HEARING WOMEN INTO SPEECH: THE FEMINIST PRESS AND THE WOMEN'S COMMUNITY

Betty-Ann Lloyd

Les femmes ayant le privilège de travailler avec les mots et les images dans la presse féministe, ont une relation particulière avec la communauté de femmes qu'elles desservent. Leur procédé, la façon par laquelle elles produisent leurs publications, peut être une source de pouvoir non seulement pour elles-mêmes, mais aussi pour leurs lectrices et pour la communauté en général. Elles ont la possibilité de — dans les paroles de Nelle Morton — "hear women into speech." Les femmes qui produisent Pandora, *un tabloïd de 24 pages publié à Halifax, en Nouvelle-Écosse, tentent de se servir de cette image. Bien que la pratique ne soit pas toujours à la mesure de la théorie, elles tentent toujours de se respecter pour les efforts qu'elles font.*

For the last eighteen months, I have been co-ordinating editor of *Pandora*, a 24-page tabloid newspaper based in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Our sixth issue went in the mail on December 1, a testimony to the power of women, our words and our images.

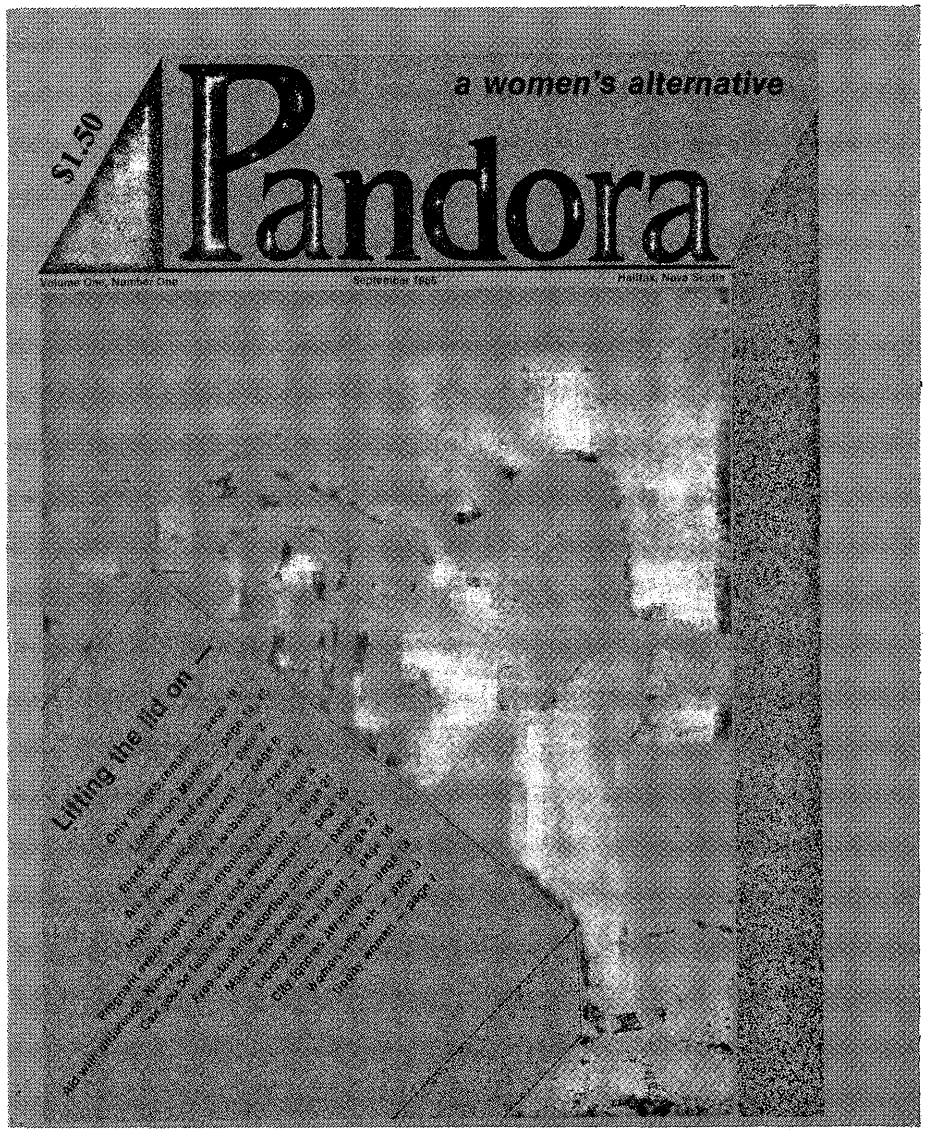
There were only three of us in the beginning, in April 1985. I was interested in working with women to produce a feminist newspaper. Brenda R. Bryan was interested in the networking potential of the paper and in the graphic design. Carol Millett was interested in working on group process. As part of the celebration of our first birthday, we set aside a section of the September 1986 issue to list the names of the 160 women who worked directly with the paper during its first year of production. Of these women, over 25 have become committed "Pandora women."

When the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women undertook a study of women and politics in Canada, Linda Christiansen-Ruffman decided to include these Pandora women. The three of us who started the paper knew we were involved in political action, radical political action. But, Linda discovered, many others were not initially conscious of the paper's political implications. Some of them wanted to work with words or images. Others wanted to work with women.

Our experience in the first year made it clear to everyone that women who choose to work with other women to produce women-identified words and images are — whether they anticipate it or not — involved in political questions of power and rights.

Obviously, all the feminist publications in Canada are involved in these political questions. Our older sisters, such as *Kinesis*, *Broadside*, *Herizons*, *Hysteria*, *Common Ground* and *Fireweed*, have shared their experience of power, celebration, conflict and vision. Because they have let us take part in their process, we are more able to envision ways in which we can deal with the difficulties that inevitably arise when women work together with words and images. It doesn't mean that we can avoid conflict within our publications or with our particular communities. We can't. We haven't. But we can foresee the pleasure as well as the pain and we don't feel as if we are alone in the struggle or in the joy.

Certainly, individually and as a group, our experience with *Pandora* has been both painful and rewarding. Our theory



often surpasses our practice, our vision is challenged by the realities of time, money, space and personalities. We do, however, try to realize our respect for each other as designers, photographers, typesetters, layout women, distributors and writers.

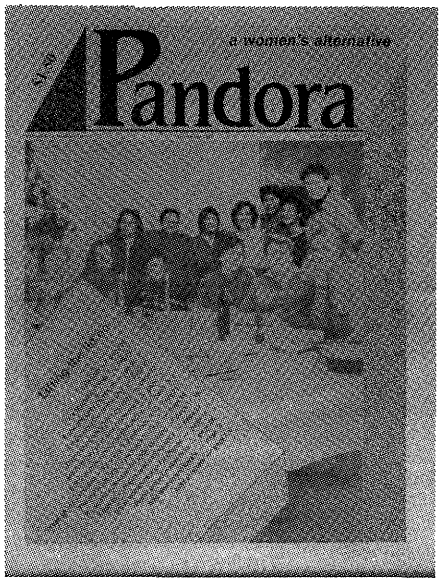
We also try to stay in touch with our understanding that we are privileged, as women, to be able to work with images and words. Although many of us have a working class background, although we are not all able-bodied, we recognize that our formal education, our work history, our colour and our confidence give us access to the tools of production.

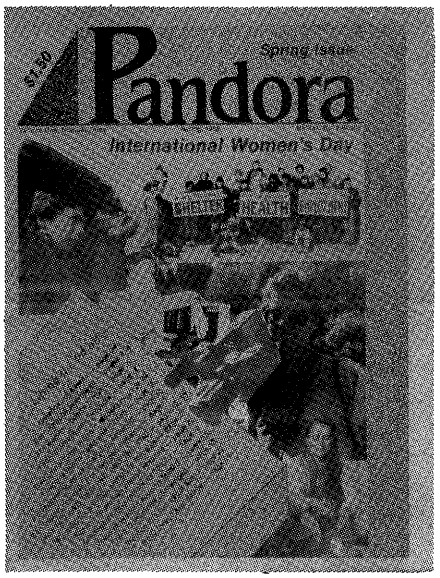
Obviously, if we were all fighting poverty, family violence, racial discrimination or physical barriers we would not have the time or inclination to put our energies into this project. Our oppression as women is common, our double and triple oppressions vary and complement each other. Those of us with formal education or technical skills try to teach others. Those of us who have cars, drive others. Those of us who can get in and out of cars unaided, travel to those who can't, or give our sisters a boost.

And we are trying to confront those barriers we have not been able to get around, over or under. The question of lesbian and straight women working together, the question of working with black women and other women of colour, the question of group and individual leadership are all on the agenda. As some of us leave Halifax, we need to find and fold in others to take our place.

Because we have an open structure, allowing women to become part of the production process at any time, we do not all participate in the same struggles at the same time. We have extremely disparate degrees of political experience, production experience, experience in working with women in non-hierarchical ways. Women are in very different stages of developing feminist consciousness and analysis. We don't ask that we all agree, but we do ask that we respect and support each other's best intentions.

All of this adds up to an emphasis on process that almost, but not quite, overshadows the product. And this is, to me, a revelation. For close to ten years, I worked in the mainstream media, as a reporter and editor with community newspapers and as a journalist and associate producer with CBC Radio. I have taught part-time and this year am teaching full-time at the Journalism School of the University of King's College in





Halifax. In these pursuits, the focus was and is, almost exclusively, on the final product.

In other feminist periodicals, the amount of emphasis placed on process varies widely. Some periodicals are produced by one woman alone, with perhaps two or three helping. Others have a board structure and paid staff, others are closed collectives in which each woman is equally responsible for all the decisions that must be made, all the work that has to be done. Feminist publications are not some single, homogeneous entity, inspired by the same philosophy, working for the same community.

We have, sometimes in French, sometimes in English, sometimes in both languages, an academic women's press, a women's health issues press, a socialist women's press, a lesbian press. There is a press for francophone women outside Quebec, a university women's press, a women artist's press, a rural women's press, and an urban women's press. We have a government women's press, a women writer's press, a black women/women of colour press, a women's peace movement press. There is a press for women lawyers and for women in conflict with the law.

We have, in Canada, at recent count, over forty feminist publications that are sold by subscription and in stores. This does not include the myriad publcations that are produced by women's centres and organizations. We are, both within and between these categories, very different.

In 1985 Eleanor Wachtel updated her 1982 report, "Feminist Print Media" (prepared for the Secretary of State, Women's Program). Her figures indicate that one of the feminist publications is seventeen years old, although our average age is seven years. Most of us publish four times a year. The average cost of a subscription is $10.00. The average number of pages per issue is forty, although that ranges from 7 to 150. The median press run is 2,000, with a range from 150 to 25,000. The median number of subscribers is 650, with a range from 60 to over 10,000. Annual budgets range from $1,400 to over $350,000. Total salaries for publications run from $0 to $85,000. The percentage of income from grants, advertising and subscriptions varies widely. Only 35 percent pay for office space.

All of these statistics aside, feminist periodicals obviously fulfill the requirements for one of Webster's definitions of *press*: "a crowd of people or a crowded condition." In my opinion, however, the many and various definitions of the active verb — *to press* — best describe the range of our activities. Some of us "strive earnestly," others "apply steady pressure," many of us "force or push our way." We have been known to "make a hostile assault." We often "force recruits into service." Sometimes we "impose a weight or burden." All of us, if we are lucky, "clasp in affection and courtesy."

When we are facing criticism from ourselves and from our community, it may seem that the archaic definition of press is most appropriate: "the crush...of foot soldiers in battle."

Certainly, given these choices, the common definition of *press* seems most inappropriate: a press is a printing or publishing establishment.

If nothing else, as the feminist press,

we are the counter-establishment press. Simply by publishing work for, by and about women, we act against our society's convention of trivializing and marginalizing women's experience and women's analyses.

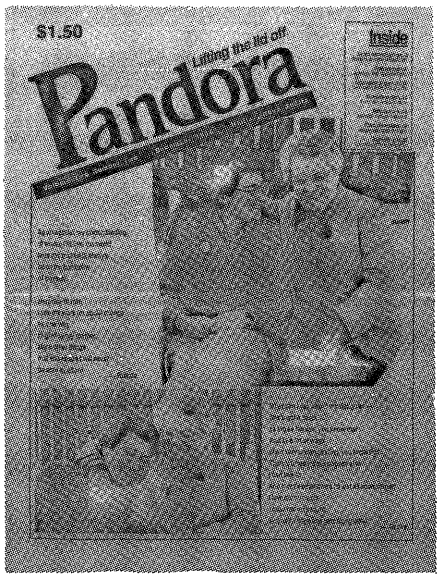
In my work with *Pandora*, I don't think I am involved in journalism as much as I am involved in political action. And, even as I write this, I realize I am picking up male-identified categories. What I mean to say is that woman-identified journalism is political in exactly the way that male-identified journalism is political. While we say, "this is political action," they say "this is objective journalism." Of course, male-identified journalism — reporting by men, for men about issues that are of concern to men — is political action. It is political action that supports and maintains the status quo. Women-identified journalism, reporting by women, for women, about issues that are of concern to women — is political action also. It is political action that affirms our experience, that addresses the imbalance of power in our lives.

With the CBC, I worked as a journalist. At the University of King's College, I teach as a journalist. As co-ordinating-editor of *Pandora*, I use my journalistic experience to take part in political activism. The graphic designers and photographers, the accountant and advertising rep, the women who do layout and typesetting, the copy-editors and proof-readers, the women who organize distribution are using their particular skills for political action.

Each of the feminist publications publish for a particular audience. There are some publications marked "Womyn Only." There are some that say "Lesbians Only." One publication is distinctively socialist, several have strong geographical boundaries (with the national boundary no less restrictive than interior British Columbia). Some publications speak in academese.

At *Pandora*, we work at having a very direct relationship with our readers. We ask them to write for us. When we want low-income women to read us, we ask for and facilitate stories from low-income women. When we want mothers to read us, we publish articles by mothers. This holds true for native women, academic women, peace movement women, older women, younger women and so on.

It's simply good community newspaper theory. If you want the people in Middle River to read and subscribe to your newspaper, you take pictures of the schoolchildren, report on Legion meetings and comment on the latest council scandal. If you want feminist artists to subscribe to your paper, you ask them to write about their lives, you photograph their work, you publish their graphics, ask the galleries to advertise and put their events in the Calendar.



It seems simple, but it isn't. Good community newspapers — newspapers that effectively represent all facets of their community — are very rare. And that's no less true in the women's community than in the community at large.

I think one reason we fall short of this ideal effectiveness is that we tend to think in terms of the relationship of the feminist press *to* the women's community rather than our relationship *with* our particular communities. Where one concept is static (vertical), the other is more dynamic (horizontal).

It is this horizontal, dynamic relationship *between* that I am particularly interested in. It keeps me in my place, as a woman with access to the tools of production. It reminds me that unless I take from the members of my community, I cannot give them anything. Without respect for what they have to say, I cannot be heard.

Nelle Morton is a wonderful eighty-year-old feminist theologian. She talks about a "woman movement" that recognizes the power and expressiveness of women who speak from their experience as women within this society and from their conscious understanding of women's experience in other societies.

She is not talking about the women's movement, a malestream media creation, a government-funded institution that feeds on an earlier liberation movement. She is talking, instead, of women in community who consciously act in ways that demonstrate their belief that the personal is political, that oppression is something done by one group or individual to another, that freedom is worth fighting for.

In *The Journey is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), Nelle Morton talks about her understanding of "hearing women into speech." She says we are powerful when we provide a safe place for women to express themselves — when we listen in such a way that women are heard into their own speech. She says we are expressive when other women provide that space and that listening for us. She is saying, also, that women cannot become powerful or expressive by being spoken to, by being spoken for or, especially, by being spoken about. It is by being *heard* that women become empowered.

And this is where I feel the feminist press can begin to enter into an effective, affirming relationship with the women of our particular communities. Our part is providing safe space so that women who are so often silenced, so rarely heard, can risk speaking, can find a respectful, questioning and challenging ear.

Women can use this space to speak of their experience. They can speak of the connections they have begun to make between that experience and the experience of other women. They can speak of the analysis that grows out of making connections, the vision that expands that analysis and the strategies that further the vision.

What can be political and empowering about our publications is not so much what we print as how and why we print

it. *Pandora's* content (excepting, perhaps, its lesbian-positive stance) is relatively moderate. It reflects the interests and concerns of white, primarily middle class, anglophone women in the Maritime community. But while our product often seems only mildly political, our process strives to be radically political. What we want to do is to hear individual women into their own speech, whatever and wherever that speech may be.

It is easy to see how we can provide concrete space for writers, artists and photographers, even designers and administrators. Obviously, however, we have to do more than this. We have to provide safe space; that is, we have to be accessible. On one level, this means our meetings can be held in buildings that are wheelchair accessible. Disabled women may then come to our meetings, begin to know us, join in a working group, write an article, take a photograph, or invite a friend to become involved. Only then will their experience, and our experience of their reality as women, be reflected in the publication.

On another level, we can provide childcare and subsidized admission to all our public events. At the end of each general meeting, we can add as much as we individually can to the money jar put aside for those women faced with transportation and childcare costs. In this way, mothers and low-income women may feel they will be heard.

On another level, again, women from cultures not represented in our group can be given space that does not carry with it the cost of reflecting our cultural values. We can share our skills, our access to the production tools, without insisting that our way of expressing ourselves, visually and verbally, are copied.

We can, essentially, as individuals and as a group, be conscious of where our oppression ends and our privilege begins. And both our oppression and our privileges are reflected in our process. I think it is our process, when it reflects feminist process (and perhaps even more when it doesn't), that reaches out into our various communities within the woman movement and becomes a kind of touchstone for these communities.

For example, an academic women's publication, a rural women's publication, a lesbian publication, any feminist publication, can decide to focus on the issue of isolation. We may decide to focus on our experience of isolation and the isolation experienced by women in other communities. We may focus on an analysis of the issue of isolation, on a vision for change, on the development of strategies to realize that vision.

What is primarily important is whether, in this first stage of the process of publishing, all the women involved have been heard. It is important that the writers, the editors, the photographers, the designers, the women doing outreach, group process, production and distribution felt a part of the process, have not felt isolated or, at least, have come to a better understanding of their isolation. Because their experience, our experience, will be reflected in our publications. And it will come back to haunt us in the second stage of the publication process.

It is in this second stage that our readers, our communities within the woman movement, take the words and images and, we hope, feel that their experience is validated, that they are better able to make connections, develop analysis, vision and strategies. I don't think the process of publishing is complete until their response circles back to us. Because — and this is, I think, politically correct these days — all good relationships, all positive connections, involve a striving for mutuality, for interdependence.

As members of the feminist press, I think that means that we have to pay close attention to our relationship with our various communities, with the individual women in those communities, including the women we work with on our publications. We have to give the kind of attention that is empowering and expressive — that *hears women into speech.* And we have a right to ask that these women relate to us, connect with us, pay attention to us, in a way that is equally empowering and expressive. Because, truly, if we do not *hear each other into speech* then it seems to me the press has stopped — no matter how many words and images make it into print.

I think it is time, if that happens, to reconsider the relationship, to see if we haven't become merely a printing or publishing establishment.

But if, in each issue, we hear even one woman into speech, I think we have made the kind of connection that justifies the tremendous amount of energy that we put into our newspapers, magazines and journals. And I think it is enough, then, to continue striving earnestly, to continue making hostile assaults, forcing recruits into service and, as often as possible, clasping each other in affection and courtesy.

Betty-Ann Lloyd is currently coordinating editor of the feminist quarterly tabloid, Pandora, *and a lecturer in the School of Journalism, University of King's College. She has worked as a reporter and editor with community newspapers in the Maritimes and as a journalist and associate producer with CBC Radio. She has also driven a school bus on the back roads of Cape Breton, taught weaving and put in time in government information services and as a temporary typist. She is the proud mother of a ten-year-old son.*

CORRECTION

In our "Post Nairobi" issue (Volume 7, Numbers 1 & 2) we published an article by Njunga Mulikita, "The Ongoing Food Crisis in Africa and the Rights of Female Farmers" (pp. 85-88). We incorrectly described the author of this article as a woman: for this we apologize.