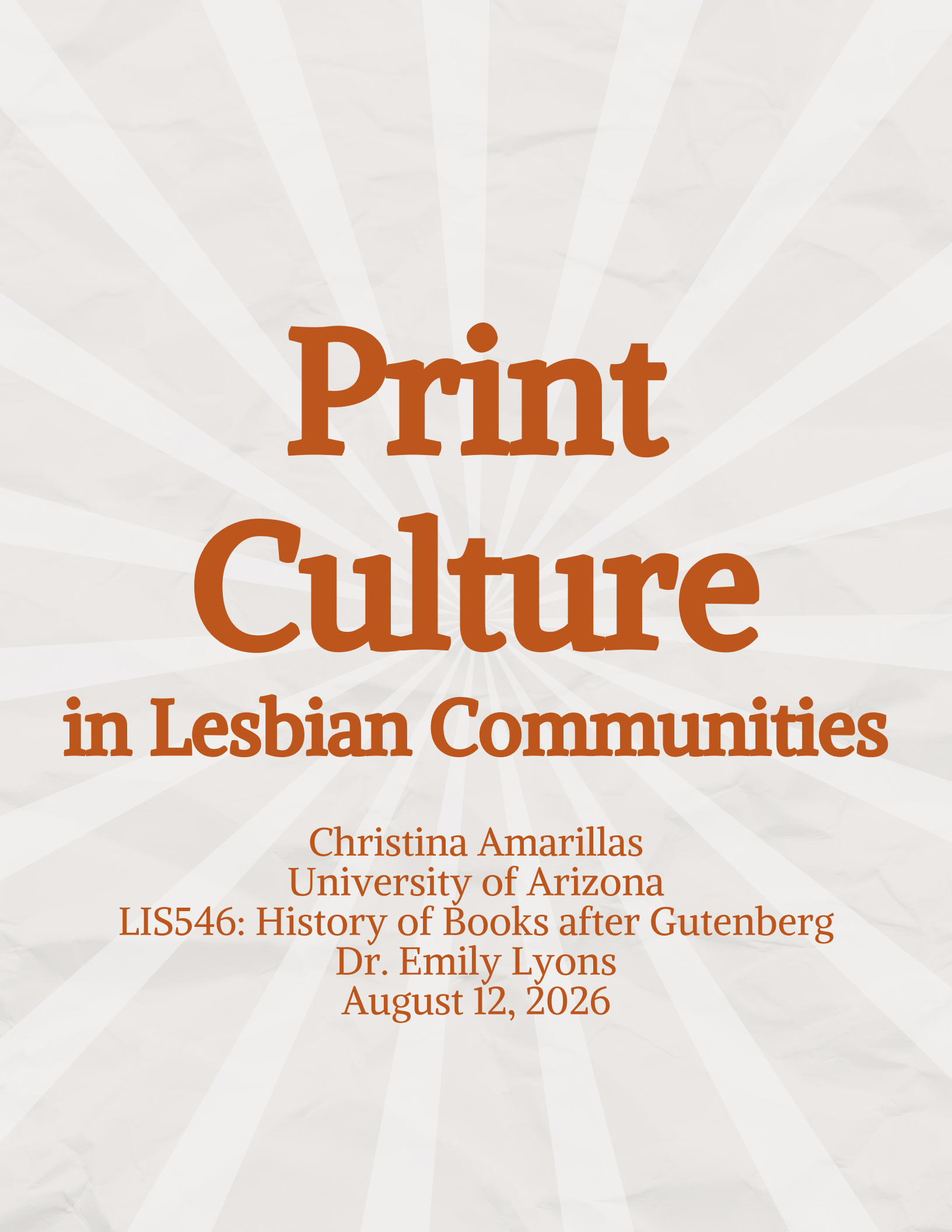




Print Culture

in Lesbian Communities

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**HOW DO YOU
FIND YOUR
PEOPLE WHEN
YOUR PEOPLE
AREN'T
SUPPOSED TO
EXIST?**

THE PROBLEM



Before the internet made instantaneous communication across geographic distances possible, lesbian feminist communities faced a fundamental problem: how could people who were geographically isolated from one another find community, share information, and develop a collective identity?



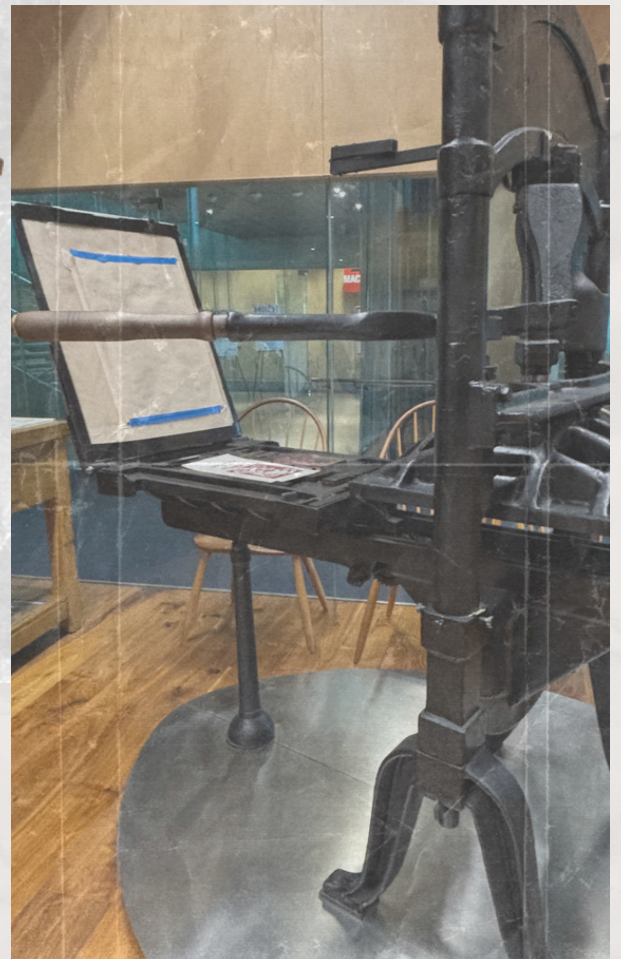
PRINT CHANGES EVERYTHING

The importance of lesbian feminist periodicals can first be understood through the broader characteristics of print culture. The development of the printing press transformed knowledge by making texts more reproducible, widely distributable, standardized, and permanent. Printed materials could travel beyond the location in which they were produced, reaching readers who would otherwise have had little or no access to the information they contained. Print therefore created communities that did not necessarily depend upon physical proximity.

The same principle can be seen centuries later in lesbian feminist periodicals. Publications such as WomanSpirit and Onyx could be produced in one location and mailed to readers across the country. A reader did not have to live in a lesbian neighborhood, visit a lesbian bar, or participate in a local feminist organization to encounter lesbian ideas and other people who shared similar experiences. The publication itself became a point of connection.



The Gutenberg Press (Print Museum)

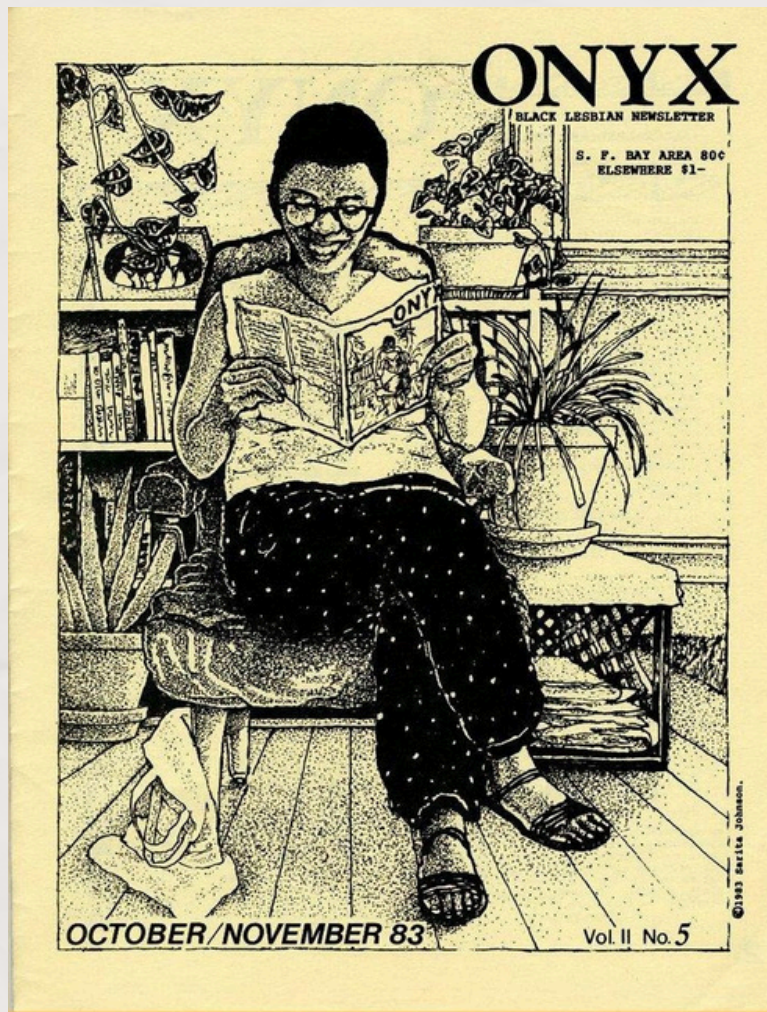


A functioning 1895 Washington
Printing Press at Phoenix Public
Library (taken by C. Amarillas, 2025)

REAL EXAMPLES

This function of print was particularly significant because lesbian communities were often geographically dispersed and socially isolated. Unlike commercial magazines, which could rely on established publishing and distribution networks, lesbian feminist periodicals frequently had to create their own networks. Ketchum's examination of lesbian and queer women's printed ephemera demonstrates how flyers, newsletters, directories, concert schedules, business cards, and other seemingly temporary materials created an information infrastructure for these communities. Identical flyers could circulate through multiple cities, while directories and newsletters provided readers with information about bookstores, women's music, events, organizations, and gathering places. Print thus created a map of a community that did not necessarily exist as a single physical place. A lesbian reader could encounter evidence of a much larger community simply by opening a newsletter or magazine.





A Black lesbian writer contributing to a publication such as the Black Lesbian Newsletter, for example, was not simply communicating with a small group of readers. By publishing articles addressing Black lesbian political organizing, health, and community life, the publication created a durable record of perspectives that dominant institutions had frequently ignored. Similarly, WomanSpirit preserved feminist and lesbian perspectives on spirituality, sexuality, art, and community that were rarely represented in conventional publications.

HOW IT CIRCULATED

This circulation was especially important because the publications were not simply distributing information outward from a central authority. They created opportunities for readers to become participants. Classified advertisements, personal connection notices, event announcements, letters, reviews, poetry, artwork, and calls for contributions transformed the periodical into a space for interaction. A publication could tell readers where a concert was happening, where a feminist bookstore was located, or how to contact an organization, but it could also invite readers to contribute their own experiences. The relationship between publisher and reader was therefore more collaborative than the traditional model of commercial publishing. Periodicals created a recurring cycle of communication: readers received information, responded to it, contributed material, and encountered the contributions of others in subsequent issues.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mid-August

Interested in a beach party?
Sun! Fun! and Black women!
For more info call 548-9364 evas

Black Lesbian Newsletter

Letters

Could you consider an issue or articles on women's spiritual power for non-violence, for peace work? ★ Since moving to Cheyenne, living only a 20 minute walk away from nuclear warheads, the insanity of the patriarchy's war machine has stirred me to action,

Woman Spirit

PERSONALS

Attractive 33 yr. old seeks
new friends to share life's
pleasures. - Nita May, 1442A
Walnut St., #351, Brk. 94709

Articulate, warm, easy-going, over-
achiever woman seeks another woman
who is particular about whom
she calls "friend." Let's share
growth and an inner glow of love.
Call Ann 547-0158

Black Lesbian Newsletter

This system resembles what print culture scholars identify as one of print's most important characteristics: its ability to create communities among people who will never physically meet. The periodical became a material meeting place. Its readers might never encounter one another face-to-face, but they could read the same articles, encounter the same advertisements, recognize the same symbols, and participate in the same conversations. The repeated circulation of these publications allowed geographically isolated individuals to imagine themselves as part of something larger than their immediate surroundings. In this sense, lesbian periodicals were not merely documenting a preexisting community. They were actively producing one.

TYPOGRAPHY AS RESISTANCE

At the same time, lesbian feminist periodicals complicated the relationship between print and standardization. The history of typography demonstrates how printing gradually developed systems of standardization. Typefaces, measurements, spacing, and layout became increasingly formalized and professionalized. Standardization made printed materials more predictable and reproducible, but it also established ideas about what legitimate or authoritative print was supposed to look like. Commercial publications generally presented polished typography, consistent layouts, professional photography, and high-quality printing as signs of legitimacy.

Lesbian feminist periodicals frequently rejected these conventions. Their pages might contain typewriter text, hand-drawn illustrations, pasted photographs, inconsistent type sizes, unusual layouts, or visibly imperfect reproductions. These characteristics were partly the result of limited resources. Lesbian publications often operated with extremely small budgets and depended upon volunteer labor. Editors borrowed typewriters, photocopiers, and computers;

(Cont...)

contributors worked without pay; and publications struggled with printing, binding, and mailing costs. Yet the resulting aesthetic was more than evidence of financial limitation. The handmade appearance of these publications could itself communicate the values of the communities producing them.

This distinction is important because it demonstrates that lesbian feminist publishers were not simply failing to meet professional standards. They were redefining what a successful publication could be. The visual imperfections of a periodical could make the process of production visible. Rather than hiding the labor behind a polished commercial product, DIY publications showed readers that ordinary people had produced the publication themselves. The typewriter marks, collages, handwritten elements, and uneven layouts communicated participation and accessibility. Readers could imagine themselves not only as consumers of the publication but as potential contributors to it.

esto no tiene nombre

THE LABOR BEHIND IT ALL

This approach also reflects a broader feminist tradition of reclaiming control over the means of print production. Lesbian periodicals similarly used whatever technologies were available—typewriters, carbon paper, mimeographs, photocopiers, and eventually desktop publishing—to produce and distribute their own materials. The technology did not have to be sophisticated to be transformative. What mattered was that it allowed communities to reproduce their own voices without depending upon institutions that might reject or distort them.

The history of lesbian publishing demonstrates just how significant this control over production could be. Earlier examples such as Lisa Ben's *Vice Versa* illustrate the lengths to which lesbian publishers went to create communication networks with extremely limited resources. Later publications relied on workplace equipment, borrowed machines, feminist bookstores, community spaces, and volunteer labor. Financial insecurity was a persistent challenge. Small circulation numbers made advertising difficult, while controversial subject matter could discourage mainstream commercial support.

(Cont...)

As a result, lesbian periodicals often existed because people were willing to contribute their time and labor without expecting conventional financial compensation.

This labor is central to understanding the relationship between print and community. The publication was not simply a technological object; it was the product of a social network. Someone had to write the articles, type the pages, create the graphics, operate the copier, assemble the issues, address envelopes, solicit subscriptions, and distribute the finished publication. The work of producing a periodical therefore created relationships among the people involved. Print connected readers geographically, but the process of making print also connected contributors socially. The publication was both the product and evidence of collective labor.



See Red Women's Workshop

PERMANENCE & PRESERVATION

The permanence of print also mattered. Walter Ong's concept of typographical fixity helps explain why printing was particularly powerful for communities whose histories and experiences had frequently been excluded from dominant cultural records. Once an experience was printed, it became materially fixed. A poem, political argument, personal narrative, or discussion of lesbian life could no longer exist only as an individual memory or conversation. It could be reproduced, mailed, read by others, saved, and eventually archived. Lesbian feminist periodicals therefore transformed experiences that might otherwise have been forgotten into historical records.

This permanence was especially significant because lesbian experiences were often absent from mainstream publishing. Printing gave marginalized writers an opportunity to establish their own authority. The act of publication itself therefore became an assertion of existence: these people, experiences, ideas, and communities existed, and they were worthy of being recorded.

The archival function of lesbian print culture becomes even clearer in later publications such as *esto no tiene nombre*, a Latina lesbian publication produced in the early 1990s. Its editors understood their work as contributing to a future Latina lesbian archive and preserving a history that might otherwise disappear. This demonstrates that the archival value of lesbian periodicals was not simply an accidental consequence of their survival. Publishers recognized that producing print could preserve community memory. The periodical became both a communication tool for the present and a historical record for the future.



esto no tiene nombre, Volume 3, Number 1. Cover design and self-portrait by tatiana de la tierra.

tatiana de la tierra

ZINE AS NETWORK

Marshall McLuhan's concept of the medium as an extension of human association provides another way of understanding this process. The significance of lesbian feminist periodicals was not limited to the content contained within their pages. The medium itself reorganized how people could interact. A photocopied newsletter could extend a conversation beyond a local meeting. A directory could connect someone in one city to an organization hundreds of miles away. A personal advertisement could allow an isolated lesbian to reach others she would never otherwise encounter. In this sense, the physical properties of print—such as its reproducibility and ability to be mailed—created new social possibilities.

The medium therefore communicated something beyond the literal content of the publications. The existence of a lesbian feminist periodical communicated that a community existed to produce it. A reader opening an issue was encountering not only an article or poem but evidence that other people were writing, organizing, creating art, and communicating around lesbian experiences. The physical object could reduce the isolation of a reader simply by demonstrating that she was not alone.

AS A NETWORK

Ultimately, independently produced lesbian feminist periodicals demonstrate that the history of print is not only a history of technological advancement or professional standardization. It is also a history of marginalized communities adapting print technologies to create new forms of social connection.

In this way, lesbian feminist periodicals can be understood as an early form of networked community. Every copy became another node in a network. The power of these publications therefore came not simply from what they printed, but from the fact that they made community reproducible.



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