and to promote dialogue on issues such as class, culture, racial differences and disabilities. (*LNews*, 1997, 1, 2)

Later, she dropped the word 'transgendered' from the publication altogether, explaining in her outspoken way that it was unnecessary. 'To me, it is to utterly ridiculous to label someone transgendered when they are self-identifying as lesbian. To me, they are lesbian. They have identified as lesbian. Why would I want to know how they physically got that way?' (McLaughlin, 1998c, 2).

McLaughlin had come out as a lesbian in the 1960s, before there was a visible lesbian feminist community at all, her main emotional support being a close gay male friend. She considered herself an 'equality feminist', rather than a radical one, and was always open to connecting with gay men politically, believing in strength and protection in numbers (McLaughlin interview, 2011). She encouraged

her readers to become involved in the local gay pride parade and the national gay liberation struggles for equal rights against the right-wing backlash (McLauchlin, 1995a, 1995b). She also published articles about the discrimination lesbians faced on the international feminist scene (Durie, 1995) and wrote a flattering profile of the founder of the Women's Studies programme at the University of Victoria (McLauchlin, 1995c). McLauchlin criticized the younger generation of lesbians, 'especially the university ones', however, for being too enamoured of feminist theory and politically correct language and not being involved enough in political activism (McLauchlin, 1996c, 2).

She continued to be a strong booster of local lesbian activities in Victoria and new gathering places, such as the G-Spot, that would 'provide space for lesbians to come together to meet, to network, to play, to use the space to develop and/or create whatever we need' (McLauchlin and Barnes, 1997, 1). Aside from her editorial duties, McLauchlin contributed a regular column, 'Little Lezzie Flashes', with her unvarnished opinions and gossip about the goings-on at the G-Spot and other venues (McLauchlin, 1996b), a feature that one 'minority' woman criticized as representing only a particular clique in the community (Warner, 1998, 4). McLauchlin also published editorials and articles on some of the same themes that had engaged the lesbian community in earlier years, such as sex (Ashley, 1997), lesbian family relationships (Toner, 1997), community bridge-building (Shaw and Hutkin, 1996) and racism (SarDyke, 1997).

Some articles were contentious; for example, in one instance, she apologized to subscribers by email for publishing an 'open letter to the goddess' that argued that, because men had a culture of war and violence, there must be some way to do away with most of them (Rabinovitch, 1998a). McLauchlin then retracted the apology in an editorial, feeling, she admitted, 'like a horse's ass' for forgetting that *LNews* was about her readers, not herself. Nevertheless, she took her own mistake in stride as a member of a visible lesbian community, which, as someone who had once been isolated, she highly valued, loving even the frank conversations she engaged in about her personal life.

No matter what is going on in my life, I feel safe in my community. Not everyone feels that way. Some of you feel threatened by community; overwhelmed by community, find community too much in your life – especially your love life. Well, I think about what it was like to come out alone, to be without community, to be the only one I knew for the longest time – how I kept my first relationship under the covers in more ways than one. I don't want to waste time hiding from community. (McLauchlin, 1998a, 2)

In truth, she found her community a disappointment when it came to supporting its own activities, including the defunct Everywoman's Books and Hot Flashes café (McLauchlin, 1998b), the struggling G-Spot (Rabinovitch, 1998b) and even *LNews*. After several 'tongue-biting' years financially supporting and producing the magazine every month, she decided to expand her media community to include gay men and changed *LNews* to *Lavender Rhinoceros* ('An open letter ...', 1999), putting an end to Victoria's only lesbian-focused publication.

Conclusion

This account of *LesbiaNews/LNews* is a rare historical study of a periodical produced by and for lesbians in Canada, and will, I hope, encourage similar studies here and elsewhere. When considering the role that their own media played in any lesbian community, it is vital to understand the politics of the era in which they were operating, to thoroughly examine the publications or other media artifacts in question, and, where feasible, to interview the key editorial personnel using oral history methodology. The interviews with Gregory, Perks and McLauchlin are important because they gave them the chance to remember, reflect on and reconsider their roles as editors of the publication. For Gregory it 'put Victoria on the map' as far as its lesbian community was concerned, but in the process she learned a lot about its diversity, especially along political and generational lines. 'It really showed me that there is not one community, that there are many, and some parts overlap and other parts have almost nothing to do with each other' (Yaffe interview, 2011). Perks regards *LesbiaNews* as being important to the community at the time and as a way of 'planting a seed' that might inspire some future generation to produce its own alternative media (Perks interview, 2011). McLauchlin wonders wistfully if the lesbian community in Victoria would be more united than she feels it is today had she not 'pulled the plug' on *LNews*, especially given the incremental losses of their gathering places such as Everywoman's Books, the Hot Flashes café and the G-Spot. The publication was, she says, 'a vital part of communication and community' among Victoria's lesbians in the 1990s (McLauchlin interview, 2011).

The editors of *LesbiaNews/LNews* strived to provide a means of communication for a lesbian community that they found elusive in many ways. Nevertheless, *LesbiaNews/LNews* existed and persevered for almost a decade because they thought it was crucial that lesbians in Victoria have their own publication, not just as a counter-public sphere alternative to mainstream media (Marshall, 1995), but also to the feminist and gay publications that sometimes included them but were not exclusively about their concerns (Freeman, 2011). Whether it was produced as a labour of love, as Godard (2002) regarded feminist publications, or was meant to be self-sustaining as McLauchlin (2011) had hoped, *LesbiaNews/LNews* reflected Turner's (2009) understanding of connection, identity and safety as being markers

of lesbian community. Moreover, the periodical presented a public profile of this particular lesbian community in Victoria BC, much as its founder (Gregory, 1989a, 2) had envisioned, whether or not its individual readers felt secure or committed enough to gather openly in the city's lesbian-friendly venues.

This study also demonstrates how its editorial agenda changed over the years, depending on who was publishing it. While each editor was adamant about being as inclusive as possible of ethnic, racial and other minorities within the community, they had different approaches to sexual identity politics, as was apparent not only in what they wrote and published at the time but in their oral history recollections a number of years later. The shift over the publication's life-span from a lesbian feminist perspective to a more defiant sexual inclusivity reflected their personal experiences and political differences, as well as a growing impatience with perceived feminist political correctness among their contributors and readers. Their publication's highly individualistic understandings of feminism and sexual identity politics thus reflected the fragmentation as well as diversity of Victoria's lesbian community as these editors saw it during the 1990s.

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1. In order to be historically accurate and honour the editors' own preferences, I generally refer to them as they identified themselves when *LesbiaNews/LNews* was in print. Gregory changed her surname to Yaffe some years later. I cite her as Gregory in reference to her time on *LesbiaNews* and as Yaffe, which she prefers today, in reference to our 2011 interview. While the editors often signed their editorials with their initials, I use their full names in the references in order to make their authorship clear.

2. McLauchlin was mistakenly celebrating *LesbiaNews'* 10th anniversary, rather than its 9th. Her claim about its longevity might have been technically correct in relation to other English-language lesbian magazines in Canada; however, *Womonspace News*, the informative newsletter geared to lesbians who frequented their own centre, *Womonspace*, in Edmonton, Alberta, had been in existence since 1982 and carried similar material to *LesbiaNews*. Lucas has devoted a chapter to *Womonspace News* in her unpublished thesis about the centre (Lucas, 2002, ch. 3).

3. The interviews for this article were conducted and recorded as part of an oral history project on feminists in the alternative media, 1970–2000, with the intention of having them archived after publication. Each audio-recorded interview involves about 20 structured questions and usually lasts close to two hours per session. As such, it goes well beyond the unstructured interviews, telephone conversations and emails often referenced as 'personal communication' in articles involving primary research with contemporary subjects.

4. Joan Garcia graciously declined an interview with the author, explaining that she did not remember enough useful details of her two-year stint as co-editor of *LesbiaNews*.

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