Virtual Activism and the Pro-Choice Movement in Canada

LIANNE MCTAVISH

The Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada pour le droit à l'avortement au Canada (ARCC-CDAC) est un groupe de militantes bilingues établi en octobre 2005. Cet article nous donne une description de la formation du groupe et son existence virtuelle, et place la coalition dans un contexte plus large de cyberféminisme surtout sur les politiques d'abortion sur Internet.

The Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada/Coalition pour le Droit à l'Avortement au Canada (ARCC-CDAC) is a bilingual group formed in October 2005. Feminist leaders and clinic directors from across Canada decided to create a new pro-choice organization that would be overtly political in nature. ARCC-CDAC is now actively devoted to expanding and defending women's access to abortion, as well as to preventing reductions in reproductive health services or rights. This article discusses the challenges faced by the founding members of ARCC-CDAC as they strove to establish a national movement with limited financial resources. It investigates how the group functions as a "virtual organization" (www.arcc-cdac.ca) without a stable location, mailbox, or phone number, while considering the political and historical implications of this virtual existence. As a relatively new form of feminist organization, virtuality has many benefits. This essay will also consider, however, the drawbacks of virtual forms of communication and political activism, offering a frank assessment of effectiveness of ARCC-CDAC to date.

The creation of another national pro-choice group might seem surprising, given the longstanding existence of the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (CARAL), formed in 1974. Yet the mandate of CARAL was met in 1988, when the Supreme Court struck down Canada's unconstitutional abortion law. Though CARAL continued to lobby for access to abortion, by 2005 members of the group were working to close down the organization, believing it should be replaced by an organization with goals more germane to the current situation in Canada. Therefore, CARAL created Canadians for Choice (CFC), a non-profit organization that operates by raising public awareness and promoting education. As a group with charitable status, however, CFC is not permitted to undertake political activity such as lobbying. ARCC-CDAC thus compliments CFC. Unhindered by charitable status, the new coalition directly participates in political activism in ways that both continue and move beyond CARAL's original objectives.

There is much political work left to do. Abortion is difficult to access in many parts of Canada, and this situation is of primary concern to ARCC-CDAC. According to the Supreme Count's decision in 1988, Canadian women have a right to obtain abortions without discriminatory barriers.[1] Nevertheless, over 18 years later, women living in rural and northern areas continue to travel long distances for abortions. In Prince Edward Island women face especially dire conditions. There are no abortions performed in the province, and women often drive to Halifax's Victoria General Hospital or to Fredericton, paying for procedures done there at the Morgentaler Clinic. The situation is, however, scarcely better in New Brunswick. There women are routinely denied hospital abortions, and every year more than 600 have to pay out-of-pocket for this health service at the Morgentaler Clinic.[2] The government of New Brunswick refuses to pay for the abortions performed in clinics, though such funding is required under the *Canada Health Act* (ARCC-CDAC 2005a). The illegal user fees that numerous women must pay for their abortions are a form of gender discrimination because only women can get pregnant.

ARCC-CDAC is currently supporting Dr. Morgentaler's lawsuit, launched in 2003, meant to force the government of New Brunswick to fund abortions performed in clinics as well as hospitals. In 2001,

the federal government began insisting that New Brunswick fully fund abortion services, but was slow to take official steps toward remedying the situation (ARCC-CDAC 2005b). In April 2005, then-Federal Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh began a dispute avoidance resolution process with the government of New Brunswick, but it has lost momentum. With the recent election of a Conservative government, it seems clear that women's right to fully funded abortion will no longer be supported at the federal level. At least 63 per cent of the Conservative caucus is publicly anti-choice, and new Federal Health Minister Tony Clement has yet to take a public stand on the issue (see "Listing of Anti-Choice MPs"). ARCC-CDAC nevertheless has reason to believe that New Brunswick will ultimately be required to fund clinic abortions, for in August of 2006 a court judgment ordered the government of Quebec—which had been funding only part of the abortions performed in that province—to repay 13 million dollars to the approximately 45,000 women who had paid fees for their abortions in women's health centres and private clinics between 1999 and 2005 (Carroll and Dougherty, 2006).

Even this brief discussion shows that Canadian women do not have the same experiences when seeking abortions, depending on where they live, despite a Supreme Court ruling and national health policy. Recognition of this diversity prompted the founders of ARCC-CDAC to create a national coalition, made up of activists from across the country. They wanted a range of voices to be represented, instead of a centralized group—located in central or western Canada—trying to speak for all women. Joyce Arthur, a member of British Columbia's Pro-Choice Action Network, was an early organizer of ARCC-CDAC. She contacted clinic workers and community activists from across Canada, inviting them to participate in the new organization. Eventually, representatives from such groups as the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics, Le Collectif pour le Libre Choix, Planned Parenthood Alberta, Fédération du Québec pour le planning des naissances, Catholics for a Free Choice, and Pro-Choice New Brunswick, as well as many abortion clinics across Canada, joined Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada/Coalition pour le Droit à l'Avortement au Canada.

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The coalition then had to determine the best method of organizing, which was not obvious given the range and geographical dispersal of its members. Choosing a name proved challenging, since referring to Canada risked alienating separatist Quebecers and implying a false unity. The term was retained in order to signify the nationwide participation of its membership, and so that federal as well as provincial reproductive health policies could be addressed. More crucial decisions involved how to create a broad organization with a national presence that existed in solidarity without becoming too centralized and concentrating authority into the hands of a few instead of collectively. During an initial teleconference, members decided the group should exist virtually, with participants communicating by means of e-mail and a listserv. Decisions would be made by a Steering Committee consisting of representatives from each region in Canada, with input from other members. Information about ARCC-CDAC's mandate, vision and goals would be disseminated on an extensive web site. Now largely in place, this web site additionally features recent press releases and some 25 position papers—brief written statements on topics such as why abortion is a medically required service, the abortion provider shortage, and emergency contraception. These papers were written by individual members, and then circulated electronically to the entire group for final editing. ARCC-CDAC's outreach and activist tools now comprise three different listservs for members, one for volunteers who work on ARCC-CDAC projects, a forum for grassroots pro-choice supporters, and a list that posts news stories related to reproductive rights in Canada.

In practical and financial terms, this virtual existence has been successful. The group does not pay for office space, regular mailouts, telephones, or many of the other overhead costs traditionally borne by political organizations. Though without a centralized phone number, ARCC-CDAC provides the media with cell phone numbers for its spokespeople. The exchange of information and communication between members is immediate and regular. The web site and listservs are available 24 hours a day, offering a wide range of political and practical information. During the 2006 election campaign, ARCC-CDAC's web site included daily election updates, and a press release warning that "Harper's Reassurances About Abortion Don't Mean a Thing." This data received national attention, and was cited in the press, giving ARCC-CDAC further exposure.[3] Though much information on the web site is aimed at the media and government officials, position papers such as "All About Your

Abortion (From Appointment to Recovery)" and "Why Do Women Have Abortions?" strive to address a broader audience.

The virtual existence of ARCC-CDAC may nonetheless have implications extending beyond the matter-of-fact issues of expense and the efficient exchange of information. Virtual pro-choice activism is a relatively recent phenomenon, different from the consciousness-raising groups and protest marches that characterize the history of abortion activism in Canada. For example in 1970, the Abortion Caravan traveled over 3,000 miles from Vancouver to Ottawa to demand legal abortion. Nearly 500 women from across Canada joined the protest along the way, and on Mother's Day weekend the group demonstrated in Ottawa. Some 35 of the women chained themselves to the parliamentary gallery in the House of Commons, closing Parliament for the first time in Canadian history (Rebick 35-46). The Abortion Caravan helped politicize and activate women around the country. Can the ARCC-CDAC web site ever have a similar effect?

This comparison might be misplaced, for times are different and so are strategies, with greater emphasis now placed on changing or implementing government health policies. It may also imply that such "on the streets" pro-choice activism is no longer happening, which is clearly not the case. Many pro-choice people, including some members of ARCC-CDAC, help to organize community health clinics. Others participate in local pro-choice events, or volunteer at abortion clinics, as patient escorts. ARCC-CDAC certainly promotes such activity, and will continue to do so in the future. Nevertheless, as a virtual organization, ARCC-CDAC also participates in what is now commonly called "cyberfeminism," a contested term with various theoretical strands (Galloway). It is important to consider ARCC-CDAC within the context of cyberfeminism in order to explore the impact of pro-choice virtual activism. This approach should both enable a fuller evaluation of ARCC-CDAC, and contribute to the ongoing assessment of cyberfeminism itself.

Since the 1990s a "utopian" branch of cyberfeminism has embraced technology, notably the Internet, arguing that it is a radically democratic medium that presents a plethora of voices able to undermine gender inequality. One author undertook a case study of web page use in a non-governmental organization in Colombia, concluding that "Networks—such as women's, environmental, ethnic and other social movements networks—are the location of new political actors and the source of promising cultural practices and possibilities" (Escobar 32).[4] In another formulation of the utopian position, Sadie Plant contends that computer technology is fundamentally female in both its nonlinear form, and its historical production by women such as nineteenth-century "computer programmer" Ada Lovelace (Plant). Her claims have some bearing on contemporary feminist activism online, reminding us that the use of communications technology is not entirely novel. Nineteenth-century abolitionists in Canada and the United States had, for example, "virtual" links with sympathetic European groups through their frequent exchange of letters.[5] Earlier forms of pro-choice activism functioned similarly, using fax trees, newsletters, and telephone hotlines to communicate. In a sense, ARCC-CDAC's virtual existence simply continues this tradition, while drawing on the utopian principle that virtuality can include diverse women from across Canada, bringing them together to fight the discrimination caused by women's unequal access to abortion.

The strategies have been moved online. Yet, the success of these strategies may increase online, because the Internet is widely considered a democratic resource providing information to all who seek it.

Other cyberfeminists have criticized the positive view of the politics of virtuality. They claim the Internet is firmly embedded in sexist and racist frameworks, often promotes the exploitation of women, and furthers the interests of capitalism rather than democracy (Gur-Ze'ev). Such arguments are relevant to contemporary abortion politics online. Entering the term "pro-choice" in an Internet search engine reveals a range of sites, including one called "ProChoice.com," which is actually an anti-choice site providing false information about abortion. In an effort to make women fear abortion, it links the procedure with various maladies, even breast cancer. All recognized health authorities, including the Canadian Cancer Society and the World Health Organization, have concluded that no link exists between abortion and an increased risk of breast cancer (ARCC-CDAC 2005c). This anti-choice web site is like the deceptive "pregnancy counselling centres" set up across the North America. Often using feminist-sounding names such as "Women's Care Centre," the centres are designed to reach women before they access an abortion provider, and bombard them with anti-abortion propaganda.[6] Clearly, the longstanding strategies of the anti-abortion movement have simply been moved online. Yet the success of these strategies may increase online, because the Internet is widely considered a democratic resource providing information to all

who seek it. At the same time, anti-abortion groups often have more money than pro-choice groups, allowing their messages to dominate cyberspace.

The ARCC-CDAC web site intervenes in this situation, contributing to a pro-choice online presence. Various position papers on its web site are designed to counter anti-choice misinformation and harassment. One short essay discusses the medical facts about breast cancer, while another explains that so-called "partial-birth abortion" is a term invented by anti-abortionists trying to make all abortions illegal (see Mason 84-85). This kind of rebuttal is important, even though it is not new, as the ARCC-CDAC web site moves a standard pro-choice strategy online. For several decades, pro-choice groups have had to dispute the misinformation produced at an alarming rate by well-funded anti-abortion groups. Though necessary, this defensive activity detracts from the more proactive work pro-choice groups could be doing. In many ways, abortion politics-as-usual are now taking place in cyberspace as well as in the wider world.

ARCC-CDAC's virtual existence nevertheless fosters a new kind of pro-choice community, one that remains connected in defiance of time differences and geographical expanses. The more utopian approach to cyberfeminism studies how virtual feminist communities, created in gaming environments or interactive sites such as www.gurl.com, reconstitute identities (see, for example, Turkle). For them, cyberspace enables the proliferation of female selves, while the relationship between women and machines both empowers women and unsettles patriarchal binary distinctions. Yet critics claim that virtuality erases specificity, especially any concrete sense of place. According to philosopher Paul Virilio, the speed of virtual communication "no longer depends on the interval between places or things and so on the world's very extension, but on the interface of an instantaneous transmission of remote appearances" (Virilio 33). This denial of the interval between places and things privileges the *now* to the detriment of the *here*. When communications technologies paradoxically enable being everywhere at the same time but nowhere at all, they mark the loss of the site, city, and nation in a way that is at odds with democracy.

Virilio's claims are unsettling because the virtual existence of ARCC-CDAC is meant to insist on the specificity of place, particularly women's differing experiences of abortion based on their location within Canada. Are such goals undermined when a teleconference takes place "everywhere and nowhere," or when the ARCC-CDAC web site remains unanchored to a specific geographical location? These points are worth considering. It is true that many members of ARCC-CDAC have never met face to face. Some cyberfeminist critics contend, however, that it is possible to use these technologies while insisting on the rootedness of place, noting that virtual communities must include face-to-face meetings as well as other kinds of activism (Escobar 46). Active members of ARCC-CDAC have indeed met in person and will continue to do so. The existence of ARCC-CDAC has not reduced the continuing opportunities for abortion activists from around the country to meet. As well, the coalition plans to use Internet teleconferencing to host its Annual General Meetings, which will allow far more members across Canada to participate than would a traditional meeting in one geographical location. In this way, the virtual coalition undeniably enables a wider range of dialogue, bringing forward the voices of women in PEI, for example, which are otherwise far from the ear of the federal government and thus easily ignored. Arguably, virtual existence has its own kind of presence, one able to overcome the effects of absence within the context of abortion politics.

Virilio's assertions raise, however, an important possibility: perhaps virtuality will render invisible another important location in the abortion debate, namely the specificity of women's bodies. The pro-choice movement has always drawn attention to the bodies of individual women, and of pregnant women in particular. The voices of insistently present women contributed, for example, to the powerful effect of the pro-choice demonstrations in Ottawa in 1970. This strategy has been necessary because anti-choice rhetoric works to deny female subjectivity and bodily experience. Anti-abortionists portray the fetus in a fictional manner, as an individual entity able to exist separately from the maternal body.[7] The erasure of women proliferates in anti-choice imagery, especially on the Internet. The nature of virtuality may support anti-choice politics if it allows for concrete places and bodies to be overlooked. This possibility has already been recognized by the pro-choice community, and addressed on web sites that feature the stories of real women who have had abortions, such as www.imnotsorry.net. This emphasis is not part of the ARCC-CDAC web site, and its members may need to devise additional strategies to counteract the disappearance of female embodiment both on and offline.

All the same, ARCC-CDAC members feel it has accomplished much during its short existence. As a virtual entity with no funding, it has brought women together from across the country to articulate positions in relation to various reproductive issues, and it has been active in the recent federal election. Many of the challenges raised in this brief account of cyberfeminism can be addressed in the future; members of the coalition can consider meeting face to face more formally, reaching out to include even more women, and devising strategies meant to in-

sist on the specificity of individual female experiences. Yet this discussion has also suggested that the nature of virtuality may enable the anti-choice message to be delivered more effectively than the pro-choice message. Anti-abortion groups have more money. Also the way in which the Internet potentially undermines place can also exacerbate the erasure of the female body and female subjectivity. Clearly, pro-choice groups such as ARCC-CDAC complement more traditional pro-choice grassroots activism and must continue to insist that individual women make decisions about abortion based on their particular circumstances. And they must convey this message using multiple forms of communication and activism, including the Internet.

Lianne McTavish is a member of ARCC-CDAC, and co-founder of, as well as spokesperson for, Pro-Choice New Brunswick. She volunteers as a clinic escort at the Morgentaler Clinic in Fredericton. An Associate Professor of Visual Culture at the University of New Brunswick, McTavish has recently published a book, Childbirth and the Display of Authority in Early Modern France *(2005).*

[1]For a transcript of this decision see: www.lexum.umontreal.ca/csc-scc/en/pub/1988/vol1/html/1988scr1_0030.html.

[2]This information was provided by Judy Burwell, Director of the Morgentaler Clinic in Fredericton from 1999-2005.

[3]For examples of press coverage during the 2006 election see: "Tories Would Curb Access to Abortion, Activists Warn"; Page; Binks. In addition, Prime Minister Paul Martin and the Liberal Party made use of ARCC- CDAC's data for their campaign.

[4]In Canada, Womenspace (www.womenspace.ca) is a non-profit organization that promotes women's participation in information technologies, believing that "inclusive access, peer networking and creative uses of communication technologies are powerful vehicles for social equality."

[5]Alice Taylor's doctoral dissertation considers, among other things, the trans-Atlantic links between abolitionist women.

[6]The evidence against these deceptive pregnancy centres is overwhelming, but see, for example, the documentary produced by *W-Five*, and aired on 5 November 2000, which broadcast the story of a young woman's unpleasant and misleading experience with the Calgary Pregnancy Care Centre.

[7]There are many feminist critiques of contemporary fetal imagery, but see, for example, Petchesky; Stabile; Duden 99-106; Squier; Hartouni.

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