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### **Newsletter networks in the feminist history and archives movement**

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines how networks have been critical to the construction of feminist histories. The author examines the publication *Matrices: A Lesbian/Feminist Research Newsletter* (1977–1996), to argue that a feminist network mode can be traced through the examination of small-scale print newsletters that draw on the language and function of networks. Publications such as *Matrices* emerge into wide production and circulation in the 1970s alongside feminist community archives, and newsletters and archives work together as interconnected social movement technologies. Newsletters enabled activist-researchers writing feminist histories to share difficult-to-access information, resources, and primary sources via photocopying and other modes of print reproduction. Looking from the present, the author examines how network thinking has been a feature of feminist activism and knowledge production since before the Internet, suggesting that publications such as *Matrices* are part of a longer history of networked communications media in feminist contexts.

#### **Keywords**

Networks, lesbian feminism, archive, print culture, periodicals, newsletters, media history

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Julia Penelope, professor of English at the University of Nebraska, once described herself as a “white, working-class, fat butch Dyke who never passed” (Brownsworth, 2013).

Penelope, a political lesbian separatist, edited several collected volumes of political and theoretical writings on lesbianism, but one of her greatest contributions to feminist politics begins with a modest, mimeographed form-letter sent to lesbian academics in the Spring of 1977. Addressed “Dear Sister,” the letter proposes a newsletter to be circulated to academics, activists, and community researchers across the U.S. working on lesbian-feminist topics, mostly historical in focus. It begins,

Several wimmin across the U.S. have been corresponding back and forth, exchanging papers, and we’ve been considering starting a Lesbian/Feminist Research Newsletter that would facilitate communication among the members of what we perceive to be a growing network of wimmin doing exciting research on issues and problems that touch on all of our lives. Right now, our communication is haphazard, and we don’t always know who’s doing what research. A newsletter would help to keep us in touch with each other, and inform us of recent papers and publications and ongoing research (Stanley, 1977, personal communication).

That fall, Penelope collaborated with four other women dispersed across the country — Sarah Hoagland, JR Roberts, Susan Leigh Star, and Libby Bouvier—to found *Matrices: A Lesbian/Feminist Research Newsletter*. Circulation increased to “800 womyn in nearly every state and seven countries” by the newsletter’s fourth year of publication (*Matrices*, 1980: 1). Subscribers and contributors include artists and academics who made major interventions in queer and feminist scholarship, from the gay and lesbian historian and

founder of outhistory.org, Jonathan Katz, to the fiction writer Sarah Schulman, to the lesbian-feminist filmmaker Barbara Hammer.

*Matrices* supported each of these figures' work; the publication functioned explicitly as a *network* designed for sharing information and resources amongst anyone doing research related to lesbian feminism. Using various forms of communications media—photocopiers and mimeograph, telephones, letter mail, and the newsletter itself—the *Matrices* network facilitated collaboration *across space*, with people who were otherwise difficult to know about, let alone reach. Though *Matrices* is this article's focus, its operation is not at all unusual situated in the larger context of newsletters during its time, and offers an entry into a broader general history of the idea of networks in this particular feminist print culture.

Newsletters in the late-20<sup>th</sup> century, U.S. lesbian-feminist movement pre-date online communications media and the contemporary List Serv, but also used networked communication to circulate information to geographically dispersed but politically organized individuals and groups. Distributed primarily by letter mail, issues of these newsletters acted as communication infrastructures, publishing requests for information and resources, updates on the activities of others, surveys, phone trees, listings of archival holdings and primary source materials at community and institutional archives, mailing lists, and bibliographies. Each issue's publication was an initial moment of communication facilitating a range of subsequent connections amongst recipients, generally taking the form of further, task-oriented correspondence between individuals and/or institutions. *Matrices's* first issue is exemplary of how the idea of networks animated the newsletter's communicative functions; announcing the first issue, the

editors write, “we open what we hope will become a continuous dialogue and exchange of information, a network of Lesbian/Feminist researchers working in the community and academia...*Matrices* hopes to facilitate interconnectedness among us, so that we can work together, sharing information and resources” (Hoagland et al., 1977: 3).

This article illustrates how a feminist mode of network thinking can be traced through small-scale print lesbian feminist newsletters that draw on the language and practice of networking. These publications emerge in the early 1970s via the nascent Women’s Liberation and Women in Print movements. The Women in Print movement took political advantage of changes in the accessibility of communications media and printing technologies, such as the rise of less expensive, simpler to operate offset printing presses (Beins, 2011: 9–10). The normalization of copy machines and word processors in workplaces allowed women clerical workers to use these technologies covertly to assemble their periodicals.<sup>i</sup> While many feminist newsletters had short life-spans of a few years or even a few issues, *Matrices* and others enjoyed long print runs. More established periodicals such as *Lesbian Connection* and *Sinister Wisdom* continue publishing in the present, while others, including *Matrices*, stopped in the mid 1990s and early 2000s when online media opened new venues for feminist exchange.<sup>ii</sup> Even prior to the web, networks have been critical to the construction of feminist histories and I examine the relationship between networked print cultures and the U.S. lesbian-feminist history and archives movement in order to demonstrate this. I approach archives and newsletters as interconnected social movement technologies that enable activists to share difficult-to-access information, resources, and primary sources via photocopying and other modes of print reproduction. In the process, archival collections of these feminist print cultures

redress the relative invisibility of essential media practices that have constituted the work of doing women's history.

*Matrices* is one among several newsletters that provided communicative support for grassroots lesbian (and gay) historical research. Others include *The Lesbian/Gay History Researchers Network Newsletter* (1980–81), and the annual newsletter of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) (1975–2004). A loosely organized community of academics, non-institutional researchers, and activists worked within this movement to redress the elision of gay and lesbian experience from the historical record (Maynard, 1991–92), establishing community archives across the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere, and conducting primary-source research and publication through oral histories and bibliographic work. Several intersecting politics form the movement's ideological roots: the post-Stonewall, Gay Liberation movement is key, as is the longer legacy of the mid-century Homophile movement, which Lisa Duggan has characterized as an assimilationist project invested in the free circulation of gay and lesbian literature depicting "accurate" information about homosexuality (2002: 181). Other activism providing access to literature and primary source materials through archives communities exceeded this assimilationist model, bringing lesbian-feminist commitments to self-determination and radical information-systems design to traditional bibliographic forms: projects such as Clare Potter's *Lesbian Periodicals Index* (Potter 1986) with its collectively generated subject headings, and Barbara Grier's (Grier 1981) bibliographic work ranking lesbian literature on a five point grade-scale denoting lesbian-importance-to-plot (A–D, and "T" for "Trash"). The establishment of university women's studies departments and oral histories methods in the 1970s provided early institutional support

for this research and generated new primary source materials for future study. Straddling both the gay and lesbian archives world and radical lesbian-feminist information work organizations such as the New York-based LHA were run by feminist activists trained by women's liberation, and remain so today; however, the archives also found an uneasy home in a gay and lesbian historical movement noted for emphasizing the histories of white, gay men.

Community archives such as the LHA constructed mailing lists to extend the reach of their work beyond the physical archive; the management of these lists often became the first impetus for the use of personal computers and database software at these archives.<sup>iii</sup> Mailed newsletters offered outreach that was critical to fledgling gay and lesbian archives for several reasons: first, newsletters sought funding from the community to run the archives; second, newsletters reported research findings or alerted readers to the publication of this research in monograph form; third, and key to my analysis here, newsletters told potential researchers what was available through archives so they could translate the raw stuff of a collection into published forms, disseminated in service of the historical movement's ultimately pedagogical goals (Maynard, 1991–92: 200).

Though it was not affiliated with any single archive, *Matrices* supported emerging community archives, publishing requests for donations of funds and primary source materials, and making potential researchers aware of collections they might access. *Matrices* is thus one outlet in a complex web of print-based communicative infrastructure that allowed these archives to operate, and by extension, allowed historical research on

lesbian-feminist topics to be produced. I focus my analysis on *Matrices* as one of a series of newsletters that facilitated the everyday work of historical research.

*Matrices* was typewritten (later word-processed and desktop published), and adopted a simple, graphic masthead beginning with its fourth issue. The newsletter was copied (mimeograph and later Xerox) on 8 ½” by 14” paper, stapled in the top left corner, and folded in half for mailing. Inside the newsletters, readers found content that can almost entirely be characterized as “listings” by other readers either requesting or offering specialized information. Tense and tone vary widely, suggesting that editors generally reproduced subscriber listings verbatim. Simple, one-line instructions that seem remarkably general reflect the paucity of published research on feminist topics: “Send papers on rape to Pauline Bart” (*Matrices*, 1977/78: 6). Longer, more lyrical listings make substantively similar requests but in ways that offer a glimpse of subscribers’ creative research endeavors, and resourceful, scavenger methodologies: “My current research involves alternative perceptions of wimmin’s behavior, especially, but not exclusively, wimmin of the past. Too often we are seen as “patsies,” not saboteurs. My themes are sabotage, conspiracy, and madness.... Send any information, leads, references in literature, anecdotes, etc., to Sarah Hoagland” (*Matrices*, 1977/78: 3). While the tone of all these announcements is generally practical, informative, and by extension somewhat formal, each issue’s opening editorial provides more philosophical reflection on lesbian-feminist research, writing, and activism, and the newsletter’s potential for serving this work. *Matrices* published three times a year from 1977 until the mid 1980s, and then infrequently until 1996, a moment when many specialized newsletters lost

relevance as email became widespread and List Servs became key networks of online distribution in humanities and social science research communities (Hyman, 2003).

I closely analyzed a total of twenty-four *Matrices* issues that I gathered from partial collections at two different periodicals collections. My method of close reading across issues emphasizes the figures, projects, spaces, and conversations that transcend one issue, rather than focusing on any of the publication's singular moments. For example, the New Alexandria Lesbian Library in Western Massachusetts appears in the pages of the publication beginning in 1978, with updates that chronicle its initial conception and fundraising drive, to its search for new volunteer staff and move from Chicago, updating readers on the status of the project and the sources the library offered, and soliciting input from the *Matrices* community along the way. Following this library's activities through *Matrices* over a period of years illustrates the publication's ongoing entanglement with a larger activist movement, and its instrumental role in facilitating outreach.

In addition to reading across the archive of *Matrices*, my method situates the publication in a larger constellation of feminist periodicals by following citation practices across other newsletters (Hemmings, 2011). Reading *Matrices* as a network extends beyond the editors' explicit characterization of the publication as such; the network form can also be assigned retrospectively via a larger view of the lesbian historical "movement" and its complex interconnections that take shape readily from a present-day analysis. Feminist libraries and archives with open-access policies that allow me to bring these publications into conversation with one another have been critical for framing this "larger view." I am literally describing the ability of a researcher at the LHA or York

University's Nellie Langford Rowell Women's Studies Library—the periodicals collections where I conducted this research—to have open access to stacks that hold rare feminist printed matter, in order to follow a citation by pulling out more than one publication at the same time. As Kate Eichhorn (2013) has documented, this methodological proximity is rooted in a feminist, open-access archival politics that makes collaborative, network-based feminist histories possible. Libraries and archives practice access and classification strategies that are critical to the preservation of feminist networks, which might not otherwise survive the disciplinary technologies of archivization (Sloniowski, 2013).

In the first section of this paper, I study how the *Matrices* network operates at two levels: as a conceptual model, where networked communication is articulated to the political goals of feminist print culture and of feminist historiography; and as an actual schematic for uniting a community of researchers and activists through decentralized forms of communication, such as through the newsletter's maintenance of a shared subscriber profile system. Following this discussion of *Matrices* as a network, I consider the role this Lesbian-Feminist Research Network had in building early lesbian history, situating the publication in a larger constellation of primary source research, publication, and the beginnings of women's and lesbian community archives. *Matrices* demonstrates how feminist historiography is built collaboratively, in and through print-based networks.

### **A lesbian-feminist network model**

*Matrices* drew upon cultural ideas of how a network could operate and what this operation might accomplish, and re-worked this established network thinking in the

specific context of feminism. The publication contributed to a larger conversation about networks in lesbian-feminist activism, exemplified by figures such as Susan Leigh Star, who helped found *Matrices*, published on many feminist topics in academic and feminist-press contexts, but was also an information science scholar working at UC Irvine and later the University of Illinois. Star's communications infrastructure theory is often referenced in media and technology studies today. Reading Star and Karen Ruhleder's description of communication infrastructures as complex, "fundamentally relational" systems that disappear from view because they operate in the background (Star and Ruhleder, 1996: 113), it is easy to imagine how Star's feminist activism and theorizing of information systems co-determined one another. Like Star, *Matrices* editor Penelope also explored networks and webs in her role as feminist theorists, describing "lesbian culture's" power to "connect us in a way which defies the geographic and temporal barriers which separate us" (Penelope and Wolfe, 1993: 11), using print culture and archives "to weave together the strands of culture and memory into a patterned history" (12). Lesbian-feminist theorist Mary Daly practiced a similar method of "weaving" and "tracing a hidden web" (1987: 4) in her creation of *Websters' First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*. This radical futurist dictionary sought to redefine language in lesbian terms by recovering the forgotten, arcane, and collectively generated meanings and word-uses long practiced by women but effaced by standard reference methods. These are just three examples of the network culture circulating amongst lesbian feminists during *Matrices's* time.

In this section I situate *Matrices* in relation to circulating network models from computer science, and the network thinking germane to feminist print culture. Networks

animate the design of *Matrices* at two distinct but interconnected levels, one high-level and ideational, the other pragmatic and operational. First, the network is a conceptual model for imagining a kind of utopian feminist politic. “Network” stands in for an idea of what a large, organized feminist movement could do. The newsletter project is envisioned from within isolated patriarchal nodes, for example, by marginalized lesbian-feminist academics who were often the only women, let alone the only queers — “fat, butch dykes who never passed” — in their departments.<sup>iv</sup> Imagined and accessed from these marginal spaces, the network represents a critical idealism that newsletter producers used to facilitate other kinds of collectivities from which to work collaboratively. *Matrices* emerges out of, and contributes to, the imagination of the political possibilities that networked communication could offer to feminism. These possibilities include the “recovery” of women’s history lost to the gendered biases of researchers and institutions, and the creation of sustainable feminist libraries and archives to support this research. Using the network, scholars might also circulate papers on lesbian topics outside the mainstream publication venues that failed to support this work. These achievements all fall under the broader, social-justice oriented goal of improved life chances for women. At stake here is what feminist activists imagine and hope for when they talk about, organize around, and ultimately build networked media infrastructures, in this case via printed newsletters. Networks represent webs built collaboratively to provide the substance, support, and interstitial bonds needed to facilitate but also legitimize feminist research and “weave together” the “patterned history” Penelope describes above.

Agatha Beins (2011) and Martin Meeker (2006) both argue that newsletter culture’s circulation of information was understood as a condition of possibility for

feminist organizing. In the early 1970s, newsletters animated the idea that the Women's Liberation movement could be a unified, national and international undertaking. Newsletters promised informational support for the pedagogical drive to "recruit" women into feminism via consciousness-raising (CR). Meeker uses "sexual communication networks" as his analytic approach to studying the mid-century homophile movement and its transition into gay liberation in the 1970s. He argues that the "politics of communication [was placed] squarely at the center of the emerging movement for homosexual civil rights," reaching "its most forceful articulation in the context of lesbian feminism" (2006: 13). While newsletter networks built upon CR's strategies of diversity, open-endedness, and commitment to ongoing communication (Freeman, 2013: 239–240), they also undermined CR's emphasis on accountability through the assembly of small, in-person groups (240) by welcoming far-reaching, potentially anonymous and unaccountable participation.

Network imagery and language was prevalent across a range of lesbian-feminist periodicals and newsletters in the 1970s (Meeker, 2006: 234). These publications' names and purpose statements give a sense of the role mediated communication played in imagining an outreach-oriented movement that would, above all, bring into the fold women who were *not yet* enfranchised as feminists. Countless publications feature the word "network" in their title, standing alongside names equally invested in the political possibility of communication, such as *Telewoman* (1977–1986). This San-Francisco based publication attached the Greek prefix "*tele*," meaning "over a distance"—*telephone*, *television*, *telegraph*—to the newsletter form, and to the idea of woman. Techno-futurists telecommunications theories circulating in U.S. popular culture during

the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century (see Turner, 2006) are imagined in relationship to feminist organizing. *Telewoman's* masthead reads:

We provide networking services for lesbians who live anywhere through this newsletter... We connect lesbian mothers. We make referrals to women's service organizations, lesbian-feminist therapists, and give job/housing information. We connect city lesbians and country lesbians. We serve isolated lesbians and integrate them into the local and larger women's communities (*Telewoman*, 1983: 1).

*Telewoman* thought about connecting its subscribers over distance to satisfy both their needs for information and their need for other emotional forms of care; the latter would, among other things, ameliorate isolation or provide access to mental health services.

For Meeker, the actual integration or connection publications such as *Telewoman* offered mattered less than the awareness that such communication was possible. He writes, "lesbian-feminist networks...were the ideological basis of the social movement in which they originated; they were the *raison d'être* of the movement itself," unlike homophile networks, which he describes as "largely instrumental and nonideological" (2006: 243). While I agree with Meeker that simply having an operational network was part of the goal of lesbian-feminist newsletters and that in this way, "the network" is fundamentally ideological, I depart from his perspective in two ways. First, the stakes of feminist social movements must be explored in relation to the network's promise. I pursue this connection here, arguing that networks seem vital in ways that are particular to feminism, both in the 1970s U.S. context and as a politics operating heterogeneously in and upon the present. Second, Meeker's bracketing of the ideological from the

instrumental is inadequate to the ways in which feminist politics entangles these spheres. Feminist organizing balances a grand vision of the world as it might be with the “instrumental” micropolitics of stuffing envelopes or providing childcare; the women’s liberation movement strategically insisted that these “practices of everyday life” were significant symbolic sites for much larger struggles over gender inequality (Hesford, 2013: 178–79).

Newsletters have effects that transcend the expectations of a singular publication— effects related to the network forms they generate and the feminist social movement contexts these networks facilitate. As Anna Feigenbaum (2013) has argued, “More than instrumental tools, rituals or resources for mobilization,” feminist newsletters are discursive communicative practices that *form* social movements—“the very means by which their politics garnered shape and meaning” (2). A newsletter network promised to deliver specific “goods” such as the recovery of women’s history, but it also promised that feminism itself might carry on, taking the form of dispersed but networked communities united by shared interests and goals. Securing a future for feminism is a massive undertaking guided by much smaller communicative endeavors achievable for a thriving print culture; thus a newsletter network grounds feminism’s more utopic visions in the modest pragmatism of ink, newsprint, stuffed envelopes, and stamps.

*Matrices*’ ideological operation works partly through an affective register where the newsletter network’s generative promise exceeds task-oriented, individual moments of information exchange. Information offers to do much more than satisfy a query with content. *Matrices* describes the service it *hoped* to offer in ways that point to the charge information was thought to carry. A 1980s editorial explains:

We need to share our knowledge and resources, including contacts, jobs, how and where to publish our work, exchanges about how we survive in academia or outside of it, offer support to each other, mobilize to help Lesbian/Feminists who are fired, or to know other Lesbian/Feminist researchers we can turn to when we are having specific research problems. Other possibilities: to serve as a liaison between researchers in academia (who have access to libraries, laboratories, meeting places) and those working without such support; to share information about our experiences in institutions—the courses we can offer, departmental colloquia we might be giving, which libraries have what kinds of information...

(Lacy, 1980: 1)

Some of these proposals might seem only tangential to the actual work of “doing research,” demonstrating the forms of “instrumental,” emotional, and community-based support the network valued as critical to the work of feminist organizing. Beyond these stated aims, other instances of communication through the network provide examples of the ways in which subscribers were connected to each other as more than just information-circulating hubs. In a 1980 letter placed on the cover, feminist theorist and historian Gayle Rubin solicits small financial donations from subscribers to pay for the nursing home care of Jeannette Foster, author of *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956), the first comprehensive bibliographic study of lesbianism in literature (Rubin, 1980: 1). Rubin’s invitation to care for Foster, who she calls “a national treasure of the Lesbian Community,” points to what else circulated through the network, beyond the proper object of information. Subscribers connect to form a larger economy of care for their intellectual and political forebears (1).

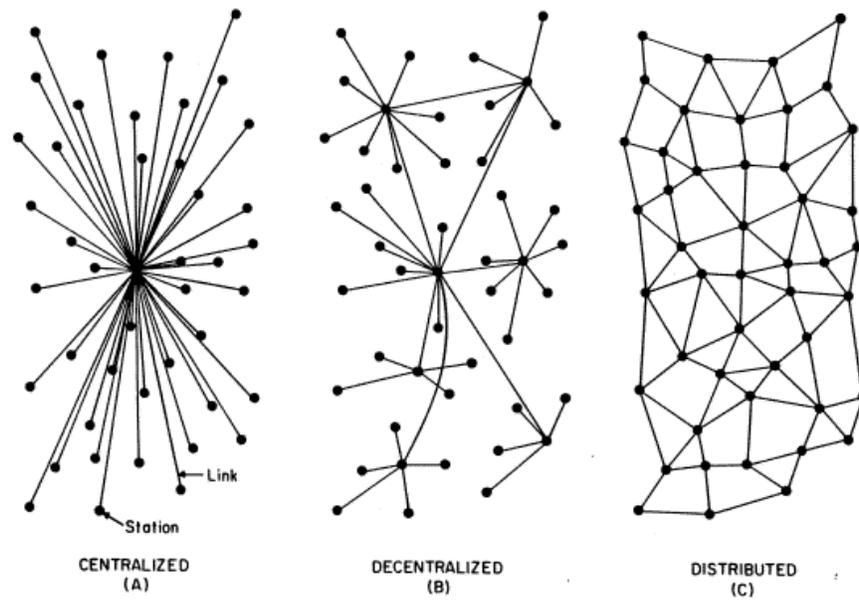
The second level at which the network functions is the newsletter's actual operation—its facilitation of centralized and decentralized communication. *Matrices* asked each subscriber to complete a profile with contact information, a short biography, research interests, titles of papers written and published and information on how off-prints could be acquired from other subscribers, current projects, and support needed from other subscribers. Published in each issue, these subscriber profiles presented readers with the possibility of communicating directly with other lesbian-feminist researchers who offered or requested information that might be of value. Five regional editors spread across the U.S. collected completed profiles and assembled other pieces of information submitted by subscribers, sending them on to the managing and general editors. Though serving to distribute labour, this purposeful spread of editors across the country points to a conscientious effort to create a network that would transcend the geography that made collaboration difficult. A 1985–86 callout for new regional editors to serve Canada and Europe demonstrates the newsletter's international ambitions (*Matrices*, 1985–86).

Issues of *Matrices* included sections that will be familiar to readers of any specialized academic List Serv. These include Conferences and Calls for Papers, Book Reviews/Articles, and a listing of lesbian and feminist periodicals and their subscription information. The section Notes and Queries includes more general callouts for information and assistance from the network. Issue number three, published in spring 1978, includes this request from Madeline Davis, who would go on to write the first comprehensive history of working-class lesbian subculture in the U.S.: *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993):

Madeline Davis wants to hear from other oral history projects currently being undertaken in lesbian communities—she is part of a group working on such a project in Buffalo, NY. Also, she has been teaching a course on lesbianism, an historical, political, and personal view, at State University NY at Buffalo.<sup>v</sup> She would be grateful for any suggestions from women who are teaching or formulating courses on any aspect of the topic (*Matrices*, 1978: 7).

Some requests are even simpler. In the same issue, the notice “Mary C. Peterson wants to know what women/lesbians are doing in athletics” was also posted (7).

These notices point to networked modes of communication that reflect circulating understandings of networks illustrated by computer science models developed in the U.S. as early as the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Fig. 1). “Old” media such as a newsletter typically created a network that would be described as centralized, represented by the diagram on the left of Figure 1. Here, a publication is the central hub and each line or connection disperses out from or into this hub, in a “strategic massing of power and control” (Galloway, 2004: 201). The diagram on the right models a “distributed” network and is used to explain how the Internet works, distributing power “into small, autonomous enclaves” (Galloway 2004: 201). Distributed networks are less vulnerable because the destruction of one hub does not critically affect the network, while centralized networks crumble when the main hub fails (Galloway, 2004: 200; Rosenzweig, 1998: 1532–33); when a publication goes out of print.



**Figure 1. Centralized, Decentralized, and Distributed Network Diagrams created by computer scientist Paul Baran of the RAND corporation, ca. 1964.**

*Matrices*, and feminist newsletter culture more generally, operated somewhere in between a decentralized (middle diagram) and distributed network (right diagram), creating connections that transcend the limits of the centralized network diagram on the left, which is typically associated with a print publication. In the case of *Matrices*, each individual researcher or organization is a “node” or “dot” that received the publication. *Matrices* presented opportunities for communication by making individual hubs aware of the contact information, interests, or desires for input of other hubs. By publishing a request for materials in *Matrices*, a women’s archive might become a small hub with lines emanating out to individual subscribers who began a relationship with the institution, a model represented by the “decentralized” diagram in the middle of Figure 1. *Matrices*’ subscriber profiles further facilitated the distributed operation illustrated by the diagram on the right, where lines between individual subscribers represent opportunities

for communication that became independent of the publication itself. I use the word “opportunities” quite deliberately because *Matrices*’ paper archive leaves the actual connections established by the publication difficult to trace with any certainty, a methodological problem I return to at the end of this article. On one level, *Matrices* “raison d’être” was the facilitation of a network as such, as Meeker suggests. But crucially, the network is a means toward a very particular kind of end, where the ideological vision of making lesbian history visible is precisely what motivates the design and maintenance of the newsletter’s networked communicative infrastructure, and “instrumental” information sharing. Everyday information exchanges between researchers, activists, and archives make the larger project of doing feminist historiography possible.

By illustrating the operation of *Matrices* through the metaphor of a network, the publication’s editors deploy a purposeful mode of description that points to the imaginary of a strong, distributed, web-like structure for feminist organizing, evoking similar strategies to Daly’s *Wikidary* (1987), with its emphasis on weaving feminist webs. Moreover, to continue to explore the metaphor of the network from my place in the present necessarily associates *Matrices* with a more present moment mediated by the Internet and online communications media. Publications such as *Matrices* become part of a longer history of the cultural politics of networked communications.

### **Speculative histories / network histories, or did lesbians invent the Internet?**

Julia Penelope and the women at *Matrices* did not invent the Internet; I seek to hold open rather than dismiss the absurdity of this claim, in order to trace a speculative history of

networks through older forms of feminist print culture. Such a proposition takes up Roy Rosenzweig's (1998) description of the Internet as a "meta-medium" in need of many histories that consider the multiple contexts of its conceptual and technical beginnings (1552). Rozenzweig and other media historians such as Fred Turner (2006) offer general histories of network *thinking* as a condition of possibility for the web—as opposed to actual technological design—where the social promises articulated to networked communication are critical for understanding the political possibilities associated with emerging media in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Network thinking is not a singular story: it ought to be conjunctural, following a path Lawrence Grossberg (2010) describes as "more complicated than any one trajectory, any one judgment, can thematize" (16).

Historicizing feminist activism in relation to the transitions between print and digital takes up a project described by Sue-Ellen Case in her study of Lesbian "at the end of print culture" (1996); however, turning to networks as an infrastructure that transcends singular media forms attends to the messy transitions between print and digital over Case's emphasis on the rupture presented by computing and "cyberspace" (27–34). Feminist media studies has considered multiple trajectories of "networks" across a range of media, documenting both the cultural politics of newsletters (Beins 2011), and the relationship between feminist social movements and other mediated network forms, such as 'zine distribution networks (Feigenbaum, 2013), VHS "chainletters" (Hilderbrand, 2009), and contemporary social media (Eslon-Ziya 2013). Building upon this scholarship, I explore these early, print-based feminist networks as a way of intervening into how histories of networked thinking based around the Internet are told. In this story, the web

is not an event or turning point for feminist social movements; rather, it extends existing media infrastructures of networked communication. Consistencies and divergences in the politics of feminist networked communication across time take precedent over formal, technological changes. Lucas Hilderbrand's (2009) history of Riot Grrl VHS chainletter distributions networks illustrates this approach; despite being "analog" and "specifically nondigital" in their formal properties, they share with the web a feminist cultural model for "social networking" (197).

Feminist networks are communicative infrastructures that extend across emerging forms of media, and across time, particularly in the case of a network that is "historical": *Matrices* is both of the past, and focused on facilitating historical research. Networked communication and feminist historiography are interdependent forms; feminist historiography is a heterogeneous set of practices and desires built through these networks, and thus it can be difficult to map onto more conventional understandings of History that emerges from a single, authoritative source. As the editors of *Matrices* put it, "Lesbian/Feminist research is significantly different from what we have been taught to regard as 'research,' because it arises out of our lives and the community we are creating" (Lacy, 1980: 1). In other words, it arrives from multiple nodes, in ways that are difficult to isolate as singular or "rightfully historical." Among these nodes are feminist archives and other spaces for historical research, which are themselves mediated through networks such as *Matrices*, and through network thinking more generally. Feminist organizations emerging out of the 1970s—artist-run centres, cooperative women's buildings, bookstores, academic networks, journals, etc.—were informed by values of non-hierarchy, direct participation by members, and an investment in decentralized processes

(Pourtavaf, 2012: 9). Feminist archives and archival sensibilities share these traits (Sloniowski, 2013).

*Matrices* facilitated the construction of these archives, and shows how a working communication network was vital for circulating information about the kinds of primary source materials that were available. Women's and lesbian community libraries and archives called upon the network to help build their fledgling collections during the early days of these spaces in the 1970s and 80s. In a March 1984 issue callout, the new Archives lesbiennes in Paris declared that they "do not want to depend on any external powers: they will continue to exist and develop with the support and contributions of lesbians. In order to realize our projects and plans, we have to believe in our collective power. Please send documents, information, or financial support" (*Matrices*, 1984: 13). Every issue of *Matrices* contains some kind of listing of archival holdings or request for materials from an archive, including the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA). By the early 1980s, the publication featured a distinct archives section. The 1982 Archives and History Projects insert re-printed from the CLGA's newsletter explains the importance of communication networks for building these precarious institutions:

An intimate relationship should exist between history groups and archives... .  
To help groups to contact one another and allow others to do likewise we list here various archives and history groups. We encourage you to contact these people, offer your help and see what they can do for you (*Matrices*, 1982: 13–14).

Feminist and queer histories emerge from collaborative processes that mirror the network mode of collective feminist organizing, and of non-institutional, “community archives” more generally.

These collaborative processes extend beyond *Matrices* to a larger network of feminist periodicals through content sharing and cross-citation. *Matrices* published requests for research assistance with projects that went on to become significant foundational texts in the gay and lesbian historical movement, such as Katz’s 1982 request for historical sources to support the project that would become *Gay American History* (1978). Requests such as Katz were often submitted directly to *Matrices*, but *Matrices* also borrowed content from other newsletters: for example, an Archives and History Projects insert produced by the CLGA was reprinted in a 1982 *Matrices* issue, a 1979 issue includes a detailed, partial listing of primary source holdings at the LHA, and short entries in *Matrices* “Notes and Queries” section were often gathered by editors from other lesbian feminist periodicals, their provenance noted through citation. By reproducing content across periodicals, feminist newsletters ensured that requests for participation reached a wide range of feminist publics, a salient tactic given that these publications often served niche communities such as lesbian mothers, or a specific region. Read together in relationships that are only possible through what Eichhorn (2013) calls “archival proximity”—the way in which archival documents make a certain kind of sense insofar as they are ordered in relation to one another—the larger practice of citation across these publications reveals how the minutia of classified-style “ads” circulated through these networks worked to construct norms about the kind of work thought to be worthy of attention and participation (Hemmings, 2011). This cross-

citational economy of attention also affected the kinds of materials donated to archives and accessed by researchers, as community archives reproduced listings of holdings they anticipated to be of greatest research value across multiple platforms.

While the *Matrices* network supported the construction and use of community archives, it is this very network form's distribution of information into potentially anonymous enclaves that made the publication's effects difficult to document through archival practices. Women's print cultures of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century are ephemeral in the sense that they have not been collected widely and evenly, and have rarely been preserved well (Ingold, 2011). The ongoing connections they map out are also ephemeral because they are seldom documented. *Matrices* editorials often comment with frustration on a lack of feedback from subscribers about their use of the network structure. The October 1979 issue laments:

For two years, we have published *Matrices* as a source of networking, but have little indication if it is serving this function. We assume it is, because the mailing list has grown to over 600 and new subscriptions arrive regularly. So, if you have had any positive experiences through *Matrices*, we'd like to hear about them (Penelope and Lacy, 1979: 1).

The publication's reach is extended beyond those subscribers accounted for through profiles via the "after-market" circulation of newsletters through Xeroxing, further demonstrating the decentralized operation of these networks. *Matrices* initiated communications that were fleeting, a problem identified by the newsletter's editors during its period of publication, and a methodological challenge for my study of the network from the present. Soliciting evidentiary feedback through editorials was a

belabored practice that reflects the “burnout” characteristic of much feminist activism and academic “service work.” Assembling issues of *Matrices* was labour-intensive, time-consuming, and unremunerated; aimed at long-term, structural changes that were difficult to measure in the abstract, the newsletter’s effects might be glimpsed through singular examples.

Research conducted through the network depended on the interplay of the newsletter, archives, and the quite concrete form of books and articles that this research left behind, asking us to reckon with feminist historiography’s conditions of mediation as a formative subject of these very histories. Approaching feminist print culture as communications infrastructure—in *Matrices* case, as a network—foregrounds these conditions of mediation in search of connections facilitated by the newsletter that might be recovered retrospectively. Publications like *Matrices* must be historicized through methods that attend to their dispersed forms, chasing the “interconnections” hoped for by editorial staff through cross-citational research in the same archival collections *Matrices* helped to build.

*Matrices* editors saw the newsletter’s printed form as an invitation to begin, invoked through their choice of name:

Because we believe that our work is a beginning, we decided to call this newsletter ‘*Matrices*,’ ‘a situation or surrounding substance within which something originates’... Our research is the material of our lives. *Matrices* seemed to capture all of our meanings for the newsletter, the interconnections we wish to establish and maintain, the intersections of research interests, our womon-identification (Lacy, 1980: 1).

Undocumented “interconnections” are incommensurate with the editorial staff and subscriber list’s desire for history more broadly. For some people, *Matrices* failed to deliver evidence of its effects and sometimes failed to circulate information according to the tacit ethics and expectations of subscribers. Out of these so-called failures, conflicts specific to the publication’s mediated forms unfold in its pages. Carried out through the open-letter genre, these conflicts suggest an engaged readership willing to dialog on issues that hurt, even as they neglected to report adequately on *Matrices* more banal, research-related effects.

Conflicts sometimes emerge when more centralized controls exert an influence that undermines the publication’s investments in the anti-hierarchical, decentralized circulation of information; or, put another way, when the centralized network model more familiar to print publications asserts its effects over the decentralized and distributed network model *Matrices* imagined as its infrastructure. Examples of these conflicts are plentiful, but tend to galvanize around issues of privacy and control. Control is central in the 1984 resignation letter of JR Roberts, Eastern co-editor, published in the newsletter. Roberts writes:

The present structure, in which a decision is made by one woman and then presented in print as a “group decision” supposedly made by *all* the editors, is not a structure I feel comfortable with.... It just goes against my grain of how things need to work in the world.... It is difficult because we are all so busy and our geographical separation and distance make is not conducive to group activity (Roberts, 1984: 2).

Roberts' resignation suggests that in practice, the *Matrices* network did not always operate according to its egalitarian network ideal, and that making subscribers aware of this incongruity seemed an urgent project. Feminist researchers needed networks for the practical but also emotional support required to commit one's life to de-valued, lesbian-focused research that was more likely to hinder rather than advance such pursuits as tenure. To manage these risks and others, feminist networks depended on the interstitial, spatial significance of webs and nets; their promise to cradle and connect was threatened when top-down organizing models seen as the institutional enemy's domain took hold. Importantly, Roberts, author of the open letter quoted above, was a particularly precarious, non-institutional researcher and bibliographer (Roberts 1981).

Privacy became a heated issue when *Penthouse* magazine salaciously excerpted the lesbian activist Karla Jay's book on lesbian sexuality, *The Gay Report* (1979). Jay relied on the lesbian-feminist print movement to circulate the survey that formed the primary source research for this book, and she heavily promoted the work and its importance in *Matrices*' Notes and Queries section. In a letter of complaint printed in the June 1979 issue, a reader named Amethyst explains that she was "shocked/angered/infuriated by this exploitative, anti-feminist, misogynist act/use of Lesbian/'Feminist' research!" (Amethyst, 1979: 3). Amethyst lists the lesbian periodicals that distributed the survey—*Lesbian Connection*, *Lesbian Tide*, etc.—then writes, "We remember how we were urged by Karla Jay's many ads to fill in her questionnaire and send it to her. It was beneficial to the Lesbian Feminist movement. I/We were suspicious at the time of how this could benefit us..." (Amethyst, 1979: 3). Though Jay explains in a follow-up letter that her publisher provided the excerpt without her permission, the

incident points to how certain norms in the lesbian-feminist community more generally—in this case, a sex-wars prohibition on pornography—exert ideological control over the circulation of information through *Matrices*, here under the guise of providing “privacy” to members of the network.

While the network *Matrices* designed aimed to do away with centralized control, it was also caught up in larger operations of power and political formations that put it in conflict with certain lesbian-feminist norms about who has the right to represent women’s sexuality. Responding to another subscriber’s query was a choice underwritten by a tacit trust that was quite tenuous in the case of Jay’s book. This trust was built on shared values around the politics of information that in the end could not be fully respected by the publishing house that saw *Penthouse* as an ideal publicity mechanism for the book. In an Internet age where it is easy to take for granted that information “wants to be free,” this incident from *Matrices* is a reminder that a mediated network cannot transcend the political norms in which it operates through formal means alone. *Matrices* often represented “the network” as a political ideal, and yet this form emerged from multiple communities with visions that overlapped as much as they conflicted; from the ongoing debates over sexual politics in lesbian-feminist communities, to tensions between feminist activist and academic communities evidenced by the class-inflected condemnation of Karla Jay as a producer of knowledge exploiting the experience of her research subjects, to the larger late-20<sup>th</sup> century print culture in which *Penthouse* and *Matrices* shared space. The *Matrices* community sometimes sought centralized characteristics such as privacy and control, while eschewing them more generally in pursuit of the network’s promise.

## Conclusion

*Matrices'* effects lack documentation in ways that counter the Lesbian Feminist Research Network's political desire for historiography; however, the infrastructure that produces this lack also secures a certain future for lesbian-feminist research through the network. To return to Baran's network models (Figure 1), connections facilitated by the network are strong because they no longer rely on the central hub of the publication; they are semi-autonomous from the printed newsletter and have effects that exceed its pages. Distributedness offers a kind of future because it facilitates a network mode that can carry on past the life of *Matrices* itself, and this is a different kind of relationship to feminist futurity than working to sustain publications, institutions, social movement organizations, and even archives, at all costs. The network's promise of futurity is particularly salient given that feminist spaces, because of their grassroots nature, always seem so precarious; they are always on the verge of collapse, and we are always lamenting their demise. Beins (2011) details how feminist newsletter culture created networks that promised a future for feminist social movements dependent on the circulation of information (13). As a historiographic network, *Matrices* promised this future by promising a past, or a past that would carry on into the future provided information continued to circulate freely amongst the researchers producing this work. Recent feminist historiographies of late 20<sup>th</sup>-century print culture (Beins, 2011; Jordan, 2010; Meagher, 2013; Travis, 2008) take up responsibility for this future, generating new research using the archives and primary source collections originally built through networks such as *Matrices*.

*Matrices* stopped publishing in 1996, after several years of infrequent publication, marked by a shift in tone toward more editorial content and away from subscriber participation. Notably, the last two issues include a new column on “lesbian cyberspace,” and an announcement of the creation of a *Matrices* website, signaling what Barbara Sjöholm marks as the end of the women in print movement in the 1990s—replaced, ostensibly by the “digital universe” of “Amazon,” “the Internet,” and “digital publishing” (2012, 166). And yet zine culture in the 1990s reinvigorated feminist print cultures (Piepmeier, 2009), suggesting that the Internet does not replace earlier forms of feminist publishing but becomes part of the networked media channels that link print “texts,”—including their forms of distribution and the connections they engender—with contemporary feminist blogs and social media culture. Given this continuum, the end of the *Matrices* newsletter does not foreclose its effects; rather *Matrices*’ remnants can be located in this ongoing networked “print” culture, as well as in the digital and online outreach efforts of feminist community archives, in a more expansive feminist “network,” that extends across a range of media, including into the digital realm.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> For example, the early lesbian newsletter *Vice Versa* (1947–48) was produced by editor Lisa Ben (a pseudonym and acronym for “Lesbian”) in secret at her desk when secretarial tasks were slow (Streitmatter 1995).

<sup>ii</sup> The persistence of such publications is a compelling argument for the ongoing need some feminists and feminist communities have for small-scale print culture, as is the “print-on-demand” models practiced by “born-digital” feminist periodicals such as *No More Potlucks* (NMP). NMP’s insistence on the value of print troubles assumptions that publications such as *Lesbian Connection* are merely relics or holdovers.

<sup>iii</sup> At the LHA, the creation of a mailing list database to circulate the annual newsletter was the task through which women at the archives learned how to use a personal computer, a precursor to the development of a computerized catalogue of the archives’ holdings.

<sup>iv</sup> Julia Penelope was expelled from two universities as a graduate student and fired from one academic job because she was a lesbian (Brownworth, 2013). The pages of *Matrices* often featured stories and questions about workplace discrimination experienced by lesbian researchers working in institutions.

<sup>v</sup> SUNY Buffalo was the site of one of the first Women’s Studies departments in the United States, founded in 1969, thanks in part to the work of Elizabeth Kennedy, co-author of *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (Kennedy, 2000).