Review

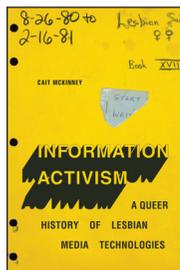**Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies.** *By Cait McKinney.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. 290 pp. ISBN: 9781478007821.

Did lesbians invent the internet? The author facetiously raises this question in the first chapter of *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies.* The answer is an emphatic "no," and an acknowledgement that the lesbian-feminist archivists and activists who are the subject of this book would probably take umbrage with the patriarchal notion of invention. Nonetheless, and as McKinney argues, this question does point to the digitally-oriented thinking of lesbian feminists long before paper archives were scanned and put online. The author's second, more serious opening question is: Who is a lesbian? In tackling this question, McKinney examines how racism and transphobia shaped both exclusionary practices and the challenging of these practices among the lesbian feminist organizations and activities at the core of the author's investigation. McKinney posits that lesbian feminist activist organizations have simultaneously functioned as counterpublics seeking to share and collate information that remained excluded or difficult to find due to heteronormative archiving practices, and as gatekeepers that barred, and were continually challenged by, trans lesbians and lesbians of colour.

In this book, McKinney examines a range of media over a number of decades—including a newsletter, paper index cards, and a helpline—to develop a media history of the work of self-identified lesbian-feminist activists in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Canada. The chapter titles—"The Internet that Lesbians Built: Newsletter Networks"; "Calling to Talk and Listening Well: Information as Care at Telephone Hotlines"; "The Indexers: Dreaming of Computers while Shuffling Paper Cards"; "Feminist Digitization Practices at the Lesbian Herstory Archives"; and the epilogue, "Doing Lesbian Feminism in an Age of Information Abundance"—demonstrate the breadth of technologies and spaces investigated.

The variety of media McKinney examines speaks to the author's interest in breaking away from the "rubric of print culture studies" (p. 4) that has, in their view, dominated studies of women's activism in the 20th century. McKinney combines historiographic methods with key informant interviews and document analysis to examine moments of negotiation by activists over the meaning and uses

of media, and processes by which information is conveyed. In so doing, McKinney compellingly argues against strict and discrete definitions of print and digital, drawing instead a through-line between current pressing questions of ethics, access, and search retrieval on the one hand and past archiving practices of lesbian feminist activists on the other.

Chapter 1 connects the notion of networks and network-thinking to newsletters. Here, McKinney focuses mainly on the lesbian feminist newsletter Matrices, the product of a self-described network that operated from the early 1970s to the mid-1990s that enabled interconnections between researchers studying lesbian feminism. McKinney's investigation of the ways in which participant lesbian feminist activists and researchers developed a networked counter-public to share information, resources, and primary sources that previously were difficult or impossible to access, serves as a basis for challenging the notion of a stable pre-internet age.

With its focus on lesbian telephone hotlines, the second chapter stands out from the others in this book in terms of demonstrating McKinney's interest in affect and the intensely interpersonal, embodied, and emotional elements of activist work, and for illustrating the complexities of media archeology scholarship. Lesbian telephone hotlines emerged in the 1970s as alternatives to hotlines providing information, company, and/or emotional support to straight callers and to those for, and mainly staffed by, gay men. McKinney excavates the paper logs, handwritten notes, and print resources filed away by volunteers at New York City's Lesbian Switchboard (which operated from 1972 to 1997), in order to illustrate how telephone hotlines "drew on a combination of print and electronic technologies, troubling the telephone's position as a quintessentially 'electronic' medium'" (p. 28). Today, the only remains of the use of this electronic medium are the volunteers' paper ledgers. McKinney's approach to reading these logs for patterns and answers, while having to contend with both gaps in the written logs and the absence of actual voice recordings, provides a helpful guide for researchers who might find themselves with a similar abundance of archival documents and no proverbial decoder ring.

In Chapter 3, McKinney looks to the Circle of Lesbian Indexers (1979–1986) and JR Roberts' 1981 Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography project, to problematize reductionist divisions between media. Here too, McKinney deliberately uses "digital" language to argue that these indexers engaged in a "lengthy and deliberate process of classification and compression" (p. 108). The discussion in this chapter traces lesbian feminist activists' indexing work and the Circle of Lesbian Indexers' struggle with learning the WYLBUR text editor and word processor program, an opaque indexing software designed in the late 1960s for users with established knowledge of programming. For McKinney, these lesbian activists and indexers' openness to editing and change in their careful analogue indexing prac-

tices exemplifies the historical continuity of a feminist ethic of archiving across different time periods and media.

In the final portion of the book, McKinney looks at the digitization practices associated with the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). Noting the ways that lesbian feminists at the LHA contend with digitizing work by donors who specify that their work would be for lesbian eyes only, McKinney speaks to the work of digitization and archiving scholars such as T.L. Cowan and Jas Rault (2018), who assert that the ethos of universal access online raises risks for marginalized communities. According to McKinney, the lesbian feminist killjoy counters contemporary digital media rhetoric of open access and transparency by "supplanting fantasies of the digital with attention to everyday operations and uses that matter" (p. 216). In so doing, McKinney dispels notions of digital media as new or ahistorical, tracing the ways in which contemporary lesbian feminists continue to bring the same ethic of care and carefulness to their technological practices.

Throughout this book, McKinney challenges the commonplace notion of feminist waves—with successive waves becoming more open to difference, such that the second wave is defined by cis white women—and attends to the ways that women of colour and trans women are always confronting (white cis) lesbian information infrastructures. This work is a fascinating read for scholars of media and information, archives, queer histories, and activism. It raises a number of important questions about medium-specific affordances, privacy, and access that merit further study. This said, it is worth noting that, given the author's interest in the ways that digital thinking can be read back into practices that some might consider pre-digital, Information Activism stops short of asking how the affordances of specific mediums might shape the ways in which contemporary activists and archivists approach their work. How digital and analogue archives might manage the privacy wishes of those featured in them—and how digital and analogue concerns might differ despite the continuities in practice across media—thus remains an important question for further research.

References

Cowan, T. L., & Rault, J. (2018). Onlining queer acts: Digital research ethics and caring for risky archives. *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory, 28*(2), 121–142. doi:10.1080/0740770X.2018.1473985

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