
Investigate the Effect of the Internet on Feminist Publishers

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Abstract

This paper asks whether the rise of the internet has had an adverse effect on independent feminist publishers since their introduction during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. The internet has been an integral part of 21st century society, allowing any individual with access the power to absorb, publish and comment on content. An influx in readily available material has put pressure on the entire publishing industry, especially those that define their catalogue by a niche. This article will consider if blogs and social media have become the leading outlets for feminist content, and whether feminist publishers are now obsolete in the publishing industry.

Keywords: Virago; Second Wave Feminism; internet; blogs; social media.

Introduction

Established in 1972 at the height of the women's liberation movement, Virago quickly became the largest feminist publisher in the UK, publishing titles by new and neglected women writers, as well as works with feminist themes. Founder Carmen Callil began the publishing house with the concept that Virago would be: "the first mass-market publisher for 52 per cent of the population" (Virago 2016), offering a diverse catalogue of titles that reflected the multiplicity of the female experience.

Although other feminist publishers have existed, such as Pandora and Sheba, Virago has been the only publisher of its kind to survive 40 years since its formation. The publisher has developed with the political, cultural and economic changes of society to subsist today as a

successful imprint of Little, Brown Book Group. In *Mixed Media: Feminist Presses and Publishing Politics* (2004, 32), Murray associates Virago's longevity to the "duality of its self-conception", which was a unique and distinguishing characteristic in comparison to other feminist presses of the time: "it perceived itself simultaneously both as a commercial publishing house and as an intrinsic part of the British women's liberation movement."

Working alongside Marsha Rowe and Rosie Boycott, creators of feminist magazine, *Spare Rib*, Callil and her all female team at Virago gave a voice to women not only in the publishing industry, but also to the everyday women in society. However, as commented on by Murray, their feminist actions have always been underlined by business. An aspect that proved particularly advantageous during the sale of the publisher to Little, Brown Book Group, which was at the time owned by American multinational media and entertainment conglomerate, Time Warner.

Virago was bought by Little, Brown in 1995 following a number of years of struggle. Two years later, *Alias Grace* (Atwood 1997) helped the firm to achieve its highest ever trade turnover, proving that the move was a financially viable decision. Virago employee, Lennie Goodings reiterates the publisher's strengths in *The Guardian's* "Lennie Goodings: 'Virago survived because it's a brand with a philosophy'" (Rustain 2013): "I guess it's fair to call it pragmatic but we're not a charity, we're not a political movement, we reflect what's going on but we're not a library, we're a business."

Virago past and present

The first book that Virago published was non-fiction title, *Fenwoman: A Portrait of Women in an English Village* (Chamberlain 1973), which provided a unique study of an isolated village through the unheard voices of the women who lived there. The original cover image consisted of a woman dressed in casual attire holding a wheelbarrow full of straw. Although simple, the image relays the dominating message of the narrative and of the women's

liberation movement, showing that women were capable of fulfilling manual, labour intensive, male orientated roles.

Feminist themes continued to influence Virago's catalogue, with the publication of *Life as We Have Known It: by co-operative working women* (Davies 1977). The title followed a similar oral history to *Fenwoman*, accounting the experience of working class women in 20th century England. From domestic service to working in the fields, Davies depicted the hardship of poverty-stricken marriages and the horrors of childbirth. Although the first-hand reports were effecting, the voices of the women were spirited and inspiring. In an introductory letter by Virginia Woolf, she remarks that women possess: "inborn energy which no amount of childbirth and washing up can quench."

Both titles reflect Callil's initial objectives when forming the publishing house, as reiterated by Murray: "Virago's raison d'être was to publish books informed by the feminist politics of the time and to make them profitable" (32). Rather than producing propaganda material that may have limited their audience, Virago published titles that reflected women's lives without inclusion of flagrant and outspoken comment. The carefully selected titles that Virago chose to publish, as well as deterrence from mentioning feminism with the marketing of the press as a "publisher of books by women", contributed to the titles being more widely read by a diverse market of differing class, education and gender.

In 1977, Virago challenged the narrow definition of classic literature with the launch of Virago Modern Classics. The programme quickly became the hallmark of Virago and exists today as one of their main revenues. A couple of years after the launch, Virago began to introduce male authors to the list in an attempt to attract more men to their readership. The authors included George Gissing, George Bernard Shaw, George Meredith, and H.G. Wells; authors who were publishing titles to challenge the preconceptions about gender stereotypes in an attempt to present the new, modern woman to society.

In *The Guardian's* "Has Virago changed the publishing world's attitudes towards women?" (Cochrane 2013), evidence is given to support the disparity between female and male

readers of women writers: “In 2005-6, UK academics Lisa Jardine and Annie Watkins asked men and women about the books they had found formative; the women's top 20 included six male authors. The men's top 20 included one female author.” Even though Jardine and Watkin’s sweeping survey cannot certify why men primarily choose to read male authors, the results show that there is an apparent disinterest in women writers by the opposite sex.

Cochrane goes onto discuss the paratext of books by women, and comments on how the features that should complement a text often discourage a reader from consuming the contents: “even when female authors adopt a male perspective, along with subject matter that strictly accords to the masculine aesthetic, there is a fair chance they will be packaged frothily, the content of their work undermined by its cover.” Literary theorist, Gérard Genette believed that the paratext of a book acted as a “fringe of the printed text [...] control[ling] one’s whole reading experience” (1997, 2).

If the paratext is genderised it can misrepresent the text and consequently have a destructive influence on the actions of a potential reader. Virago avoided this risk by standardising the covers of Virago Modern Classics. The simple bottle green coloured cover, stamped with the renowned half eaten apple logo became a uniform for the list, making the titles instantly recognisable. The gender neutral colour of green is neither affiliated with male or female, and even though Virago’s logo is highly evocative of Eve’s experience in Eden, the indiscreet subtlety of its positioning does not attempt to overshadow the other paratextual characteristics. In *The Independent’s* “Letter: Male readership for Virago’s offerings” (1993), Walter comments: “few literate women don’t have any dark-green spines on their shelves, or men for that matter [...] men read women, just as women read men, not because of their sex, but because of their writing.”

Although Walter refers to males reading books by women authors to be because of the standard of writing, it is the reference to the “dark-green spines” of the Virago Modern Classics’ titles that emphasises the importance of paratext. The journey of a reader begins with their initial impression about the aesthetic of a book; an action that either motivates or deters a reader from going onto investigate the contents.

The visual appearance of their titles was, and still is, an important part of the publishing process for Virago. To mark 30 years of the Virago Modern Classics list, the publisher reissued a selection of the most prominent titles with bespoke hardback covers designed by a selection of female textile designers. Similarly, to the green of the originals, the new editions are unfeminine in their design, and attract not only a more modern audience, but also a greater number of male readers. The reimagining of the titles also contributes to the value of the books as physical objects. With high quality, embellished covers and complementing additional merchandise, the books make the perfect gift and/or treasured possession. In a throwaway society, the new Virago Modern Classics are created to be displayed proudly on a bookshelf, and to last as long as the author's stories have.

Today, Virago can be seen to have modernised their catalogue of titles in an attempt to stay relevant to current issues. The latest titles include *I Call Myself a Feminist* (Pepe 2015) which covers contemporary feminist topics, such as employment, religion and sexuality, *What language do I dream in?* (Lappin 2016), which is a memoir about the author's mother, and *Let Me Tell You About a Man I Knew* (Fletcher 2016), which follows the final years of artist Van Gogh through the eyes of his wife.

Virago appears to be continuing on an unbiased, reflective route when it comes to the content that it publishes. Even though the titles mentioned are all written by women and raise a number of modern feminist concerns, the themes merely mirror the feelings in society instead of questioning and effecting change. The subject must be broached as to whether Virago is still worthy of being labelled as a feminist publisher, or if it can only be considered as a platform to honour female authors and their work. The number of male writers on the publisher's list has diminished, and there no longer seems to be a battle to express the rationales of feminism to both genders.

A shift in motives may be a consequence of the publisher's loss of independence in 1995, when it became an imprint of Little, Brown Book Group and a part of Time Warner Ltd. As a multimedia conglomerate, Time Warner focused on a variety of channels, instead of just the publishing industry. Subsequently, there may have been greater pressure for the titles

published by Virago to have a more commercial focus as a means of complementing the other areas of the company. In *The Telegraph's* "Virago Modern Classics celebrates 30 years of publishing" (2008), Picardie comments that: "Virago had dumped the bottle-green covers after Carmen Callil's departure in 1995, as well as several of its much-loved authors [...] they thought they would need to 'modernise'".

The rise of feminist presses in the 70s produced an influx of literature written about women by women, which understandably had an effect on the entire industry. Mainstream publishers began to follow suit, with many choosing to include lists dedicated to women to their own catalogue of books. This created competition, and whether positive or not, publishers with a dedicated subject area like Virago had to diversify in order survive as a business. However, the introduction of feminist texts into the commercial market has, as Callil wished: "made women's voices heard" (2008). Virago is not only the largest feminist publisher in the UK, it is also the largest women's imprint in the world. Virago's name as a publisher is legendary and as Murray comments: "individual feminist imprints have become cultural signifiers, alluded to without need for further explanation" (3, 2004).

Virago's move to Hachette Book Group in 2006 signified a step back to a company that was dedicated to the world of publishing, compared to Time Warner's varied range of outlets. Since the change in management, Virago's authors have won and been shortlisted for a flurry of awards, including The Man Booker Prize, the Orange Prize and the prestigious Stonewall Writer of the Year Award. In addition to having a considerable number of their titles topping the highest selling charts, it is evident that Virago has been commercially accepted.

Nevertheless, a new found space in the mainstream and a lessened political voice, again suggests that Virago is no longer a feminist publisher. Murray characterises such a press by its: "non-hierarchical, collectivist structures [and the] emphasis on political engagement over profit generation" (127). Even though it is unknown to an outsider if Virago's team is "non-hierarchical", the publisher has most definitely lost its drive for "political engagement over profit generation". The 21st century has seen a range of feminist-led campaigns such as

UN Women's HeForShe gender solidarity movement and *Grazia's* fight for equal pay, none of which were supported by Virago.

Effect of the internet

The growth of the internet over the past two decades has led to other platforms leading the way in the production of feminist themed content. In the UK alone, there are a number of websites and blogs that are focused on the issues of modern day women. *The Pool* was launched at the beginning of the year, and claims to be a website that: "makes interesting, inspiring and original content for women". Backed by a team of female writers, the website publishes articles on everything from politics to work, life and health, with recent articles including "A selfie is more than just self-indulgent – it's empowering" (Laverne 2016) and "Why taking risks shouldn't be a man's game" (Day 2016).

The Pool provides articles throughout the day and night, demonstrating the increased quantity of content that is now available on the internet, and the faster speed in which it is delivered to readers. The internet allows authors of such platforms to react instantaneously to current affairs, offering comment for free whilst the subject is still fresh. It is therefore understandable that publishing houses are feeling the pressures of digital on their businesses. The process of publishing a book takes a considerably longer amount of time in comparison to the drafting and uploading of a blog post, and in terms of feminist publishing, relevant, up-to-date material is key.

Sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu believed that society was effected by distinct, interlocking fields; politics, economy and culture. If an aspect of one field was to change, it would have an effect on the other two. Advancements in technology has added demand onto all three fields, and as a result increased pressure onto not only the publishing industry, but all areas of business. The internet has had the most significant influence on culture, resulting in the public becoming accustomed to expecting a stream of content continuously. Publishers no

longer have a stronghold as gatekeepers of published material, and they must modernise in order to stay in direct competition with the platforms that the internet has created.

Even though the struggles of the publishing industry have been highly publicised, the internet and the faster pace modern world has pushed publishers to review and renew their traditional and sometimes archaic structures. A positive that has arisen from the internet is social media, which has allowed publishers to connect directly with their audience, providing them with a clear insight into what their readers want. Gooding commented: “one of the reasons Virago has flourished is because of our relationship with our readers. And now conducted via emails, websites, networking sites, twittering – it’s a relationship still very much alive” (Virago 2016). Virago can now respond and adapt quickly to requests, much like the websites and blogs that have become the publisher’s main rival.

Conclusion

Like feminism, publishing has adapted with society. It is not that feminist publishers are now obsolete; it is more that their voice has changed and become part of a wider programme of content. Even though the internet has added additional competition with the material that is being made available, the publishing industry still has a notable advantage. A book is a tangible item, which holds more value to a reader than just the writing on a page. Through the study of Virago from its establishment to present day, it is clear that its following is built from a community’s emotional connection to women writers. Unlike the articles published online, Virago’s titles take the work of outstanding authors and produce a product that can be enjoyed, cherished and passed on for many years. There is still a need for Virago to adjust, but instead of losing what makes it a publisher, they must instead as Murray states: “appropriat[e] mainstream tools for feminist ends” (165), using and collaborating with the internet for its own benefit.

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