

## **Riot Grrrl zines and online magazines: a study of the self-publishing used by feminists 1990-2015**

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### **Abstract**

The period 1990-2015 was an exciting one for publishing; charting a shift from the predominately print landscape to an era of 'born-digital products'. In the Internet age, publishing houses have to compete with multitudes of free user-generated content on blogs and social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. Self-publishing then, has never been easier. This article focuses on the importance of ordinary girls and women using self-publishing in order to spread their own undiluted feminist ideas. Having total editorial power to share personal experiences as well as political ideas enables feminists to communicate and support each other.

### **Key Words**

Riot Grrrl, feminism, self-publishing, zines, blogging, online revolution

## Introduction

Historically, the publishing industry was male dominated. It was difficult for women to hold power, "the opportunities... are biased towards men". (Cadman et al, 1981 p.22) There was also a "rigid division of labour and hierarchical power structure", which often excluded women from decision-making. (Cadman et al, 1981 p. 27) In the 1960's this led to independent co-operatives like *Sheba Feminist Press*, *The Women's Press* and *Onlywomen Press* starting up. These radical women-only presses gave the women running them the opportunity to make publishing decisions and publish radical work by women.

In 1972 *Virago* was born. It stood out from other women-only publishers at the time as being a commercial project, whose priorities were "politics and profitability". (Murray, 2004 p.32) The business had an internal hierarchy, whereas many other projects were democratic collectives in which everyone had a say in decisions. They took design and branding of the business seriously, they wanted to 'market feminism for a mainstream readership'. (Murray, 2004 p34)

Now an imprint of Little, Brown, the *Virago* list contains respected fiction by women. Writers like Patricia Highgate-Smith (*The Mr Talented Ripley* series) and contemporary author Sarah Waters, who writes historical fiction with lesbian love arcs. On the Little Brown website they explain *Virago's* aims "to break the silence around many women's experiences; to publish breathtaking new fiction, alongside a rich list of rediscovered classics; and above all to champion women's talent". *Virago* no longer has the radical, political edge it once did, in my opinion. This is partly due to other mainstream imprints and publishing houses printing overtly feminists texts, for example Roxanne Gay's *Bad Feminist* printed by Corsair, another imprint of Little, Brown and *The Vagenda* by Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett which was printed by Penguin. Both are non-fiction and critique current culture. In the case of many books, Gay, Baxter and Cosslett included, the authors started with blog or other print and/or online self-publishing projects and when the publisher believes they have become a good enough investment, i.e with a large readership, they offer them a book deal.

## Dissemination of Riot Grrrl

In the early 1990s, a feminist punk music movement sprang up in Olympia on the west coast of America. It began as the idea of Kathleen Hanna and Tobi Vail (who started a band together called Bikini Kill and a zine each, *Jigsaw* and *Riot Grrrl*). They initiated weekly meetings in order to meet other women interested in music and starting bands. They formed a collective of women whose essential aims were to claim space in the predominantly male punk scene for themselves, with their own bands with female musicians and sub-culture. Things snowballed, and Riot Grrrl 'chapters' as they were called, sprang up in other towns and cities in America as well as spreading to the UK via bands like Huggy Bear.

Probably the most important way for individuals involved in the movement to spread the Riot Grrrl message and communicate with each other was through fanzines. Small,

photocopied pamphlets sent via post or given out at gigs, these cheaply produced texts, often with accompanying drawings, collages and photographs contained personal confessions and reviews of bands in addition to manifestos and opinion pieces. For girls in their teens or early 20's self-publishing provided them with a platform to critique and reject mainstream media.

Kathleen Hanna called girls to "set forth their own revolutionary agenda from their own place in the world". (Duncombe, 2007 p.68) Often subversive and angry these zines were confrontational, penned by young people unhappy with the culture they lived in.

" If I was a man-hater (gasp!) would that mean my ideas would not be worth listening to even though there is no institutional way for me to express my hatred for men the way women-hating is shoved down my throat every fucking day" (Marcus, 2010 p.305)

Roger Sabin and Teal Triggs in their book *Below Critical Radar* describes the appeal of the zine and alternative comic scene, 'people making their own culture rather than consuming that which was made for them: about replacing institutionalized information with individual energy and expression... that's a very empowering and romantic idea'. (Triggs, 2001 p.4)

### **Power through self-representation**

Once Riot Grrrl's ideas started to spread and bands (Nirvana and Bikini Kill) connected to grunge and the Riot Grrrl movement started to get famous, mainstream newspapers and magazines began to become interested in covering stories about it. The difference in the way the mainstream media portrayed Riot Grrrls and the agency they wanted to have meant they were rarely happy with the results of being interviewed and photographed. This eventually led to a self-imposed media-blackout. They felt that individuality within the movement was ignored, their political motivations reduced to a 'fashion statement'. A USA Today article in 1992 described them as "mohawked female fans in pucci-print minis". (Marcus, 2010, p.169) However, although they had sprung from the punk scene, Riot Grrrl did not see itself as limited to only punk girls. Some girls responded to this in their zines "riot grrrl is open to ALL girls. It is about a lot of things, like support for each other as girls. Music is just a medium. Just like this zine is.... we can't let these papers dominate our images of each other". (Marcus, 2010, p.198) This rejection of being portrayed by other people sprung from the fact that their "bedrock of DIY values meant being committed to alternative means of communication. The girls did not want to hear mainstream America's ideas about what they were doing or what they ought to be doing".(Marcus, 2010, p167)

Zines, and self-publishing in general, allow one to have total control over how you are represented and how you present ideas to the world (both verbal and aesthetic, political and personal). For a feminist movement, to whom breaking stereotypes as well as issues surrounding body image, body rights, rape and domestic abuse are of utmost importance, the use of and commitment to self-publishing is obvious. The only way to change the world is to have your voice heard. The only way to make sure your words are not corrupted is through speaking them yourself.

This notion of individual women's voices being important is still pertinent today. Indeed

Lena Dunham is famous for her "unwavering commitment to the idea that personal experiences, especially women's personal experiences, are valid and necessary as subject matter". (Daum, 2014)

### **Solidarity and Communication**

There was a strong emphasis on personal narrative in the content of Riot Grrrl zines. "Zines privilege the personal and Riot Grrrl zines are no exception". (Duncombe, 2007, p.68)

Reading about other girls' experiences could be powerful. Kathleen Hanna wrote to Tobi Vail about reading her zine, *Jigsaw*. She said "I read Jigsaw and it made me so happy,..I felt like we are/were trying to do similar type things and I felt validated". (Marcus, 2010 p.46) The two went on to form the band Bikini Kill together, sharing their personal-political thoughts through songs like *Statement of Vindication*:

Mirror Mirror on the wall  
Whose the fairest of them all?  
I don't I don't really care y'know  
I don't I don't really care  
I don't I don't really care  
Like it's not that important at all

You made the rules  
You wrote the script out  
Don't blame me when you fuckin lose

Don't put the blame on me

You try to make me crazy  
You try to make me scared  
You try to make me crazy  
I think yr a fucking drag

You are yr own worst enemy

Individuals sharing truths about themselves and their experiences gave shape to the larger, shared problem of the patriarchal structures in society. Catcalling, the sexualisation of women's bodies, abusive fathers- these were things a lot of girls had, and continued to, experience first hand. Reading these zines helped girls understand that instead of there being something wrong with them, there was something wrong with the wider world in which they lived in. This was important to their self-belief, as, in the words of a Riot Grrrl called Ananda, "feeling you had a community, and that there were people out there like you was a big deal". (Marcus 2010 p.328)

The weekly meetings many Riot Grrrl chapters had was another place where the girls talked about their ideas and personal experiences together, but also planned events and protests. Both these meetings and the zines acted "as therapy, as community building, as groundwork for political action, itself a form of political action". (Marcus 2010, p177)

## Evolution and relevance today

By the late 90's the movement was petering out, as 'people grew out of Riot Grrrl'. (Marcus, 2010 p.328) However, new ways for young people to connect with each other were being adopted via the online world. "Today you can find 21<sup>st</sup> century feminism online...on blogs and social networking sites". (Marcus, 2010 p.328) The Riot Grrrl ethos can be found much more widely.

Some of the people involved in Riot Grrrl, explored self-publishing in these new ways. *Jigsaw*, the zine started in 1989 by Tobi Vail (of Bikini Kill) became [jigsawunderground.co.uk](http://jigsawunderground.co.uk) from 2008, and was last updated on Tuesday May 6<sup>th</sup> 2014. Content included interviews with bands, music reviews, and music-related lifestyle/opinion posts. For example a post about drinking and music which advocates limiting your alcohol intake; not getting caught up with drinking every night just because you are a musician or DJ gigging in a bar.

The freedom and ease of communication the Internet provides cannot be overstated. I can read what Tobi Vail wrote in the late 00's for free quickly and easily even though she lives in America. It would be very difficult for me to get hold of even one of her original print zines.

In 2015, there are a multitude of blogs and online magazines that promote feminist ideas. From the personal, intersectional advice given by Victoria Snow of *Feminish* to the mixture of upbeat girl-power type articles and photographs of kittens of *HelloGiggles*, a blog started by actress Zooey Deschanel, there is something to appeal to all sorts of aesthetic and writing style tastes.

Holly Baxter and Rhiannon Lucy Cosslet, of *Vagenda* online magazine and book, neatly describe how the Internet is changing and raising the profile of feminism:

"We believe that the future for women is bright, especially if we continue to harness the power of the Internet. Social media has galvanised us and allowed us access, for the first time, to a true international solidarity movement of like-minded people who believe in the power of equality, make us laugh, and introduce us to new ways of thinking and analysing. While internet activism should always compliment grass roots campaigning – there is so much work to be done on the ground, too – we are convinced that women finally being able to create their own content, largely unfettered, will force the old bodies of power to take notice, and to eventually give us what we so rightly deserve – equality, in all aspects."

Clues to the Riot Grrrl legacy are everywhere. In issue 24 of independent women's lifestyle magazine *Oh Comely*, in a playlist titled 'music we used to dance to' are tracks from Le Tigre (Kathleen Hanna's band after Bikini Kill broke up, and still staunchly feminist lyrically) and Sleater-Kinney, a band that came from the Riot Grrrl scene. *Oh Comely* is a magazine which claims to "make people feel better about themselves" and promote an "open, inclusive presentation of women". I don't think it would be too much of a jump to think the individuals who run *Oh Comely* have been influenced by the message of Riot Grrrl, directly or indirectly. I think Riot Grrrl's ideas have become more accepted, existing in less confrontational but nonetheless proactive spaces.

### **Rookie Mag: an online re-imagining of Riot Grrrl zines?**

Rookie is an American online magazine for teenage girls; it publishes content 3 times per day during the week and once per day on Saturday and Sunday. Once a year Rookie publishes a yearbook with selected content from online, in print form, along with some new material. It is frank, personal, thoughtful and self-aware. It is also one of the most truly inclusive feminist magazines I have read, especially when it comes to the voices of transgender and disabled young people. Riot Grrrl was criticised for being too white and too cis-gendered, and although I cannot find examples of individuals associated with Riot Grrrl being explicitly transphobic, Riot Grrrl as a whole was definitely never explicitly welcoming to their trans sisters either. The concept credited as coming from writer Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 of internationality describes the importance of inclusion within feminism today: if all kinds of discrimination (racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, classism,) are connected and cannot be examined separately then the voices of all women need to be heard and valued, not just white middle class ones.

An example of the sort of writing Rookie advocates, 'The First Day' is an autobiographical piece written about the process a young trans teen took to aligning her presentation with her gender.

"In the spring of 2002, I was a 10-year-old girl who had been assigned male at birth. I ached with jealousy as one of my sisters slipped into a royal blue prom dress accessorized with butterfly clips and glitter eye shadow. The sight was dreamlike: It all felt unattainable, even though I wanted it so badly. I dreamt of my own prom; I imagined myself wearing the same shades of red that graced my mother's lips. My girlhood was the first thing I knew to be true—although it would be years until my family saw that for themselves."

The website often uses collage and illustration alongside text pieces, not at all dissimilar from the aesthetic of some of the Riot Grrrl zines.

The website has lots of interviews and features on women (and men) who might be positive role models, Carrie Brownstein (from band Sleater-Kinney), Joss Whedon (creator of Buffy), Adam Horowitz (Beastie Boys and married to Kathleen Hanna), well-known and respected rather than the super famous. One regular feature, named 'Ask a grown woman' (or man) web videos, where the well-known man or woman answers readers' questions. The sort of famous people chosen are diverse. Cameron Esposito, a stand-up comic answered questions by lesbian teens about falling in love with straight girls, not feeling like they fit into either butch or femme 'types', insecurities about their genitals and having sex for the first time. When talking about sex, Esposito, and Rookie in general, champion accepting your body as it is, not comparing yourself with porn, and acknowledging an emotional aspect of being intimate with another person. Rookie magazine takes submissions from readers in the form of drawing, collages, photos and written articles, giving a platform to aspiring young people and people writing about being young, who fit in with Rookie's ethos.

## **zines today**

*One Beat* and *Synchronise Witches* are UK zine distros selling punk-style feminist zines currently being made; most priced around £3 or £4. They take the form of online shops using free platforms like tumblr or big cartel. *Chapess* and *One Of My Kind (OOMK)* are both UK zines with wide visibility. OOMK for example is available to buy online through its tumblr, in addition to independent magazine shops and the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. On its tumblr site, editor of *Chapess* talks about the "power of DIY publishing; total creative freedom with plenty of room to fuck it up + start again". Although *Chapess* was started in 2010, the editor describes herself as an 'old school zinester' who has been making zines for many years. *One Beat* had a stall at an event at comic book emporium Gosh! on Berwick Street, London on the 19<sup>th</sup> April 2015. In fact Gosh! and other large comic book shops often sell independent books and zines in addition to alternative and mainstream comics and graphic novels. This shows there is still a market for DIY print products.

However there is another kind of zine being made now. A hybrid between an artist-book and a fanzine. A way for artists, photographers and other creatives to showcase their own work or explore the print medium, cheaply. More likely to be hand stitched, full colour, silk screen printed and possibly more expensive to buy. "The lack of constraints the fanzine format affords the emerging artist space to experiment and to publish new works." (Triggs, 2001) Thus providing these creatives with an analogue aspect to free websites Weebly or Wix. Some of these creatives seem keen to separate themselves from their punk origins. In *Behind the zines: Self-publishing Culture*, Sonya Commentz talks about art zine *Laboratory*, calling attention to it being "unlike rough and ready punk exuberance". (Commentz, 2011, p.84)

## **Conclusion**

Feminists using self-publishing for solidarity, sharing political ideas and critiquing contemporary culture remains constant from 1990 to today. Feminism today is still passionate, although perhaps less blistering in its anger, and a great deal more inclusive than Riot Grrrl was. Print has become more of a luxury medium. Although there are platforms to distribute feminist print zines, the use of social media and blogging tools are quicker and more effective methods for feminists to self-publish.

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