Using New Technologies to Enter the Public Sphere, Second Wave Style

Linda Steiner

Introduction: Historical Contexts for Second Wave Production

Although some contemporary movements operate with and through mainstream media, the women's movement has long suspected mainstream media outlets of harboring sexism, so it avoids relying on mainstream media to represent women in their diversity or to disseminate relevant news and information. The internet is merely the latest and clearest example of a pattern of focusing on men as the initial, primary market for communication technologies (Wajcman 2010; Melhem and Tandon 2009). Nonetheless, feminist organizations have used each new medium in turn to carve out space in which to share women's news and feminist perspectives among themselves and with wider publics (see Chambers et al. 2004; Steiner 1992).

Apart from the content carried, each medium has a material and technological structure that may either constrain or promote social movements. Different media have advantages and disadvantages in reaching known sympathizers or unknown "masses." They facilitate (or discourage) certain ways of thinking and interacting. They require different kinds of material investment and degrees of technical skill, even if financial profit is irrelevant and if aesthetics and slick production values are low priorities. Moreover, while feminists typically emphasize disseminating principled content, information is not the only goal. Often participants want to learn complex skills, study significant issues, and form and sustain community. Therefore, in figuring out the best way to communicate, whether internally or with potential converts or policy-makers, feminists must calculate the goals and available human and financial resources against the costs and capital investment required.

The research reported here highlights the importance of the *process* of producing feminist content and thereby sustaining feminist solidarity. Given the media options available to U. S. feminists, how do both the processes of participation and the potential for developing a sense of community and group loyalty figure in the long-term success of feminist media projects? The focus here is an emphatically feminist collective that since 1994 has produced a public service show, *New Directions for Women* (NDW),

available on public access channels on cable systems in three states. The collective is a New Jersey chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW). Most of its participants have been involved since the start, and reflect a second wave sensibility. A few are members of the Veteran Feminists of America – feminists who struggled together and want to rekindle the spirit of that revolution.

The question is whether cable access continues to offer viable opportunities for public participation by feminists using feminist modes of production, given the intersection of generation with medium-specific advantages and disadvantages. NDW participants explicitly describe themselves as "not innovative or inventive." But they take the fact that their shows are archived at Smith College, an elite women's college, as evidence that NDW not only represents relevant contemporary issues, but also will last far beyond the cablecasts and YouTube, where the group also posts all shows.

Second Wave Broadcast Feminist Media

Similar to their first wave forerunners during the campaign to win the right to vote, second wave feminists were prolific in print. They published many local, regional, and national newspapers and magazines, newsletters and comic books (see Endres and Lueck 1996; Steiner 1992). Such ventures were supported by then-new feminist publishing houses and imprints, bookstores, and news distribution services. Many of these periodicals were produced by, for, and about specific niches: women with particular religious, sexual, professional/vocational, ethnic, racial or political identities. Others, of course, had more comprehensive scope and sought more general popularity, as represented most prominently in the U. S. by *Ms.* magazine. The cable show described here changed its name to *New Directions for Women* (NDW) after the cessation of a national feminist newspaper by that name founded in 1972 by Paula Kassell, who was also active in the NOW chapter. *New Directions for Women* grew from a mimeographed quarterly to a thick bimonthly with a broad healthy subscriber base and international renown.

Other "platforms" were more difficult. Yet least 33 women's groups in the U. S. produced radio programs between 1963 and 1985 (Allen 1988). Moreover, like second wave services that distributed newspaper and magazine content, the Feminist Radio Network (FRN), formed in 1974, distributed feminist radio programming nationwide. Martha Allen's point is that the FRN was typical of women's media: It enabled women to share their experiences, offered access to technology, and had a collective structure, particularly regarding decision making. It insisted: "Feminist programming can replace the passive media-audience relationship with one in which the audience and participants are synonymous, and in which we can see the strength of our own lives reflected in our programming" (quoted in Allen 1988). Feminists continue to maintain beachheads in radio; nonetheless, the structure and financial imperatives of commercial broadcasting discourage its use by social reform movements. The FRN eventually concluded that because men controlled the technology

and owned the radio stations, women in broadcasting could never enjoy the same autonomy as print-oriented women.

Producing regular feminist broadcast television is even more difficult, complex, and expensive, given, inter alia, the structure of advertising. In 1974, for this very reason, a North Carolina women's group applied to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for permission to use a seemingly abandoned FM frequency. When the original license-holder sought to re-operate the station, the FCC rejected the women's application (Allen 1988). In Chicago, the Women's News Service Project, which served stations not normally covering women's news, began an evening news feminist show in 1974. Meanwhile, in 1980 the FCC issued a license to some Connecticut women to build a television station, but they never managed to raise the $1.5 million needed to get on air.

The History of Public Access Television

Feminists soon came to realize that commercial television would never be feasible for them. Their best chance became public access channels on cable. Multiple reports in the 1960s and 1970s (by which time utopian discourse had peaked) confidently predicted that the new "television of abundance" could deliver information, civic education, and citizen participation (Doty 1975). A blue-ribbon commission heralded the "awesome" promise of cable to revolutionize cultural life (Sloan 1971). Despite concern that "production elitism" and citizen apathy would limit its potential for decentralized participation (Gillespie 1975), public access cable television in particular was hailed for its democratic potential to revolutionize cultural life and encourage direct engagement. Public access was the "last best hope for a public sphere and for an active enlightened polity" (Devine 1992: 9). Nonetheless, implementation was slow. In 1973, some 69 women's (and mixed) organizations jointly applied for a Memphis, Tennessee cable channel that would provide serious alternative programming for and by women but not exclusively about women (Allen 1988). The city opted not to go forward with cable TV. Similar coalitions in Maryland, Kentucky, New York, Wisconsin, and Washington, D. C. failed for assorted reasons.

Meanwhile, in 1969, after experiments first in Canada and then in the U. S., the FCC endorsed cable's potential to augment community self-expression (Linder 1999). In 1972, the FCC required cable systems in the 100 largest markets to provide channels specifically for public, educational, and local government use (so-called PEG channels), which come bundled in the basic cable package. The Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984 authorized local municipalities to request channels, if they wanted, and to require cable franchise holders to provide training, equipment, and production facilities, usually for free.[1] Typically, anyone may produce programming for a public-access channel. The 1984 Act barred cable operators from

1 Municipalities may choose to forego PEG channels, thereby pocketing all franchise fees. Cable, including public-access television, is not subject to the same rules as broad-

exercising editorial control over PEG channel content. As of 2000, some 18 percent of cable systems provided equipment and facilities for local public programming (Aufderheide 2000). Because some states no longer require cable providers to offer public access channels, more than 100 PEG stations across the country (out of about 5,000) have closed since 2005; another 400 face extinction (Arnold 2011). A bill proposed in 2011 would protect PEG channels and restore some funding.[2]

Analysts personally involved in recent public access projects remained optimistic about public access's Do-It-Yourself aesthetic and value to democracy (Halleck 2002). Although political effectiveness presumably requires wide distribution, access television enables "ordinary people" to reframe commercial ideologies, exercise democratic free speech rights, and represent themselves to the larger community (Stein 2001). But feminist cable access shows are essentially limited to a few big cities and college towns – and are sparse and short-lived. Naysayers question the capacity of public access shows to help build community, and ridicule the programming as self-indulgent, amateur, homemade, and "pathetic" (Aufderheide 1992: 58). Meanwhile, public access can be exploited by for-profit businesses.

Internal technical constraints are not insignificant. Even producing a fairly primitive public access show necessitates a core mass of skilled people. It cannot be done on the spur of the moment, at home, or alone. This communal need for participation by and interaction among a group is perhaps an advantage of public access for feminists. Meanwhile, the technology continues to change. Community program producers have always exploited new technologies whenever possible, especially as costs drop. First, video camcorders were relatively easy for non-professionals to learn and use. Now, even cheaper, easier Web 2.0 technologies and digital equipment, including open-source or user-modifiable software, may gradually replace cable system-operated public access. On the other hand, in the short term, the open-source model discourages and reduces interaction among producers and may further exclude underserved and seniors, among other groups (Arnold 2011).

NOW Media Policy

From its birth in 1966, the National Organization for Women has been suspicious of mainstream media. Its website, among other venues, expresses NOW's pointed criticism of televised sexism (and violence). In 1999, for example, NOW complained that opponents interrupt and distort their message whenever its activists speak. This attention to television makes sense:

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cast television, although people mistakenly complain to the FCC about public access programming.

2 Public-access channels operate in United Kingdom and Europe, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, usually on cable but occasionally through terrestrial television. Germany, Norway and Sweden have "open channels." For example, since 1985, government-financed Offener Kanal (Open Channel) Dortmund is free for use by local citizens (http://homepage.tinet.ie/~openchannel/ctvlinks.htm).

Television symbolizes and allocates status. In 1996 three women (including two women from the local NOW chapter described here) brought to NOW's national convention a resolution calling for feminist media to counter the images of women as sex objects and/or victims and to supply feminist perspectives. Their mimeographed statement claimed NOW needs "a public voice, public awareness of feminist positions, a forum for feminist thought and analysis of national policy issues, and a vehicle for recording women's herstory." Feminist television could be a powerful tool for organizing, fund raising, and potentially converting "mainstream" women into "declared feminists."

In 1999, NOW joined a coalition of foundations and nonprofits to advocate more public affairs and political programming, as well as support for public service media, community accountability, and diversity. This project quickly faded, but its separate campaign to promote "positive and diverse" portrayals of women and people of color lasted a while longer. NOW's "Watch Out, Listen Up!" project focused on television, given "its unbeatable reach into our homes and its influence on our attitudes." "Watch Out, Listen Up!" encouraged people to regard themselves as media activists – by complaining about offensive content and applauding positive content. In 2002 NOW issued a fairly damning analysis of all primetime programs on six channels, but it seems to have abandoned this series of reports.

NOW also urges people to create their own programming – for cable access shows, low-power radio stations or online radio shows. Occasionally this works. NOW members have been quoted in press accounts discussing the effectiveness of programs they made for community or access channels. More to the point, in 1999 NOW launched its own Feminist Communications Network – a TV, cable, radio and web broadcast network. The chair of the Feminist Communications Network Task Force described participants as "energized and committed to working together toward a common vision" (Grieco 1999). But this idea also died. The only cable access show nominally linked to NOW is the focus here, *New Directions for Women*. After twice appearing as a guest, I interviewed members individually and in groups several times during November 1997, February 1998, March 1998, April 1998, December 2000, July 2004 and February-March 2012. I intended to remain an observer in the field, not to turn this into a participant-observation project. Nonetheless, three times while observing, I was recruited to do camera work because someone failed to show up. Background came from interviews and documents, especially from the show's original executive producer.

New Directions for Women

NOW chapter activists in Morris County, New Jersey were inspired to consider producing their own cable television show by Florynce Kennedy, a radical lawyer, civil rights activist, and feminist whom *People* magazine called "the biggest, loudest and, indisputably, the rudest mouth on the battleground" (Martin 2000). In the late 1970s, Kennedy co-produced a femi-

nist news analysis show in New York City for cable for the Feminist Party, which she had founded. "The Flo Kennedy Show" also aired on cable. Ironically, Flo Kennedy helped found NOW, but abandoned it after deciding it was overly geared to white, middle-class women (Martin 2000; Hoffman 1985). Meanwhile, New Jersey NOW members were tired of being vilified by right-wing extremists. "We decided it was time for us to do more than just write letters to the editor to let people know what we stood for and who we really were" (DeRise 1995). They turned to cable.

Taped at the cable system's studio, the programs themselves nearly always involve interviews with one, two or three guests. The production rate has dropped slightly, probably due to a drop in membership. Yet they persevere: By January 2012, NDW had produced 219 shows in eighteen years. The show, which is re-aired several times a month, is listed in local cable guides and on the chapter's increasingly sophisticated, content-rich website. NDW is the chapter's major activity, but the chapter's other communication mechanisms include Facebook and Twitter.

In the spirit of the newspaper's emphasis on detailed hard news, the collective insists that shows be informative. "The quality of the shows depends on the quality of the guests," the host says. Guests include nationally-known feminists, researchers, university scholars, political leaders, and professionals, as well as people whose personal experience gives them warrant. Men are rarely guests, but men have discussed male feminists, stay-at-home dads, puberty, prostitution, bi-sexuality, and pornography, among other questions. NDW wants to be "effective" so it demands topics that, in their estimation, bring the private into the public domain, resonate broadly, and interest people with all kinds of views. Several members assert that NDW programming is and should be relevant to men, as many feminists have more generally claimed about feminist content, including Kassell herself. Men may join NOW – whose preposition is 'for,' not 'of' – although no men were members of the chapter in 2012. Potential NDW topics must be approved at an open meeting of the chapter's board of directors. One NDW member explains, "Viewers need to be interested and NOW needs to be convinced there is enough interest." It's a matter of making choices among possible topics. The board rarely disapproves a proposal outright; suggestions are most likely to be denied because NDW had recently done something similar, or a guest who proposed a topic did not attend a meeting to explain it.

NDW members are satisfied with anecdotal evidence that they reach an audience, including direct responses, positive and negative. They claim to have over 32,000 views of their programming and are expanding on YouTube. A few years ago, one stalwart said, "I want to believe there is an audience. . . . Well-educated people tune into questions of importance. They are concerned with these issues." The current chapter president says: "While we don't have millions of views, we have tens of thousands and our subscriber list is slowly growing. I have been exploring all avenues of social media in an effort to spread awareness of NOW and to engage younger women. It is a philosophy of 'If you build it, they will come.'"

After carefully pondering whether to feature argument, NDW members decided that avoiding incivility or pandering was more important than being exciting or adversarial. They understand the intellectual and moral vacuity of the myth of objectivity espoused by mainstream news professionals. Noting frequent instances when the political right has manipulated journalists and misrepresented feminism, they see no responsibility to present opposing or anti-feminist viewpoints. A founding NDW member said: "We don't directly present anti-feminist content or shows that work against women." Announcements of topics often proclaim their agenda. For example, the teaser for a discussion of the impact of neoconservatives on sex education referred to "the 'civil war' between those who want to go backwards and those who understand that that will never happen."

NDW has featured several issues of particular concern to feminists, including the debate over equal rights, pay equity, feminist activism, the closing of women's prisons, prisoners' children, sexual slavery, sex crimes, domestic and dating violence, discrimination of various kinds and women in the workplace – especially in "nontraditional" fields. Deans of two women's colleges discussed pressures on women's colleges to go co-ed. Third World women occasionally come up. Not surprisingly, given that women over 50 dominate the crew, practical issues about aging (navigating the empty nest, senior care, retirement) have been featured. But breast feeding, fertility, and especially reproductive rights are more prominent. Several shows have dealt with (homo)sexuality, trans-sexuality, and same-sex marriage and partnerships. Among the historical shows, in early 2012, NDW featured Sojourner Truth, who so famously asked "Ain't I a Woman," as well as suffragist Alice Paul and journalist Margaret Fuller.

Technology somewhat constrains the potential for a specifically feminist approach to collective action in that it requires people have a certain technical literacy (although mastery of the technology is widely regarded both as an asset and part of the fun). The local cable company originally provided ten weeks of training to 18 chapter members, who learned to direct, operate cameras and lighting, and work the control panels. The crew tapes shows, two at a time, at the sponsoring cable system's facilities. Although additional people have taken the course or apprenticed with the crew, of course they have lost some of their original members. Recently the NDW chapter's newsletter – wholly online – described NDW's "dire need" in all production roles. Luckily, after doing NDW for so long, they can now get by with fewer people than before – a director, two camera operators, one audio technician, one video graphics, plus the host/interviewer. Indeed, most of the burden is on the host: She must study the topic, plan out questions, and consider how to engage with guests who might be difficult to draw out. Moreover, after years of taping on Saturdays, NDW now enjoys a "very good" mid-week time, when cable system employees are available to fix broken equipment – a chronic problem.

Like its parent organization, NDW is not obsessed with the feminist method, including the anti-hierarchical sentiment of the 1960s. It is fairly casual about power and leadership. NDW's main concern is getting the

work done without glaring errors. Still, consistent with feminist action for well over a century, NDW is concerned with group processes and group learning. Taping sessions remain consistently quiet and calm. The women, who now know each other quite well, offer and accept sisterly, friendly advice. The effort survives on a shoestring. FCC law forbids advertising on PEG channels but, as with public television, corporate underwriting is acceptable. On occasion, a few businesses underwrote NDW's "thought-provoking" show. But soliciting sponsors takes time; this has fallen off. The collective still lacks the human resources necessary to apply for grants – something the newspaper did quite successfully. So they cannot build a nicer set, and must shuttle their few props (flowers, tablecloth, mugs) back and forth.

The collective largely but not exclusively expresses the voice of white, middle-class, liberal feminists. One long-time member is African American; none are Asians.[3] No men remain members of the chapter or crew. One member who teaches at a technical high school occasionally brings students to work on the crew, but the regular members are all over the age of 50. The members themselves explicitly emphasize that they are all busy with families, careers, and a host of community, volunteer and social responsibilities that they take very seriously. These women have sacrificed to carve time out of their complex, highly over-committed work and family lives to acquire the requisite technical literacy and to continue on.

Generations, Technology and Community

To promote participation, NOW's own documents list camaraderie and "a great time," along with learning new skills, personal development, and pride in accomplishment. Along with a sense of community, these virtues have been highly important to other feminist projects and to other public access collectives, as well as to contemporary internet projects. Some years ago, NDW's instrumental view of their work, their apparent disinterest in regular extra-curricular socializing and their thin sense of community seemed surprising. NDW participants describe themselves as a community and enjoy their time together (as well as, occasionally, time outside of NOW projects). They refer to NDW as a "labor of love." Not only do they come together to produce their public access show, but they also attend NOW meetings, as well as parades and protest marches. In 2011, this included an Occupy rally in Washington, D. C. and marches on behalf of peace, labor rights, and healthcare.

The sense of community is relative and its definition plastic. Mastery of skills and fun accord with research on many Web 2.0 projects, but third-wave feminist activity arguably creates an even thinner community. Although I cannot examine this here, it's worth noting briefly that third wave feminists' favorite media tools require no interpersonal interaction. Third

3 This is not surprising given the demographics of Morris County.

wave cyberfeminists still seek "community," albeit a mostly virtual community. The bilingual Canadian blog site Kickaction.ca, for example, often mentions its status as a "community." Feministlawprofessors.com aims for a stronger feminist law professor "community." Feministing.com has a "Community" page, where "all members of our community" can post. The mission of fourthwavefeminism.com is "to foster feminist community in our contemporary world. . . . It's up to us, as a community – as a movement – to actually orchestrate change." But the blogosphere does not offer the shared identity or nurturing enjoyed by second wave feminist communities, nor do they provide a specifically feminist structure. Producing online content facilitates self-expression in the moment but neither requires nor encourages group interaction or ongoing loyalty to a shared "cause." Feminists' new online social interactivity and networking is largely virtual, anonymous, and accomplished by individuals. In particular, personal blogs (essentially online diaries) have a libertarian essence that is arguably at odds with the feminism of the older generation.

For their part, third wavers have largely rejected second wave's condemnation of mainstream media. Second wave tactics do not speak to the "media-savvy, culturally driven generation" of the third wave (Baumgarder and Richards 2000: 77). One eponymously named third wave website proudly asserts: "This is not the second wave warmed over. We are building on what they have accomplished and taking it in new directions appropriate for the 21st century" (quoted in Karras 2002).

Conclusion: Public Sphere or Screen

Jürgen Habermas's (1989) history of the emergence and disintegration of the liberal bourgeois public sphere has been accused of multiple empirical, historical, and conceptual errors. Nancy Fraser (1997) notes that Habermas's public sphere privileged white bourgeois men, formal political issues, and rational debate, so never offered universal or equally distributed power. Proposing instead the concept of counter-publics, she says a single, comprehensive public sphere is impossible in complex multi-cultural societies (Fraser 1997). Moreover, at least initially, Habermas conceived of mass media in mass-market terms, ignoring alternative or oppositional public spheres. On the other hand, while agreeing that the concept of the public sphere remains essential, Kevin DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples (2002) criticize those trying to reform Habermas's notion of the public sphere for problematically focusing on rationality and dialogue, producing "an exclusionary and impoverished normative ideal that shuns much of the richness and turbulence of the sense-making process" (128). They propose instead the "public screen," which "highlights dissemination, images, hypermediacy, spectacular publicity, cacophony, distraction, and dissent" (145).

This debate captures on the key difference between the playfulness of third wave feminists and the second wave, exemplified by the New Jersey feminists' preference for rationality, deliberation, and civility. That is, NDW

manifests two kinds of genetic ancestry: Habermas's interactive salon tradition; and the 1970s dramatistic style of feminist activism. They decidedly do not ignore difference. But they aspire to dialogue that produces consensus. They struggle together, holding firm to their long-term and explicitly shared commitment to protracted work at a variety of levels and in multiple contexts in order to produce incremental changes for women. The general claims made on behalf of public access television – that it promotes media literacy, "real" political activism, and empowerment at both the individual and group levels – continue to describe NDW. The "talking head" is, they acknowledge, old-fashioned. Indeed, more than ever, NDW members wish they could go on location and use the technology in more sophisticated and jazzy ways. Still, it actively chooses the calm, rational, moderate tone. This is not only technically easier but it also befits their general politics, inherited from liberal feminism.

While they appreciate that they don't need to confront (or solve) the economic and editorial constraints confronting commercial television, they lack the resources required for more innovative, creative work. In my view, this is not a matter of lack of time, commitment, imagination, or even money. Rather, technical and structural demands within public access channels over-determine the "product." No single medium is perfect; no single mechanism can fully support deliberation among all publics. Far greater technical resources and theatrical skills than NDW can muster are necessary to reach third wave feminists. But NDW has negotiated a partial way of serving complex and even contradictory purposes by acknowledging their own limitations and those of the form. They continue to offer for public discussion – especially audiences of their generation – genuine news from women's personal and work worlds. They have properly redefined the public not as a collection of individual consumers, but as social identity groups with real material, political, social, cultural, and intellectual needs. They have both recognized who they are, who they would like to be, and whom they want to serve. They do so without pandering or compromising their feminism.

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