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Book Review: Sisterhood? What Sisterhood?

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Making Feminist Media: Third-Wave Magazines on the Cusp of the Digital Age. Elizabeth Groeneveld. Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016. 205 pp. \$27.93 paperback.

Ah, feminism: no matter what, you just can't do it right. Like womanhood itself, the movement frays and buckles with tension. One day you're spreading feminist wisdom, and the next someone denounces you for diluting or co-opting the cause. Just when you start to master feminism's wily nooks and crannies, it balloons into too many abstractions and historical details to pass it on to the next attention-challenged generation of girls. So you give up. And then, they reinvent the wheel. And it always looks a lot like the last wheel. And you're like, "Wait, we already did this like a century ago."

So yeah... good luck with all that!

The clash between promoting feminist ideas and doing justice to the movement's rich history and philosophy is an underlying theme of Elizabeth Groeneveld's book "Making Feminist Media." The study focuses on third- and post-wave feminist magazines that have fought for survival and often lost against various social and market forces. The most closely analyzed titles include *Bitch*, *HUES*, *Bust*, *Venus Zine*, and *ROCKRGRL*, though the book also references many others, such as *Shameless*, *Rookie*, *Chrysalis*, *Ms.*, and *Big Mama Rag*.

Before I get beyond the general description, I must disclose that I know the book's author, whom I met at a conference in 2016. I also know Andi Zeisler, *Bitch*'s co-founding editor, from an earlier conference. I am Facebook friends with both, and tend to like their witty posts, often on feminist subjects. Without claiming objectivity, however, I will try to bracket my assessment of "Making Feminist Media" from my warm regard for Liz and Andi.

The book begins with an overview of third-wave magazines and the forces that shaped them, including the sellout of *Sassy*, a once-edgy publication that influenced many a future feminist in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The rage spurred by conservative editorial changes and the ultimate closure of what was many girls' favorite title inspired a flurry of new feminist zines, some of which grew to be full-fledged, though niche, magazines. The first two chapters chronicle their successes and failures, and insightfully outline their content.

The remaining four chapters are case studies. One follows the trajectory of *HUES*, a multicultural magazine born as a University of Michigan undergraduate class project, which grew to be sold nationally and internationally for seven years. Another details the contentious relationship between fashion and feminist media, some of which, like *BUST*, have embraced fashion spreads not unlike those in mainstream magazines. The next-to-last chapter details the feminist appropriation of crafting and knitting, celebrated on the pages and websites of many third-wave publications. The sixth chapter investigates feminism's fraught affair with sexuality by outlining a controversy spurred by a dildo ad on *Bitch* magazine's back cover.

Groeneveld's nuanced knowledge of feminist history and awareness of race and class dimensions are evident throughout the book. She illustrates how a publication's degree of political expression is inversely related to its likelihood of market survival, but does not stop at critiquing capitalism. A few magazines emerge from her analysis as flawed attempts at creating white, straight, middle-class, cisgender, oblivious-to-privilege, and ultimately faux sisterhoods—each proclaiming “new” ideas only to reveal its editors' ignorance of feminist history. The book seems favorably inclined toward *Bitch*, the only nonprofit among the analyzed titles, but quite critical of *BUST*, the highest-circulation publication in the bunch.

Lacking, from a magazine scholar's perspective, is an analytical dimension that transcends content to consider the medium. Groeneveld acknowledges magazines' ability to build communities, and also cites their middle-class appeal and dependence on ad revenues to explain the failure of some more radical publications. But readers are left to wonder why zines and magazines have been the medium of choice for second-, third-, and post-wave feminists. After all, they could be publishing a weekly paper (which is what the first-wave *Woman's Journal* used to be), or broadcasting on the community radio. And yet, they usually do not. The 20th century witnessed an almost uncanny association between magazines and feminism. Betty Friedan was a magazine freelancer. Gloria Steinem wrote for *New York Magazine* before founding *Ms.* *Newsweek's* female researchers filed the first-ever gender discrimination lawsuit. Something about both print and digital magazines (reach of women readers? long deadlines? visual aesthetics? subjective, analytical, and florid writing?) has made them a fertile thoughtground for bold, even radical feminist expressions. But what, and how, and why? “Making Feminist Media” does not attempt to answer these questions.

The book would make an excellent text in a seminar on third- and post-wave feminisms. It would be great as one of several texts in a graduate magazine history course, and is certainly of value to magazine historians. But despite *Bitch* publisher Lisa Jervis's endorsement of the book as “accessible and entertaining,” it is unlikely to hold the attention of undergraduates and lay readers. The text is limited by sporadic displays of what Stephen Pinker calls the “curse of knowledge,” or the assumption that readers know what you know (for example, I had to google “Brechtian alienation effect,” p. 15). More significantly, the book's bird's-eye perspective and inclusion of only a small number of examples might curb the interest of casual or young readers who have never read or seen the analyzed titles.