

The Internet That Lesbians Built

Newsletter Networks

Julia Penelope, a professor of English at the University of Nebraska, described herself as a “white, working-class, fat butch dyke who never passed.”¹ She challenged universities and their conservative structures. Before landing at Lincoln, she was kicked out of two different graduate schools and fired from one academic appointment because of homophobia.² A political lesbian separatist, Penelope edited several collected volumes of writings on lesbianism, but one of her greatest contributions to lesbian-feminist politics begins with a modest, mimeographed letter sent to other researchers in the Spring of 1977. Addressed “Dear Sister,” the letter proposes a newsletter to be circulated to academics, activists, artists, and community researchers across the United States working on lesbian-feminist topics, mostly historical in focus. The letter begins,

Several wimmin across the U.S. have been corresponding back and forth, exchanging papers, and we’ve been considering starting a Lesbian/Feminist Research Newsletter that would facilitate communication among the members of what we perceive to be a growing network of wimmin doing exciting research on issues and problems that touch on all of our lives. Right now, our communication is haphazard, and we don’t always know who’s doing what research. A newsletter would help to keep us in touch with each other, and inform us of recent papers and publications and ongoing research.³

That fall, Penelope collaborated with four other women spread across the country—Libby Bouvier, Sarah Hoagland, JR Roberts, and Susan Leigh

Star—to found *Matrices: A Lesbian/Feminist Research Newsletter*. In a classic feminist move toward diverting institutional resources, Penelope asked her department chair, John Robinson, whether the department would fund the newsletter, and he agreed. It was produced using the department’s photocopier and distributed free of charge until 1982, when a modest subscription fee was instituted. Circulation had increased to “800 womyn in nearly every state and seven countries” by the newsletter’s fourth year of publication.⁴ *Matrices* bridged the worlds of academic lesbian studies and community research, attuned to a lesbian-feminist politics of class-consciousness and institutional critique. Subscribers and contributors included artists and academics who made major interventions in queer and feminist scholarship, from Jonathan Katz, the gay and lesbian historian and founder of OutHistory.org, to the fiction writer Sarah Schulman and lesbian-feminist filmmaker Barbara Hammer.

Matrices supported each of these people’s work; the publication functioned explicitly as a network designed for sharing information and resources with anyone doing research related to lesbian feminism. A communications network uses technology to create interconnections among people or groups at a distance. Using various media and communications technologies—photocopiers, telephones, letter mail, and the newsletter itself—the *Matrices* network facilitated collaboration across space with people who were otherwise difficult to know about, let alone reach. *Matrices* offered an information and communications infrastructure that made it possible to do lesbian research within unsupported and sometimes openly hostile conditions.

Although *Matrices* is the object of my focus in this chapter, its operation is not at all unusual situated in the larger context of lesbian-feminist newsletters during its time, which drew on do-it-yourself (DIY) publishing methods to provide marginalized readers with otherwise unavailable information. *Matrices* is one of at least one hundred periodicals in the United States and Canada that specifically targeted lesbians in the 1970s and ’80s (figures 1.1–1.3).⁵ The story of *Matrices* offers an entry into a general history of networks as one part of an information activist topology.

Newsletters predate online communications media but also used networked communication to circulate information to geographically dispersed but politically organized individuals and groups. Distributed primarily by letter mail, issues of these newsletters acted as slower, print communication infrastructures. They published a range of materials designed to be useful for movement building: requests for information and resources, updates on the activities of others, surveys, phone trees, listings of archi-



FIGURES 1.1–1.3
A selection
of mastheads
from the
Matrices
newsletter,
representing
the 1970s–90s.

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val holdings and primary source materials at community and institutional archives, mailing lists, and bibliographies. Newsletters were a kind of connective tissue that made readers aware of the larger information infrastructure lesbian feminists were building; newsletters published reviews, listings, and calendars that told communities about new archives, books, or events. They were one of the main places telephone hotlines advertised their services to would-be callers, generally as classified-style “ads” in the backs of these newsletters. As a communications genre, the newsletter network brought grassroots materials produced by information activist into a larger movement constellation.⁶

Each newsletter issue’s publication was an initial moment of communication facilitating a range of subsequent connections among recipients, generally taking the form of further, task-oriented correspondence among individuals and institutions. The first *Matrices* exemplifies how the network idea animated the newsletter’s communicative functions; announcing the

first issue, the editors write, “We open what we hope will become a continuous dialogue and exchange of information, a network of Lesbian/Feminist researchers working in the community and academia. . . . *Matrices* hopes to facilitate interconnectedness among us, so that we can work together, sharing information and resources.”⁷ These interconnections promised to transcend class difference and uneven resource limitations through information sharing.

This chapter illustrates how a lesbian-feminist mode of network thinking animates small-scale newsletters that draw on the language and practice of networking. These newsletters were published between the early 1970s and the mid 1990s, bracketed by the Women in Print Movement and the popular adoption of online communication.⁸ Feminists took political advantage of new access to communications media and printing technologies, including less expensive offset printing presses, and the normalization of copying machines in workplaces, used covertly by women workers.⁹ Networks have been critical to the construction of lesbian histories. This chapter examines the relationship between networked print cultures and the U.S. lesbian-feminist history and archives movement to highlight the critical role networks play in information activism. Archives and newsletters as interconnected technologies that enable activists to share difficult-to-access information, resources, and primary sources via photocopying and other modes of print reproduction. Today, the archival collections that have grown out of these networked print cultures redress the relative invisibility of essential media practices that have built lesbian history.

The first part of this chapter considers how the *Matrices* network operated at two levels: first, as a unique conceptual model in which the idea of networked communication is articulated to lesbian-feminist political goals; and second, as an actually functioning schematic for uniting a community of researchers and activists through decentralized forms of communication, such as the newsletter’s maintenance of a shared subscriber profile system. The chapter then considers the role this Lesbian-Feminist Research Network had in building early lesbian history. I situate the publication in a larger constellation of primary-source research, publishing, and the beginnings of women’s and lesbian community archives, including the *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter*. Finally, I highlight moments when the network failed to live up to its egalitarian communicative promises, framing lesbian-feminist disappointment in relation to the structure’s outsize idealization in communication theory. I argue that feminist historiography is built collaboratively, in and through print networks such as

Matrices. Understanding what networks have meant to lesbian feminism reveals the counterpublic and sexual politics behind this everyday communications structure and its mediated promises.

Newsletters as Information Activism

Matrices is one among several newsletters that provided communicative support for grassroots lesbian historical research. Often called simply “lesbian studies,” this field grew in the 1980s out of the more established women’s history movement and the nascent gay and lesbian history field.¹⁰ Other newsletters that had a similar focus include the *Lesbian/Gay History Researchers Network Newsletter* (1980–81) and the annual newsletter of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (1975–2004). A loosely organized community of academics, noninstitutional researchers, and activists working to redress the elision of gay and lesbian experience from the historical record established community archives across the United States and Canada and conducted primary source research and publication.¹¹

Several intersecting politics form the movement’s ideological roots: the post-Stonewall gay liberation movement is key, as is the longer legacy of the midcentury Homophile Movement, particularly its middle-class, assimilationist investment in the free circulation of gay and lesbian literature depicting “accurate” information about homosexuality. Lesbian-feminist historical organizations also emerged out of the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s, as did new university women’s studies departments and feminist oral history methods. Organizations such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) straddled both worlds. Run by feminist activists who came of age in the women’s liberation era, the archives also found an uneasy home in the larger world of gay and lesbian community archives noted for emphasizing white gay men’s histories.

Community archives such as the LHA constructed and maintained mailing lists to extend the reach of their work beyond the physical building and those women able to visit New York. The archives bought their first computer and database software in 1984 to manage this growing mailing list. The LHA understood the transition to computerized information management as networked outreach even as the computer itself was not, in technical terms, “networked.”¹² Mailed newsletters performed outreach that was critical to fledgling gay and lesbian archives for a few reasons. First, newsletters sought funding from the community to run archives. Fundraising helped to pay rent and utilities, buy supplies, and reduce the financial

burden shouldered by volunteers, who paid for many archives activities out of pocket. Second, newsletters reported research findings and alerted readers to publication of this research. Third, and key to my analysis here, newsletters told potential researchers what was available in archives, providing the information infrastructure needed to use collections. The resulting publications served the historical movement's ultimately pedagogical goal: connecting marginalized counterpublics with the histories they craved but could not find.¹³

I found *Matrices*—or maybe it found me—during my research period at the LHA studying the archives' digitization practices. I was at the archives on a Saturday afternoon in my capacity as a volunteer, sorting through a stack of donor agreement forms. I was creating a spreadsheet to identify which collections of personal and organizational papers had the go-ahead to be listed online. On Saturdays, the archives is staffed by founder Deb Edel, and her partner, Teddy Minucci.

Edel and I were sitting at the large, shared worktable in the archives' main-floor library, talking about how my research was going. I told her I had begun to think that I needed a longer history of lesbians and technology at the archives if I was going to really understand the politics behind their current digitization projects. We talked more generally about my interest in print newsletters and the communicative work the archives performed. Edel told me how feminist social movement organizations, including the LHA, relied on networks of their own, albeit predigital ones. All of a sudden, a light seemed to go off in her head. There was a publication she wanted to show me. The name was on the tip of her tongue. Edel led me up the stairs to the periodicals room and went straight to the Hollinger box that contained nearly every issue of *Matrices*. She didn't need to check a computer to find out where the box was; she just knew from decades spent organizing these shelves.

I spent some time with the newsletter that day and found myself returning to it each time I was in New York during that research year. Meanwhile, *Matrices* and the people who used the publication to communicate kept surfacing as I continued my research on lesbian-feminist information activism. For example, when the LHA launched its digital audio site, the first tapes made available as streaming audio were drawn from Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy's Buffalo Women's Oral History Project.¹⁴ From reading *Matrices*, I knew that Davis and Kennedy had used the newsletter to tell others about their project and find similar oral history projects focused on lesbians. The Circle of Lesbian Indexers and *Black Lesbians*:

An Annotated Bibliography both appear as works in progress in the pages of *Matrices* and the *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter*. Later I learned that Julia Penelope—that “white, working-class, fat butch dyke who never passed”—was a member of the five-woman collective who founded the LHA, four years before she wrote the letter that launched *Matrices*.

I realized gradually through my immersion in the worlds of these intertwined media technologies, people, and events that *Matrices* exemplified how lesbian-feminist information infrastructures are built and sustained through networks that facilitate collaboration and resource-sharing amid precarious conditions. *Matrices* became a way to consider some of the more interstitial media that made lesbian-feminist organizing possible. Although it was not affiliated with any single archives, *Matrices* supported emerging community archives, publishing requests for donations of funds and primary source materials and making potential researchers aware of collections they could access. *Matrices* is one outlet in a complex web of print-based communications that allowed these archives to operate and that, by extension, allowed researchers to find information about lesbian history.

Matrices was published three times a year from 1977 until the mid-1980s and then infrequently until 1996. In the early 1990s, many print newsletters lost relevance as web browsing developed and email listservs became key networks for sharing information in both feminist social movement organizing and humanities and social science research communities.¹⁵ While studying *Matrices* I closely analyzed a total of twenty-four issues gathered from partial collections at two different periodicals collections. My method of close reading across issues emphasizes the people, projects, spaces, and conversations that transcend individual issues rather than focusing on any of the publication’s singular moments. For example, the New Alexandria Lesbian Library in western Massachusetts appears in the pages of the publication beginning in 1978. Updates chronicle New Alexandria’s initial conception and fundraising drive to its move from Chicago and search for new volunteer staff. The library’s short listings in *Matrices*—generally a few paragraphs in length—updated readers (who were also potential donors, volunteers, and researchers) on the project’s status and told them about the sources available at the library. These listings also solicited input on the collection’s direction from the *Matrices* community.

Today New Alexandria has evolved into the Sexual Minorities Archives, run by Ben Power Alwin, a trans man who inherited the collection when the original lesbian collective dissolved in 1978. As the transgender archives scholar K. J. Rawson notes, Alwin transitioned the collection to

an “all-inclusive” LGBTQI archives alongside his own transition in the early 1990s.¹⁶ For Rawson, this shift reflects broader movements away from gay and lesbian toward LGBTQ+, but more interestingly, it shows that archival collections, like the people stewarding them, have individual identities that are adaptable. The Lesbian Herstory Archives’ ongoing grounding in the lesbian community and collective organizational structure maintain the focus on *lesbian* materials, even as the meaning of this category changes. Following New Alexandria’s activities through *Matrices* over a period of years illustrates the publication’s ongoing entanglement with a larger, evolving activist movement and its instrumental role in facilitating outreach. But as Alwin’s work reminds us, these networks also extend into the present and can depart from their lesbian-feminist entanglements.

In addition to reading across the *Matrices* archive, my method situates the publication in a larger constellation of feminist and lesbian-feminist periodicals by following citation practices across other newsletters.¹⁷ Reading *Matrices* as a network is necessarily retrospective, requiring a larger view of how various efforts at making history drew on one another in a united movement. Seeing this network from the present also depends on feminist libraries and archives with open-access policies that allow me to bring these publications into conversation with one another. I am literally describing the ability of a researcher at the LHA or York University’s tiny Women and Gender Studies Library to sort through open stacks of rare feminist printed matter—newsletters that would be gated behind rare books desks and doled out one box at a time at most institutions. At these collections I could bring issues from a few different publications over to a table and look at them together. I could let the pages touch. Open access to periodicals collections allows feminist researchers to follow a citation by pulling out more than one publication at the same time. Policies that open the stacks allow for material entanglements among texts, scenes, people, and geographies. For Kate Eichhorn, this methodological proximity is rooted in a feminist, open-access archival politics that makes collaborative, network-based feminist histories possible.¹⁸ Libraries and archives practice access and classification strategies that are critical to the preservation of feminist networks, which might not otherwise survive the isolating disciplinary technologies of archival accumulation.¹⁹ In other words, activist archives require activist archival methods to maintain the intelligibility of the larger relationships they made possible.

Matrices drew on cultural ideas of how networks could facilitate communication and action, reworking network thinking in the specific context of lesbian feminism. *Matrices* took form in relation to circulating network models from computing cultures and exemplifies the “network thinking” germane to feminist print cultures. Networks animate the design of *Matrices* at two distinct but interconnected levels: one high-level and ideational; the other pragmatic and operational.²⁰ In other words, networks allowed *Matrices* to imagine a robust communications infrastructure suited to high-level movement goals and facilitated the practical, regular work of sharing information with others across distance.

Feminist communication networks reflected the popular understanding of networks illustrated by computer engineering models developed as early as the mid-twentieth century. Paul Baran’s diagram for the Rand Corporation is the most widely circulated, and ARPANET developers took it up to develop the packet-switching protocols that became the internet’s backbone.²¹ This model, from 1964, compares centralized, decentralized, and distributed network structures to explain how systems design can redistribute vulnerability and support alternative ways to share power (figure 1.4).²² “Print” media such as newsletters typically created networks that would be described as centralized, represented by the diagram at the left in Baran’s model. Here, a publication is the central hub and each line or connection disperses from or gathers into this hub, in what the media theorist Alexander Galloway calls a “strategic massing of power and control.”²³ The diagram at the far right in the model represents a “distributed” network and is used to explain how the internet works, distributing power “into small, autonomous enclaves.”²⁴ Counterpublic and network scholarship share attention to “enclaves” and the tactical advantages offered by autonomous access to communicative resources.

Distributed networks are less vulnerable because the destruction of one hub does not critically affect the network, while centralized networks crumble when the main hub fails (e.g., when a publication goes out of print).²⁵ *Matrices*’ connections transcended the limits of the centralized network model (left diagram) typically associated with a print publication or broadcast media, which center a single creator. Each individual *Matrices* researcher or organization is a “node” or “dot” that received the publication. *Matrices* built a decentralized network (middle diagram) by publishing subscribers’ contact information, interests, and details about

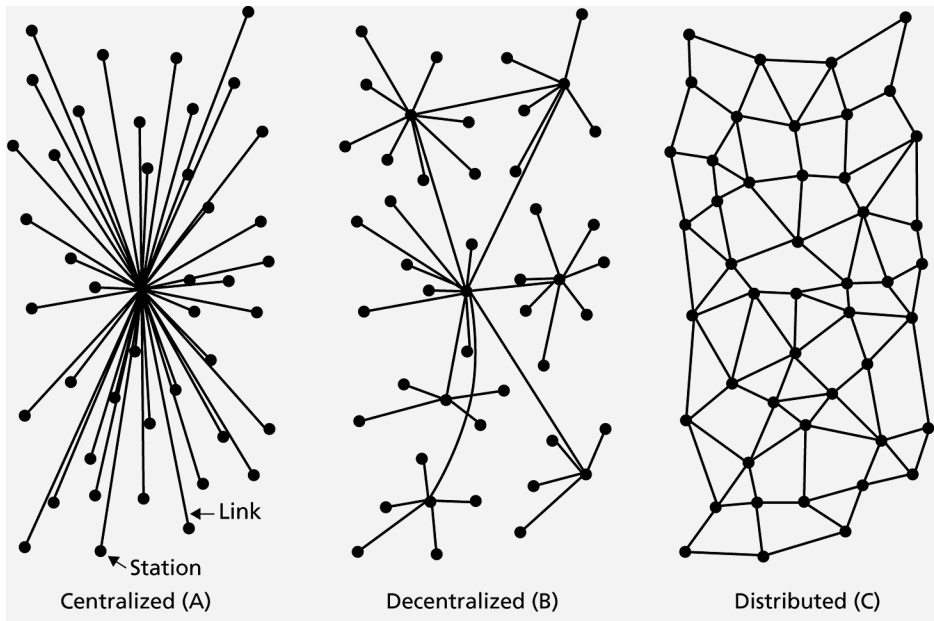


FIGURE 1.4 Centralized, decentralized, and distributed network models. From Paul Baran, "On Distributed Communications: I. Introduction to Distributed Communications Networks," memorandum RM-3420-PR prepared for the U.S. Air Force Project Rand, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, August 1964, 2. Image Courtesy RAND Corporation.

the kind of information they were looking for. These subscribers could use subsequent *Matrices* issues, or adjacent organizations like an archives, to communicate, following a decentralized structure. Or they could continue their communication independently of the publication's pages, forming a distributed model (right diagram).

Network imagery and language was prevalent across a range of gay liberation, feminist, and lesbian-feminist periodicals and newsletters in the 1970s.²⁶ These publications' names and purpose statements give a sense of the role mediated communication played in imagining a movement that would, above all, bring into the fold women who were *not yet* enfranchised as feminists. Some publications featured the word "network" in their titles, such as western Michigan's *Network News* (founded in 1988), while others drew on more colloquial network concepts, such as the *Grapevine* (1983), of New Brunswick, New Jersey. *Grapevine* models illustrate how information moves through a larger community from person to person, branching out with each act of communication. The *Grapevine* newsletter announced itself as "a communication network that exists in order to insure that women

have access to relevant social and political information. . . . The *Grapevine* is a two-way communication process: members both receive information from it and feed information into it.”²⁷ Reciprocal information exchange would secure new connections among lesbians and support movement building.

Toward this end, San Francisco’s *Telewoman* (1977–86) attached the Greek prefix *tele-* (over a distance)—*telephone*, *television*, *telegraph*—to the newsletter form and to the idea of a lesbian network. *Telewoman*’s masthead reads: “We provide networking services for lesbians who live anywhere through this newsletter. . . . We connect lesbian mothers. We make referrals to women’s service organizations, lesbian-feminist therapists, and give job/housing information. We connect city lesbians and country lesbians. We serve isolated lesbians and integrate them into the local and larger women’s communities.”²⁸ *Telewoman* thought about connecting its subscribers over a distance to service their need for information and their need for other emotional forms of care that would, among other things, ameliorate isolation or provide access to mental health services. Newsletter networks promised subscribers the possibility of feeling less alone against a world hostile to women’s liberation and especially cruel to the figure of the lesbian feminist.²⁹

The network is a conceptual model for imagining a kind of utopian feminist politic. “Network” stands in for an idea of what a large, organized feminist movement could do. As Elisabeth Jay Friedman has argued, queer feminist counterpublic organizing through online interfaces such as list-servs extends and remediates existing feminist communications networks and their strategies.³⁰ Similarly, Cassius Adair and Lisa Nakamura’s research on the publication history of *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981) connects the networked pedagogies of 1980s women of color feminism to digital archival work by feminists of color on social media sites such as Tumblr.³¹ This scholarship on the long history of feminist networks argues that network imaginaries are bound up with feminist ideals about communication, capacity building, and the power of alternative structures for organizing people and ideas.

Feminists might participate in communication networks to find the kind of support for their work that was denied in their “offline” lives. For example, lesbian-feminist academics such as Penelope were often the only women—let alone the only out lesbians—in their departments and were further marginalized within their broader disciplines for doing work that was “too narrow” in focus.³² Imagined and accessed from these marginal

spaces, the network represents an ideal and a respite. Newsletter producers drew on this vision to describe how their publications could facilitate other kinds of collectivities in which to work collaboratively. *Matrices* emerges out of, and contributes to, the political possibilities that networked communication offered the lesbian feminist imagination. These possibilities include the “recovery” of women’s history lost to the gendered biases of researchers and institutions and the creation of sustainable libraries and archives to support this research. Using the network, scholars might also circulate papers on lesbian topics outside the mainstream publication venues that failed to support this work, so that this information could reach the wider community. These achievements all fall under the broader, social-justice oriented goal of improving lesbian lives with information.

Far from merely political, these possibilities represent relief from the injustices of invisibility, marginalization, and diminished career chances, which are injustices felt as frustration, shame, and isolation, among other embodied affects. While a goal such as “Help Build the New Alexandria Library’s Collection” is practical and measurable, and aimed at developing one part of a larger information infrastructure, this mission also fulfills needs that highlight the emotional dimensions of networks. Making this infrastructure together, bit by bit, materializes a desire for history and gives life to lesbian feminism. These possibilities give the network form its pull on the feminist imagination. Information circulated through a newsletter network is always more than just informative and always greater than the sum of its parts.

Theorizing the roles of newsletters in feminist information economies, Agatha Beins and Martin Meeker each argue that newsletter culture’s ability to circulate information to wide-reaching groups of people was understood as a condition of possibility for feminist organizing.³³ In the early 1970s, newsletters animated the idea that the women’s liberation movement might become a singular, unified national and international undertaking. Newsletters promised informational support for the pedagogical drive to “recruit” women into feminism via consciousness-raising. This desire for proximity is about more than just achieving a critical mass, couched as it was in the language of “sisterhood” and “survival.” Meeker argues that the “politics of communication [was placed] squarely at the center of the emerging movement for homosexual civil rights,” reaching “its most forceful articulation in the context of lesbian feminism.”³⁴ Lesbian-feminist information activists approached the formal, material aspects of movement communication as key activist work. Functional networks promised the communicative support needed for lesbian-feminist information infrastructures.

For Meeker, the actual integration or connection offered by publications such as *Telewoman* mattered less than the awareness that such communication was possible. He writes, “Lesbian-feminist networks . . . were the ideological basis of the social movement in which they originated; they were the *raison d'être* of the movement itself,” unlike homophile networks, which he describes as “largely instrumental and nonideological.”³⁵ Meeker asserts that simply having an operational network was one of lesbian-feminist newsletters’ goals and that “the network” thus is fundamentally “ideological.” Networks promised to support feminist investments in connection, collaboration, and equity, as the descriptions from *Grapevine* and *Telewoman* illustrate. However, bracketing the network’s ideological operation from its “instrumental” role in facilitating everyday information sharing is inadequate to the ways in which feminist politics entangles the practical and affective spheres.

Feminist organizing balances an ambitious vision of the world as it might be with the “instrumental” micropolitics of stuffing envelopes or providing childcare; the women’s liberation movement strategically insisted that these “practices of everyday life” were significant symbolic sites for much larger struggles over gender justice.³⁶ Putting out a newsletter takes a great deal of work—work that is messy, physical, repetitive, and less than glamorous, even more so in the days before desktop publishing software. The work of small-scale publishing—typesetting, gluing pasteups, printing, fighting with photocopiers, making address labels, folding, gluing stamps—is nothing if not instrumental. This labor’s entanglement with the affective and ideological promises of newsletters is what makes it bearable, even fun. Meeting other women who might become friends, lovers, or coconspirators of some kind turned the promise of an “envelope stuffing party” into a tenable method for recruiting volunteers. The LHA has used this technique since the beginning, hosting regular “workdays” during which volunteers can drop in to organize, file, or do data entry (figure 1.5).

Feminist theory that considers the relationship between affects such as optimism or hope and the ability of feminist activists to carry on with their difficult, everyday work helps to explain a newsletter network’s generative effects.³⁷ A future orientation guides the work of making, circulating, reading, and recirculating communicative materials. Newsletters materialize political desires with the information they deliver and the connections they promise (figure 1.6). These horizons are then chased through the network itself, as users reach out to others and follow up on leads. Newsletters facilitate networked communication that guides hopeful, politicized investments in lesbian feminism and its continuation.



FIGURE 1.5 Volunteers sort newsletters at a Lesbian Herstory Archives work party, late 1980s. Pictured are Joan Nestle, Polly Thistlethwaite, and others. Image courtesy Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation.

Newsletters have effects that transcend the expectations of a singular publication, related to the network forms they generate and the social movement work they facilitate. As Anna Feigenbaum argues, “More than instrumental tools, rituals or resources for mobilization,” feminist newsletters are discursive communicative practices that *form* social movements—“the very means by which their politics garnered shape and meaning.”³⁸ A newsletter network promised to circulate information that was hard to find, but it also promised that feminism itself might carry on through dispersed but networked communities united by shared interests and goals. Securing a future for feminism is a massive undertaking guided by the much smaller communicative endeavors information activists can achieve. Networks embody how feminist social movements connect utopic visions with the modest pragmatism symbolized by ink, newsprint, and stamps.

The *Matrices* network operated through an affective register in which the newsletter’s generative promise exceeds pragmatic, individual moments of information exchange. The ways in which *Matrices* described the

LESBIAN

HERSTORY

ARCHIVES

NEWSLETTER 6

LESBIAN HERSTORY SOURCES

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JULY, 1980

FIGURE 1.6 Cover of *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter*, no. 6, July 1980. Photograph by Morgan Gwenwald. Image courtesy Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation.

service it *hoped* to offer point to the charge information could carry. A 1980 editorial explains:

We need to share our knowledge and resources, including contacts, jobs, how and where to publish our work, exchanges about how we survive in academia or outside of it, offer support to each other, mobilize to help Lesbian/Feminists who are fired, or to know other Lesbian/Feminist researchers we can turn to when we are having specific research problems. Other possibilities: to serve as a liaison between researchers in academia (who have access to libraries, laboratories, meeting places) and those working without such support; to share information about our experiences in institutions—the courses we can offer, departmental colloquia we might be giving, which libraries have what kinds of information.³⁹

Some of these proposals seem only tangential to the actual work of “doing research.” “Instrumental” supports are entangled with the community-based care that the network valued as critical to lesbian-feminist organizing: supporting one another, sharing information about how we survive institutional harm, amplifying the work of those without institutional support.

Beyond these stated aims, other instances of communication through the network provide examples of subscribers connecting to one another as more than just information-distribution hubs. In a 1980 letter placed on the publication’s cover, the historian of sexuality Gayle Rubin solicits small financial donations from subscribers to pay for Jeannette Foster’s nursing home care. Foster wrote *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956), the first comprehensive bibliographic study of lesbianism in literature.⁴⁰ Rubin’s invitation to care for Foster, whom she calls “a national treasure of the Lesbian Community,” points to what circulated through the network beyond the proper object of information. Community care circles are based in alternative kinship structures that understand inheritance and accountability outside autonomist, accumulative models. Put simply, these circles use communication networks to care for activists as they age, in recognition that activism serves the public but doesn’t pay. Networked care for queer and trans activist elders including Barbara Smith and Miss Major Griffin-Gracy continues forty years after Foster’s campaign using social media and crowdfunding tools.⁴¹

This appeal for Foster exemplifies how *Matrices* subscribers connected with one another to form a larger economy of care, following desires for networked intimacy that was perhaps unachievable through individual practices of *reading* information in print materials. The idea that Foster might be cared for in her old age by other lesbian-feminist historians points to “sister-

hood” as an affective constellation guiding women’s liberation-era organizing. Networked sisterhood promised belonging to some and threatened a persistent outsider status to those whose political desires, sex practices, or others ways of being in relation to feminism contravened the ideal. Although *Matrices* ultimately sought to democratize history and researching processes, the publication still had a tenuous “cannon” to deal with.

When Rubin invokes the language of “nation,” “treasure,” and “lesbian community,” she describes an economy of attention that suggests all nodes in the network were not necessarily equal in terms of access, participation, and perceived importance to research. These are just some of the network’s gatekeeping functions. The language of connection, care, and “sisterhood” articulated to feminist newsletter networks obscured boundaries and hierarchies intrinsic to any collective, particularly one self-consciously grappling with knowledge production’s gendered, classed, and racialized biases. Even my own focus on this letter over other examples of care in the *Matrices* archive points to a retrospective economy of attention determined by Rubin’s outside status in the field of sexuality studies.

So far I have described how *Matrices* used the network as a conceptual model that was both ideological and affective for lesbian-feminist researchers. The newsletter was also a network in its “actual operation,” or how *Matrices* facilitated decentralized and distributed communication among lesbian researchers. *Matrices* asked each subscriber to complete a profile with contact information; a short biography; research interests; titles of papers written and published and information on how offprints could be acquired from other subscribers; current projects; and support they needed from other subscribers. Published in each issue, these subscriber profiles facilitated a distributed network in which connections were initiated by *Matrices* but did not necessarily rely on its pages to proliferate. Subscribers communicated directly with other lesbian-feminist researchers who offered or requested information that might be of value.

Matrices used a decentralized network model to assemble the “Notes and Queries” section, which housed these subscriber profiles. Five regional editors spread across the United States collected completed profiles and other subscriber-submitted information, sending it on to the managing and general editors for publication. While it served to distribute labor, this purposeful spread of editors across the country also points to a conscientious use of the network form to transcend the geography that made collaboration difficult. The Circle of Lesbian Indexers, featured in chapter 3, also recruited indexers from across the country in what was perhaps a broader

equity-based effort to amplify lesbian-feminist activism away from the coastal cities that dominated gay and lesbian imaginaries. This work conscientiously mapped a decentralized schematic onto physical geography, ensuring that competent nodes could be found across the map. A 1985–86 *Matrices* callout for new regional editors to serve Canada and Europe demonstrates the newsletter's international outlook.⁴²

The geographical distribution of editors materialized the desire for a dispersed network by placing powerful nodes in strategic locations. This logistic practice could expedite communication across space by establishing a clear workflow; however, the distance between regional editors, who communicated using the postal service, also presented significant difficulties. Miscommunication occurred, and editors reverted to the de facto centralization of control in moments when it was easier to just *make a decision already* instead of building consensus by letter mail. Print specificity set the rhythm and speed of *Matrices*.

Issues of *Matrices* included sections that will be familiar to readers of any specialized academic listserv. They include “Conferences and Calls for Papers,” “Book Reviews/Articles,” and a listing of lesbian and feminist periodicals and their subscription information. “Notes and Queries” also included more general calls for information and assistance from the network. The third issue, published in spring 1978, includes this request from Madeline Davis at the Buffalo Women's Oral History Project: “Madeline Davis wants to hear from other oral history projects currently being undertaken in lesbian communities—she is part of a group working on such a project in Buffalo, NY. Also, she has been teaching a course on lesbianism, an historical, political, and personal view, at State University NY at Buffalo. She would be grateful for any suggestions from women who are teaching or formulating courses on any aspect of the topic.”⁴³

With Elizabeth Kennedy, Davis used this research to write the first comprehensive history of working-class lesbian subculture in the United States, drawing in part on modest support from networks such as *Matrices*. Some requests made via “Notes and Queries” are much simpler and more general than Davis's. The same issue features this notice: “Mary C. Peterson wants to know what women/lesbians are doing in athletics.”⁴⁴ While some information requests solicited practical support for concrete works in progress, more formless requests reflect how hard it was to find good information on lesbian topics in scarce conditions.

By design, *Matrices* used the distributed and decentralized network forms to circulate information in ways that would support movement

building. A community archive that published a request for funds or materials in *Matrices* might become a small hub with lines emanating out to individual readers. Those who began to communicate independently of the publication might forge new activist alliances or collaborative research projects. By creating and maintaining these structures for sharing information, *Matrices* imagined how a network could facilitate collaboration among lesbians who were otherwise isolated from these opportunities. Everyday “instrumental” information exchanges among researchers, activists, and archives made the larger project of doing lesbian feminism possible, transcending the limitations of time and space.⁴⁵ The editors quipped about *Matrices* facilitating a utopian project in their third editorial: “As we sat around talking one evening, it occurred to us that, barring patriarchal conceptions of time and space, LFU [Lesbian Feminist University] existed.”⁴⁶ This university would have no football team and would feature a Love Department and a faculty association called The Union of Feminist Utopian Futurists.

The editors of *Matrices* deploy “network” as a purposeful mode of description that imagines a strong, distributed web as a critical infrastructure for lesbian-feminist information activism. My retrospective exploration of the network metaphor from the present necessarily associates *Matrices* with online communication technologies. As Friedman argues, historicizing media technologies through queer and feminist activism can concretize how there is no singular “internet,” only many internets shaped through specific interpretive practices.⁴⁷ As part of a longer and wider cultural history of networked communication, these newsletters add a distinctly lesbian-feminist interpretation of network technologies and their affordances.

Speculative Network Histories,
or Did Lesbians Invent the Internet?

Julia Penelope and the other editors at *Matrices* did not invent the internet (and would probably call internet history’s emphasis on invention patriarchal foolishness). But this provocation is an entry to a speculative history of networks written through older forms of feminist print culture. Such a proposition takes up Roy Rosenzweig’s description of the internet as a “meta-medium” in need of many histories that consider the multiple contexts of its conceptual and technical beginnings.⁴⁸ Kevin Driscoll, Elisabeth Jay Friedman, Eden Medina, Benjamin Peters, and Fred Turner offer histories of network or cybernetic *thinking*, as a condition of possibility

for the web.⁴⁹ These histories attend to practices of dreaming about and working with network technologies, sometimes by amateurs, instead of emphasizing the research, design and market uptake of network technologies. Like sociomaterial science and technology studies, this approach emphasizes an artefact's use, negotiation, and meaning-in-practice, over its initial design.⁵⁰ Though it is not historical in focus, Marisa Elena Duarte's study of Indigenous broadband development also emphasizes how communities incorporate hard-won network technologies into existing practices as an exercise of sovereignty and self-determination.⁵¹ Building on these and other comparative studies of network communication, I argue that situated, minoritarian investments in networked communication are critical for understanding the political possibilities associated with emerging media technologies.

Feminist media studies has considered multiple trajectories of “networks” across a range of media, documenting both the cultural politics of newsletters and the relationship between feminist social movements and other mediated network forms, such as zine distribution networks, vhs “chain letters,” and contemporary social media and GIS mapping.⁵² Online communication does not present a turning point for feminist social movements; rather, it extends existing media infrastructures of networked communication. In this kind of history, consistencies and divergences in the politics of feminist networked communication across time take precedence over formal network development. Lucas Hilderbrand's history of Riot Grrl vhs chain letter distributions networks illustrates this approach; despite being “analog” and “specifically nondigital” in their formal properties, they share a feminist model for “social networking.”⁵³ Here, the impetus to mediate one's relationship to distant others who share politics characterizes feminism's “networkness.”

Feminist networks are communicative infrastructures that extend across emerging forms of media, and across time, particularly in the case of a network that is “historical” in a double sense: *Matrices* is of the past as I write this book, but was also of the past during its years of publication, as the network facilitated *historical* research. Networked communication and feminist historiography are interdependent. Feminist historiography is a heterogeneous set of practices and desires built through networks, and is difficult to map onto more conventional understandings of information created by a single, authoritative source. As the editors of *Matrices* put it, “Lesbian/Feminist research is significantly different from what we have been taught to regard as ‘research,’ because it arises out of our lives and the

community we are creating.”⁵⁴ In other words, lesbian histories are assembled from multiple nodes of information and are difficult to isolate to singular sources or authors. Among these nodes are archives and other spaces for doing historical research, which are themselves mediated through networks and network thinking. Feminist organizations emerging out of the 1970s—artist-run centers, cooperative women’s buildings, bookstores, academic networks, journals, etc.—were informed by values of non-hierarchy, direct participation by members, and an investment in decentralized processes.⁵⁵ Commitments to collaboration and sharing power inform how and why social movement organizations imaginatively invest in decentralized and distributed communication networks to create and circulate information. Feminist archives and archival sensibilities share these traits.⁵⁶

Matrices’ support for archives shows how a working communications network was vital for circulating information about the kinds of primary source materials available for research. Lesbian community libraries and archives called upon the network to help build their fledgling collections, so that these nascent institutions could remain independent and community-run. In a March 1984 issue callout, the new Archives lesbiennes in Paris declared that they “do not want to depend on any external powers: they will continue to exist and develop with the support and contributions of lesbians. In order to realize our projects and plans, we have to believe in our collective power. Please send documents, information, or financial support.”⁵⁷ Here the Archives lesbiennes imagines network support as intrinsic to its non-hierarchical operation. This communication structure undergirds collective economic models.

Every issue of *Matrices* contains some listing of archival holdings or an archive’s request for materials. Other major contributors include the LHA and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA, now the ArQuives). By the early 1980s, *Matrices* featured a distinct archives section to accommodate these listings. The 1982 Archives and History Projects insert, reprinted from the CLGA’s newsletter, explains the importance of communication networks for building these precarious institutions: “An intimate relationship should exist between history groups and archives. . . . To help groups to contact one another and allow others to do likewise we list here various archives and history groups. We encourage you to contact these people, offer your help and see what they can do for you.”⁵⁸ Feminist and queer histories emerge from collaborative processes that mirror the network mode of collective feminist organizing and of noninstitutional “community archives.”

These collaborative processes extend beyond *Matrices* to a larger network of feminist periodicals through content sharing and cross-citation. *Matrices* published individual researchers' requests for assistance with projects that went on to become significant texts in the gay and lesbian historical movement, such as Katz's 1982 request for information to support a proposed second volume of *Gay American History* (volume 1 was published in 1978). Requests were often submitted directly by the author, but *Matrices* also borrowed content from other newsletters. Some examples include the Archives and History Projects insert originally produced by the Canadian archives; a detailed partial listing of primary source holdings at the LHA in a 1979 issue; and short entries in the *Matrices* "Notes and Queries" section gathered by editors from other lesbian-feminist periodicals, with their provenance noted through citation. This exchange was reciprocal. The 1978 issue of the *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter* announced the launch of *Matrices* to its readers. By reproducing content across periodicals, lesbian-feminist newsletters ensured that requests for participation reached a wide range of publics, a clever tactic given that these publications often served niche communities such as lesbian mothers, rural women, "Third World women," or specific regions.

Larger practices of citation can be read across these publications through what Eichhorn calls "archival proximity," the way in which archival documents make a certain kind of sense insofar as they are ordered in relation to one another.⁵⁹ By tracing citations across publications, classified-style "ads" for archives that might otherwise seem unremarkable construct norms about the kind of work thought to be worthy of attention as they are recirculated through wider networks.⁶⁰ Community archives had to make choices about what collections to highlight in these generally short announcements, anticipating what would be of widest "research value." This cross-citational economy of attention inevitably affected the kinds of materials accessed by researchers and, perhaps, potential donors' perceptions of what these archives wanted to collect.

While the *Matrices* network supported the construction and use of community archives, it is this very network form that renders the publication's effects difficult to archive. Women's print cultures of the late twentieth century are ephemeral in the sense that they have not been collected widely and evenly and rarely have been preserved well.⁶¹ Even when full print runs of past publications find their way into archives, these collections fall short of mapping the ongoing, networked connections among readers. The *Matrices* network is to some extent ephemeral. *Matrices* editorials often comment with frustration on a lack of feedback from subscribers about how they were

using the network. Michelle Meagher argues that feminist newsletter editorials provided space for reflection on a periodical's broad mandate and frank, confessional commentary on how an issue was made.⁶² *Matrices* editorials follow this pattern. The October 1979 issue laments: "For two years, we have published *Matrices* as a source of networking, but have little indication if it is serving this function. We assume it is, because the mailing list has grown to over 600 and new subscriptions arrive regularly. So, if you have had any positive experiences through *Matrices*, we'd like to hear about them."⁶³ The publication's reach is extended beyond those subscribers accounted for through profiles via the "after-market" circulation of newsletters through photocopying, further demonstrating the decentralized operation of these networks.

Matrices initiated communications that were fleeting, a problem identified by the newsletter's editors during its period of publication and a methodological challenge for my study of the network from the present.⁶⁴ Soliciting evidentiary feedback through editorials was a belabored practice that reflects the burnout characteristic of much feminist activism and academic service work. Assembling issues of *Matrices* was labor-intensive, time-consuming, unremunerated, and aimed at long-term, structural changes that were difficult to measure except in the abstract. Research conducted through the network depended on the interplay of the newsletter, archives, and the quite concrete form of books and articles that this research left behind. Newsletter networks ask us to reckon with feminist historiography's conditions of mediation as a formative subject of these very histories. As one aspect of lesbian-feminist information activism, newsletter networks gesture toward the existence of a rich infrastructure that is difficult to capture retrospectively. Publications such as *Matrices* must be historicized through methods that attend to their dispersed forms, chasing the "interconnections" hoped for by editorial staff through cross-citational research in the same archival collections *Matrices* helped to build.

Newsletter Networks and Outreach at the Lesbian Herstory Archives

In the 1970s, newsletters were a primary form of information outreach for lesbian-feminist organizations housed in physical spaces, including community archives. These DIY publications could be printed cheaply and easily on an informal schedule, and they could be sent through regular mail, all of which suited cash and labor-strapped grassroots organizations. The *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter* was a significant communications

and fundraising device for the archives in its early days, and provides a foreword to chapter 4's longer history of digitization at these archives. The newsletter's importance to the early operation of the LHA points to the archives' role as more than just a repository for records; wide-reaching activities, events, and other forms of outreach promoted through the newsletter evidence a broader, pedagogical information strategy. The newsletter was a technology for transforming the archives from a repository bound geographically to New York into a site of information activism.

The archives' 1979 newsletter announced the incorporation of the LHA as the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, Inc., a move that "broadens our scope to be an information service that publishes a newsletter, does public speaking and in as many ways as possible gathers and shares information about the Lesbian Experience."⁶⁵ The physical archives would function as the "resource room" and "cultural center" for this expansive mandate.⁶⁶ As a printed document that mediates between the archives and its public, the newsletter speaks to the Lesbian Herstory Archives' goals of outreach and access, rather than just preservation and research. While *Matrices* demonstrates the interstitial role of newsletters in a larger, dispersed lesbian-feminist history and archives movement, the archives' use of newsletters shows how community archives, far from just storehouses grounding this movement, are dynamic networks in their own rights.

The *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter* was published from June 1975 until spring 2004, generally once a year, with occasional extended breaks between issues, for a total of nineteen issues (figures 1.6–1.8).⁶⁷ This newsletter was also typewritten, pasted together, photocopied, and circulated by letter mail. Content updated members of the archives' community about the archives' work, future goals, and how they could help. Early issues published in the 1970s featured an "Archives Needs" section, which listed specific books and newsletter issues sought for the collection, along with skills like foreign language translation that the archives lacked in its existing volunteer base. A short "Research Queries" section included reader requests for help with specific research projects, much like *Matrices*' "Notes and Queries" section. These early issues always included bibliographies, often of materials that could be accessed through the archives. Among them, an index of short stories about or by lesbians, a list of "Serial Media with Lesbian Content", and even a bibliography of other lesbian bibliographies.⁶⁸ Later issues published in the late 1980s and '90s moved away from these listings toward longer, informative articles that updated readers on financial statements, and activities and events related to the archives.

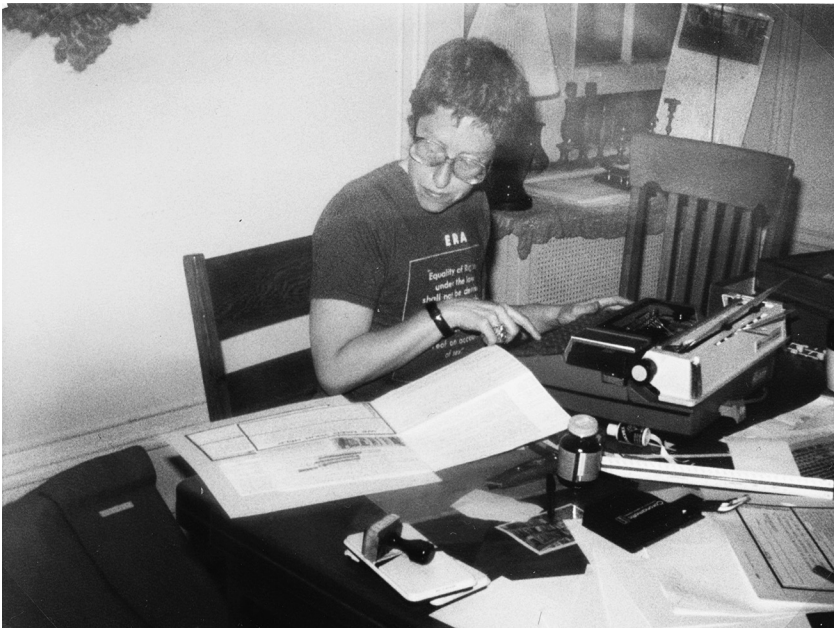


FIGURE 1.7 Lesbian Herstory Archives founder Deborah Edel typing the newsletter, 1979. Image courtesy Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation.

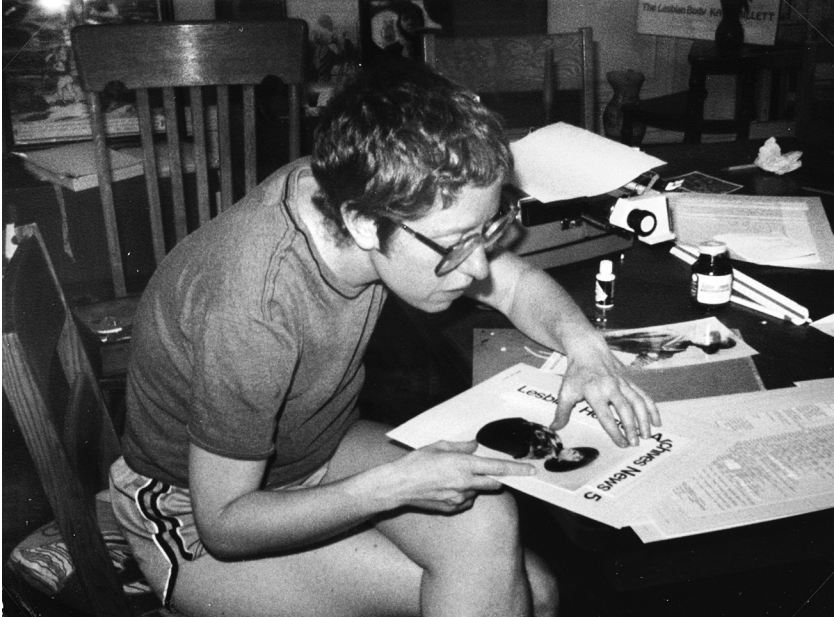


FIGURE 1.8 Deborah Edel making pasteups for the *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter*, 1979. Image courtesy Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation.

Julia Penelope was one of the founding collective members of the LHA, three years before she sent the letter that would spark *Matrices*. Her sense of a network's vitality to lesbian historiography is clear in a note she contributed to the *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter's* first issue, published in 1975. She imagined a national mailing list of lesbians illustrated by a map: "One of the projects of the Archives Collective will be a large map of the United States on which we will represent the Lesbian network by marking the small towns and villages where Lesbians are establishing themselves on farms and in communes. We would also like to maintain a mailing list of rural lesbians. This project is an effort to keep all of us in touch with each other and to provide records of our lives."⁶⁹ Though I found no records of this map's realization, Penelope's vision points to the idea of lesbian networks as a spatial imaginary that could meaningfully connect city dwellers with the rural lesbian lands movement that began in the 1970s.⁷⁰

These tactics reached beyond urban enclaves, expanding the range of materials that donors might send, and providing knowledge of the archives' work to a growing network of lesbians. De-centralized regionalism was also behind a "A Plea for Regional Clippers," which asked readers to clip articles of relevance about lesbians in their local press and mail them to the archives for incorporation into subject files.⁷¹ This workflow further demonstrates the network's reliance on a range of print technologies for sharing information. The newsletter supported regional outreach, and also reported on other efforts the archives made to circulate lesbian history beyond New York City, including a traveling slideshow, and a one-woman, six month, thirty-four-city motorcycle tour.⁷² All of these networked outreach strategies were based in the idea that information infrastructure could be purposefully designed to unite diverse groups of lesbians.

The LHA imagined a functioning network as crucial to building an archives that above all was inclusive of as many lesbian lives as possible. Outreach through the newsletter could develop a collection reflective of the archives' intersectional, lesbian-feminist mandate, which recognized that minoritized women faced extra barriers to archiving. Working class women, rural women, women of color, women who were young or old, were encouraged to think of the archives as part of a larger infrastructure they could participate in, and make their own.

Building a collection means materializing a mostly unwritten history through group effort in which the newsletter formally assigned specific tasks to readers: send money, send clippings, send photos of your life. The newsletter also informally fostered a shared responsibility for this infrastructure.

Issue five describes the need for a “grassroots network” to sustain the archives’ work: “To all lesbians who read this newsletter. The Archives grows in fullness only when you take the time to send us a contribution—a photo, a tape, a letter, something of your lives. We cannot personally attend every Lesbian event, go to every organizational meeting, *but a grassroots network can*. Please make tapes of events in your area, clip articles, write your impressions and send them to the Archives. We need all your voices!”⁷³ This request imagines the archives serving a dispersed public capable of capture within one network map—the kind of model Penelope proposed, but never drew.

As a political and affective strategy for imagining shared lesbian space outside actually existing conditions, an archives network echoes Jack Gieseck’s description of the “constellations” through which lesbians imagine their embodied and spatial relations to community.⁷⁴ The archives’ newsletter assumes that lesbians living far from New York City—a monolith in LGBTQ cultural geography—created precious information that was key to establishing a diverse historical record. The New York-based archives identified precarious access to lesbian history as a problem that might be differentially felt by those living without ready access to lesbian information infrastructures. The archives was precisely *for these women*, whose information might resist capture without outreach strategies that drew carefully on networked capacities.

The *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter* often articulates the responsibility for history and for the archives to the community constituted in and through the publication and its participatory cultures. The archives actively democratized its collection by insisting that readers take responsibility for documenting their lives and communities, their personal and political experiences. The newsletter’s pedagogical strategy tried to convince readers of this responsibility, which meant convincing them that their seemingly unremarkable lives mattered: “Our legacy will be realized only through the efforts of every lesbian. . . . [I]t is through our collective rejoicing, reclaiming and renewing that our survival as a Lesbian community will be determined.”⁷⁵ This three-fold strategy (1) gave lesbians a concrete reason to believe that evidence of their lives was important; (2) taught them how to document their lives by making and gathering records; (3) implored them to donate the materials created through this process. Readers who followed these instructions became information activists by carrying out self and community archiving affiliated with a larger network.

Through these instructions to readers, the archives’ newsletter became entangled with other forms of mediation individuals could use to create

their own information about lesbian life. Women were encouraged to become active makers by taking photographs, gathering print media (the materials of “clipping” culture), and audio-recording interviews, conferences, radio shows, musical events, and talks. Inspired by the oral history movement, issues from the late 1970s and early 1980s encouraged readers to make audio, film, and later video to document aspects of their lives. Women were encouraged to use these recording technologies to “Talk about important memories . . . people, places, experiences, things that touched you deeply or angered you. Don’t lose your own history in the rush of daily life.”⁷⁶ Through notices in the newsletter, the LHA offered to lend eager contributors recording equipment, and supply blank tapes, to make this activity accessible to women with limited resources. A 3,000-tape spoken-word collection emerged partly out of these calls for recordings, and as I outline in chapter 4, this same collection became the archives’ earliest comprehensive digitization project.

Situated among the tapes, buttons, yellowing magazine clippings and Polaroids, email blasts and streaming audio of the present, the newsletter’s print specificity both does and does not matter to the network it facilitated. Networks are a cultural logic for mediation, rather than a singular format consistent with a specific moment in media history. A more expansive media history of feminist social movements understands the idea of networks as paradoxically bound to, but also independent of, particular technologies. In other words, communication networks are one topology of lesbian-feminist information activism, and also a broader ideal guiding how feminists imagine working together.

Newsletter networks share some characteristics with online networks: for example, they connect distant others to support counterpublic work, non-hierarchical collaboration, and high levels of engagement. Lisa Gitelman centers *genres* to understand these kinds of connections. Genres “resist any but local and contrastive logics for media; better to look for meanings that arise, shift, and persist according to the uses that media—emergent, dominant, and residual—familarly have. Better, indeed, to admit that no medium has a single, particular logic, while every genre does and is.”⁷⁷ As a genre, newsletters represent a set of formal expectations about how organizations will communicate with their publics. These expectations include how documents are produced (on the cheap, on the fly) and circulated (toward specific movement goals). As a genre, newsletters also transcend specific printing techniques: *Matrices* and the *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter* were both mimeographed, photocopied, pasteboarded, and desktop published at various points in their lifespans.

The importance of genre notwithstanding, print specificity does matter to lesbian-feminist information infrastructure because these paper newsletters have a particular rhythm and pace. They are a slow, messy, deliberate, labor-intensive, and sometimes cumbersome format that seemed to frustrate the archives' coordinators at times: "It took countless hours to do each mailing."⁷⁸ Computers allowed the LHA to finally print mailing labels and more easily update subscribers' addresses. The newsletter proudly announced, "In 1983, on one of the hottest September weekends on record, about 20 Archives volunteers and 2 borrowed Kaypro computers got together in an un-air-conditioned apartment in Brooklyn and put the archives mailing list on a database."⁷⁹ This presented a major improvement over "the original list," of 3,632 subscribers' addresses, which had been "handwritten onto envelopes and sorted by hand into [Z]ip code order for each mailing."⁸⁰ The new distribution database was followed by a shift to desktop publishing in 1986. The first issue made with a computer looks different;⁸¹ it looks neater, is easier to read, and it includes a description of how the newsletter would be changing, becoming more "streamlined" in both form and content.⁸²

The archives' newsletter did not facilitate the kind of person-to-person, distributed networking *Matrices* sought out, favoring a centralized model that positioned the institution as the network's hub. Although early issues published requests from readers for help with specific projects, this kind of communication was not the focus. Most women stayed in touch with the archives through the newsletter and worried when issues were not timely. The newsletter often reassured readers not to worry about breaks in contact: "Putting out the newsletter is a time consuming and costly project. Please do not give up on us if there is a long pause between Newsletters. Be assured that our daily functioning is ongoing."⁸³ The pace of print and the network's centralized structure required faith from readers that the larger lesbian-feminist history project they believed in carried on.⁸⁴

Elusive Remnants of Lesbian Networks

The *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter's* effects are visible in the archive's collections development. For example, requests for regional clippers published in the newsletter led to the development of subject files so unusual and comprehensive that they were licensed for microfilming by Gale as part of its Gay Rights Movement series. The newsletter's centralized design made communication through the network more palpable because

engagement from readers went directly back to the archives. *Matrices* leaves less of a trace. Its network is difficult to historicize precisely because of its dispersed form. The editors of *Matrices* wanted “interconnections” among readers to proliferate independently of the newsletter, because this would strengthen historical research on lesbian topics. The editors saw the newsletter’s printed form as an invitation to begin, invoked through their choice of name: “Because we believe that our work is a beginning, we decided to call this newsletter ‘*Matrices*,’ ‘a situation or surrounding substance within which something originates.’ . . . Our research is the material of our lives. *Matrices* seemed to capture all of our meanings for the newsletter, the interconnections we wish to establish and maintain, the intersections of research interests, our womon-identification.”⁸⁵ Ephemeral “interconnections” are precisely this network’s mission, but they are also incommensurate with the editorial staff’s and subscribers list’s desire to establish concrete social movement history. *Matrices* could not keep track of its own influence as the network proliferated.

Returning to Baran’s models, connections facilitated by a distributed network are strong because they no longer rely on the publication as the central hub; they are semiautonomous from the printed newsletter and have effects that exceed its pages. Distributed networks offer futurity because they can carry on beyond the life of *Matrices* itself. This relationship to feminist futurity differs from working to sustain publications, institutions, social movement organizations, and even archives at all costs. Grassroots feminist spaces always seem so precarious. They are perpetually on the verge of collapse, and we expect to lament their demise sometime soon. *Matrices* promised a future by promising a past in the form of history built collaboratively through the network. This past could carry on into the future if information circulated freely among the researchers producing this work. The “failure” of *Matrices* to fully document the network’s reach is also a critique of unattainable, toxic metrics, including the idea that the “best” social movement organizations last the longest and leave robust archives behind.⁸⁶

Lesbian feminism idealized communications networks, but conflicts specific to network relations also occurred. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Galloway have argued, communication networks make egalitarian promises that conceal the power structures, protocols, and control mechanisms they actually exert.⁸⁷ Information circulated through the network according to the tacit ethics and expectations of subscribers. Conflicts emerged when centralized control undermined investments in the antihierarchical,

decentralized model *Matrices* imagined as its infrastructure. Examples of these conflicts are plentiful and tend to galvanize around privacy, self-determination, and the ad hoc development of organizational hierarchies.

JR Roberts, eastern coordinator of *Matrices*, resigned her post in 1984, explaining in a published resignation letter that she could no longer tolerate the publication's movement toward centralized control. "The present structure, in which a decision is made by one woman and then presented in print as a 'group decision' supposedly made by *all* the editors, is not a structure I feel comfortable with," Roberts wrote. "It just goes against my grain of how things need to work in the world. . . . It is difficult because we are all so busy and our geographical separation and distance is not conducive to group activity."⁸⁸ Roberts argues that the *Matrices* network did not always operate according to its egalitarian, distributed "network" ideal, as power clustered around centralized nodes within the publication's editorial leadership. Making subscribers aware of this incongruity, and of the network's failure to meaningfully surmount geography, seemed an urgent project for Roberts as she resigned her post.

Roberts, a white woman, also compiled *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* and worked as a member of the Circle of Lesbian Indexers. She abandoned *Matrices* because the realities of collective organizing through a print network were sometimes incommensurate with a lesbian-feminist desire for "sisterhood" built on shared values and equal footing. Ultimately, networks, no matter how purposefully built, cannot overcome what ultimately are interpersonal and structural factors that delimit lesbian feminism's ability to be the umbrella it claimed to be for all women.

Privacy and self-determination became heated issues when *Penthouse* magazine salaciously excerpted the lesbian activist and "lavender menace" Karla Jay's book *The Gay Report* (1979), which drew on survey work about lesbian sexuality.⁸⁹ Jay relied on the lesbian-feminist print movement to circulate her survey, and she promoted her research in the "Notes and Queries" section of *Matrices*. In a letter of complaint printed in the June 1979 issue, a reader named Amethyst wrote that she was "shocked/angered/infuriated by this exploitative, anti-feminist, misogynist act/use of Lesbian/'Feminist' research!"⁹⁰ Amethyst listed the lesbian periodicals that distributed the survey—*Lesbian Connection*, *Lesbian Tide*, etc.—and then wrote, "We remember how we were urged by Karla Jay's many ads to fill in her questionnaire and send it to her. It was beneficial to the Lesbian Feminist movement. I/We were suspicious at the time of how this could benefit us."⁹¹ Seeing Jay's research represented in *Penthouse* angered survey

participants because of lesbian feminists' concerns about pornography, but also because of the magazine's male audience, voyeuristically consuming data about lesbian sexuality that participants had contributed in good faith. This choice of venue did not benefit the lesbian community whose labor and data made the study possible, and it violated tacit community values around how data ought to be gathered and shared. Jay explained in a follow-up letter that her publisher had provided the excerpt to *Penthouse* without her permission. While lesbian-feminist values guided how *Matrices* circulated information, interventions from outsiders contravened network norms. Here, a network's open structure and lack of oversight is too promiscuous for a sexual public with real concerns about the privacy and safety of its members.

While the *Matrices* network aimed to do away with centralized control, it was also caught up in larger operations of power that put it in conflict with lesbian-feminist ideas about who could rightfully represent women's sexuality. Responding to another subscriber's query was a choice underwritten by an implicit trust that became tenuous in the case of Jay's *Penthouse* excerpt. This trust was built on shared beliefs about how information ought to be gathered, kept, and used. Jay's publishing company worked outside these community values when it chose *Penthouse* as an ideal publicity mechanism for *The Gay Report*. In an internet age in which information's proliferation and promiscuity seem inevitable, this incident from *Matrices* is a reminder that networks establish and maintain shared practices that allow participants to feel safe communicating through them.⁹² Violating these formal rules or informal beliefs damages the network as participants lose trust and drop out.

It is worth considering for whom privacy mattered most among the readers of *Matrices*, given the gradations of financial autonomy and cultural and intellectual capital in a network that served both tenured professors and "nonprofessional" researchers who would call themselves writers, artists, activists, or simply feminists before they would take up the label "historian." *Matrices* wanted to democratize history and dismantle the hierarchies among researchers, but it also wanted to stay bound to institutional models of knowledge production, where "productive" research leads to an article or book celebrated in the newsletters' pages. Who felt at home in the network, comfortable enough to become an active, named participant, and who remained silent in the background, "lurking" by reading but never contributing information? Did these hesitant users take advantage of the network's decentralized and distributed affordances by forming

sidelined enclaves of their own? These questions are unanswerable because of the kinds of archives print cultures leave behind.

Given the kind of knowledge the network valued most, some forms of historical research were not recognizable to *Matrices*. For example, anti-racist interventions in the history of sexuality have shown how the life and activist worlds of queer and trans Black, Indigenous, and and people of color resist documentation through forms of knowledge production structured by whiteness, including universities and publishing companies.⁹³ Barbara Smith explains in the foreword to *Black Lesbians*, “It is still frustrating to think that there are probably three or four times as many resources [on Black lesbians] as are listed here, and that the very nature of our multiple oppression makes them impossible to identify and obtain.”⁹⁴ *Matrices* served lesbian-feminist researchers, the majority of whom were white. Some members of the network shared information about new work focused on the histories of lesbians of color. For example, issue three, published in 1978, includes a request for contributions to Roberts and Smith’s *Black Lesbians* project in progress and listings for several publications, including Eleanor Hunter’s “Double Indemnity: The Negro Lesbian in the Straight White World” (1969), an unpublished paper on file at several archives for which readers could send away, and Ethel Sawyer’s “unpublished thesis focusing on mid 1960s Black Lesbian bar group in St. Louis,” available through interlibrary loan from Washington University.⁹⁵ Similarly, the LHA, which celebrates leadership by women of color, used the newsletter to amplify their contributions to the collections.⁹⁶ The archives thought the newsletter could be used to highlight “international” materials in the collection, along with “multi-ethnic material” on “Asian-American, Afro-American, Native American, Latina and Chicana Lesbians.”⁹⁷ These efforts hoped that reaching out to wider networks could reshape the field but remained bound to the bibliographic structures Smith critiqued.

Matrices often represented “the network” as an ideal political structure, yet this form emerged from multiple communities with visions that overlapped as much as they conflicted: from debates over sexual politics to class tensions between activist and academic communities and the whiteness of bibliographic logics. The *Matrices* community sometimes sought centralized characteristics such as privacy and control while eschewing them more generally in pursuit of the network’s distributed promise.

Conclusion

Just as the *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter* was phased out in the mid-2000s, mostly replaced by online communications, *Matrices* stopped publishing in 1996. This happened after several years of infrequent publication, marked by a shift in tone toward more editorial content and away from subscriber participation. Notably, the last two issues include a new column on “Lesbian Cyberspace” and an announcement of *Matrices*’ new website. These issues explained the internet to *Matrices* readers, going through “URL,” “HTML,” and other basic terminology; described how readers could access the web; and made a case for the new network technology’s value to lesbian researchers by listing and annotating existing “Lesbian Resources on the Web.”⁹⁸ These final issues signal what Barbara Sjoholm marks as the end of the Women in Print Movement in the 1990s—replaced, ostensibly by the “digital universe” of “Amazon,” “the internet,” and “digital publishing.”⁹⁹ And yet, zine culture in the 1990s reinvigorated feminist print cultures, and young queers on Instagram circulate remnants of lesbian print cultures today.¹⁰⁰ Rather than replacing earlier forms of feminist publishing, online networks link print “texts”—including their forms of distribution and the connections they engender—with contemporary platforms.¹⁰¹ Given this continuum, the end of the *Matrices* newsletter did not foreclose its effects; rather, *Matrices*’ remnants can be located in this ongoing networked “print” culture, as well as in community archives’ digital outreach. We need more expansive, intergenerational models for understanding the feminist “networks” powering information activism.

More modestly, the network’s remnants are available on the Lesbian Herstory Archives’ website. After publishing *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* in 1993, Davis and Kennedy donated all of their audiotapes to the LHA, where they have been digitized and are offered as streaming MP3s.¹⁰² This is one of the archives’ first comprehensive online projects and represents a decades-long entanglement among *Boots of Leather*, *Matrices*, the LHA, and the larger community upholding this work. Networks provide the conditions of possibility for lesbian-feminist history across decades, formats, and technological change.